

Guido Alfani. *Fathers and Godfathers: Spiritual Kinship in Early-Modern Italy*.

Catholic Christendom, 1300–1700. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009. xi + 273 pp. index. append. tpls. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6737-7.

A fruitful area of research has been investigating how the decrees of the Council of Trent were communicated down to the level of the parish and how well they were followed. In this work, Guido Alfani looks at a particular Catholic practice, that of acquiring godparents at the baptismal font, to see what the social consequences of reform were. Concerned about the non-theological aspects of godparenthood, reformers at the Council of Trent narrowed the number of possible godparents to two at most for each child and hoped to reemphasize the religious duties of the godparents. Instead, they truncated a very useful social tool for dispensing patronage, acquiring clients, reinforcing family ties, and forging new social alliances.

At baptism much more occurs than the washing away of original sin. Baptism is not only a powerful rite of passage, it also establishes a social network, called “godparenthood,” which in pre-Tridentine Europe meant that both godchildren and their parents acquired spiritual kin. These spiritual kin performed all sorts of social functions. In the 1950s and 1960s anthropologists studied this phenomenon in modern Latin America; by the 1970s and 1980s historians had turned their attention to this in medieval Europe. Most of this research has focused either on the origins and early development of godparenthood as a religious and social institution (see Joseph Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* [1986]), or has looked quite narrowly at the cultural uses of a developed system of godparenthood in certain set European locales during the late Middle Ages (see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* [1985], which focuses on Florence). Since the 1980s it is commonplace to find references to godparenthood in works dealing with family and kinship, patronage and clientage.

Alfani’s study broaches new territory by looking at this practice at a significant point of transition, during the Reformation; in a sense he looks at the end of godparenthood as a social institution rather than its beginning. In addition, Alfani is able to place his data set of godparenthood practices in Northern Italy in the context of European-wide patterns of godparenthood, especially in France and Florence. From this comparative information and his study of the parish registers from eight communities in five Northern Italian regions from the middle of the fifteenth century to the advent of the Council of Trent, Alfani notes six separate patterns of godparenthood beyond the canonical two same-sex and one opposite-sex for each child. A child could have a single godparent, or many, of varying numbers with some gender imbalance. For an extreme case, Maria Salti in 1502 had twenty-seven godparents, seventeen male and ten female, which meant her parents then had twenty-seven coparents from this one ritual as well.

These high numbers bothered the Church, especially since it appeared to the reformers at Trent that people chose godparents more for their social utility or status

than for their religious suitability as stand-ins for the child and later instructors of religion for the child. Having sketched the origins and development of medieval godparenthood practices and having noted the various patterns in godparenthood current in Europe (and especially in Northern Italy) on the eve of the council, Alfani goes into a minute analysis of how the Tridentine reformers approached the abuses in baptismal practice and how and why they decided to reduce the number of godparents to just one (though they would allow at most two, one of each sex). As Alfani notes, this investigation is the core of his book, and he does a fine job here denoting the various positions of the reformers and the wrangling that went on in debate.

From his data Alfani concludes that the reduction of the numbers of godparents occurred quickly and widely by the 1580s. But another aspect of the reform took longer, implying some negotiation with the local priests, and probably never took full hold. This was the desire of the reformers that the parents' choice of godparent would be someone suitable to religiously educate the child, an issue certainly significant for the era of the Counter-Reformation. This effort failed, as people still chose godparents for their social utility, but now it seemed that rather than spread their choices up and down the social ladder and out and about the family network, people tended to choose godparents of a higher status than their own. Since godparenthood was limited, social climbing became the most important element in choosing godparents. With this and Joseph Lynch's work, all we need now is a detailed study of how godparenthood was transmitted across the seas after 1500 to get a complete picture of the significance of this premodern social and religious ritual.

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