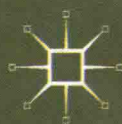


Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500 – 1900



Edited by Guido Alfani
and Vincent Gourdon



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Edited by

Guido Alfani

Assistant Professor of Economic History, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy

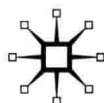
and

Vincent Gourdon

Researcher, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France



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Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900

Also by Guido Alfani

FATHERS AND GODFATHERS: SPIRITUAL KINSHIP IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

IL GRAND TOUR DEI CAVALIERI DELL'APOCALISSE: L'ITALIA DEL 'LUNGO CINQUECENTO', 1494-1629

Also by Vincent Gourdon

HISTOIRE DES GRANDS-PARENTS

Also by Guido Alfani and Vincent Gourdon

BAPTISER: PRATIQUE SACRAMENTELLE, PRATIQUE SOCIALE (edited with Philippe Castagnetti)

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Notes on contributors

Guido Alfani is an economic and social historian and a historical demographer and Assistant Professor at Bocconi University, Milan, Italy, where he is also a member of the Dondeña Centre and Innocenzo Gasparini Institute for Economic Research (IGIER). He is in addition an Honorary Research Fellow at Glasgow University. He is chief editor of the journal *Popolazione e Storia* and an expert on godparenthood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. He has published a book on this subject titled, *Fathers and Godfathers: Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

Étienne Couriol lectures in history at the Universities of Lyons 3 (Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes (LARHRA)) and Toulouse 3 (France Méridionale et Espagne (FRAMESPA)), France. He is completing his PhD thesis on spiritual kinship in Lyons during the *Ancien Régime*. He has published, 'Parrainage', in O. Christin (dir.), *Dictionnaire européen des sciences sociales* (Paris: Editions Métailié, 2009).

Tom Ericsson is Professor of History at Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden. His current research deals with Swedish migration to Paris between 1870 and 1914. He has written numerous books and articles on the social history of the lower middle-class and the petite bourgeoisie in Sweden. He has co-edited with Jörgen Fink and Jan Eivind Myhre, *The Scandinavian Middle Classes, 1840–1940* (Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, 2004).

Annick Foucrier is Professor of North American History and Director of the Centre for Research in North American History at the University of Paris–I, Paris, France. She has published several books, including *Le rêve californien: migrants français sur la côte Pacifique, XVIIIe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Belin, 1999). She is currently working on a book on French migrants and their families in Cook County, Illinois, between 1860 and 1930.

Vincent Gourdon is Researcher at the Centre Roland Mousnier, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, France, and is chief editor of the journal *Annales de Démographie Historique*. He is an expert on the history of the family in Europe. His main topics are grandparenthood, family networks and family rituals, especially baptism. He has published the book, *Histoire des grands-parents* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

Sandro Guzzi-Heeb is a social historian at the University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland. In recent years he has worked on the history of social movements and on the history of kinship and sexuality. On this topic he published, 'Sex, politics and social change in the 18th and the

19th centuries: evidence from the Swiss Alps', *Journal of Family History*, 2011, 36, 4, 367–86.

Antonio Irigoyen López is a Researcher at the University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain. He is an expert on the social history of the Catholic Church, which he studies from the perspective of the history of the family. His publications include *Luis Belluga, prelado de Cartagena: un obispo, una diócesis, un clero* (Murcia: Academia Alfonso X el Sabio, 2005).

Cristina Munno is Research Fellow at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy. From 2003 to 2009, she developed her interests in quantitative history and demographic research at the Institut National Études Démographiques (INED), Paris, France. Her publications deal with the study of kinship and relational networks and their influence on demographic events and the history of the family, and she has published, 'Prestige, intégration, parentèle: réseaux de parrainage dans une communauté ouvrière de Vénétie (1834–1854)', *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 2005, 1, 95–130.

Marianna G. Muravyeva is a legal and gender historian and an Associate Professor at the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, St Petersburg, Russia. Her publications deal with the gender history of Early Modern Europe and Russia, the history of sexuality, witchcraft and godparenthood, including, 'Relations sexuelles, fornication et inceste spirituel entre *kumovja* (*campari*) dans la culture traditionnelle russe', in G. Alfani, P. Castagnetti and V. Gourdon (eds), *Baptiser: Pratique sacramentelle, pratique sociale (XVIe–XXe siècles)* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009), pp. 281–90.

Kari-Matti Piilahti is Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. He is an expert on family history, economic elites and genealogy in Early Modern and Modern Finland. He has published *Aineellista ja aineetonta turvaa. Ruokakunnat, ekologis-taloudelliset resurssit ja kontaktinmuodostus Valkealassa 1630–1750* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2007).

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Spiritual kinship and godparenthood: an introduction

Guido Alfani and Vincent Gourdon

In European societies during the Middle Ages, baptism did not merely represent a solemn and public recognition of the 'natural' birth of a child. Rather, it was considered a second birth, a 'spiritual birth' within a group of relatives normally different from that based on blood relations: the spiritual family, composed of godfathers and godmothers. In the eyes of the Church there was a tie of kinship between godfathers and godmothers on one side, and godchildren and their parents on the other, which was an impediment to marriage. The use of spiritual kinship ties did not always correspond to their religious significance. So there was no 'coherence' between religious thought and social practice.

Although spiritual kinship and godparenthood were key factors in the functioning of European societies in the past, they have been given very limited attention until recently. As a rule, they have been mentioned only in passing in general works on the history of kinship and the family (usually for their implications regarding European systems of impediments to marriage, from an anthropological perspective).¹ More specialised monographs dedicated to the topic, themselves quite rare, showed a tendency to focus on the Early Middle Ages (Lynch, 1986; Cramer, 1993; Jussen, 2000), leaving the Late Middle Ages and especially the Early Modern period virtually uncharted territory, with a few notable exceptions (Coster, 2002; Alfani, 2009a). Only the last two centuries have been the object of a greater number of studies on godparenthood and spiritual kinship, the vast majority of them being anthropological in character.

The reason for this neglect is probably due to the widespread conviction that spiritual kinship was losing relevance at the end of the Middle Ages, a view held by many, especially among anthropologists, following a scholarly tradition that can be traced back to the 1950s.² Recently, this conviction has been seen to be unfounded (Alfani, 2009a; Alfani and Gourdon, 2009, 2011), and godparenthood has been shown as vital, and notably perceived to be a very important relationship, up to the beginning of the twentieth century and beyond. The articles collected here point in the same direction.

The aim of this book is to fill what recent research has shown to be a relevant gap in our knowledge of the past of the European continent and beyond. It does this in two innovatory ways. First, it covers a very long time period, from about 1500 to 1900 (in addition, this introduction will briefly detail the Middle Ages). Thanks to this, it can both illustrate the long-term consequences of the processes of religious – and social, economic and cultural – transformation beginning in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and analyse the development of godparenthood and spiritual kinship during the new phase of accelerated change, beginning with the Age of Revolutions and later fuelled by the processes of industrialisation and modernisation. Recently, it has been suggested that in this complex period kinship was not so much losing relevance, in line with a long-held scholarly tradition, as simply changing its role (Sabean et al., 2007). We believe that the same can be stated for spiritual kinship and godparenthood.

Second, the contributions published in this book cover most of the European continent and involve all three Christian traditions: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Until the Reformation and the Council of Trent, however, there were no deep divides across Europe in matters of spiritual kinship and godparenthood, even considering the existence of relevant regional differences both in practices and regulations, particularly between the Western and Eastern Churches. The beginning of the sixteenth century, which is the starting point of this book, is also the moment when divergence begins in some key Christian social institutions. The contributions presented here illuminate different aspects of what quickly became a very varied situation. The task of this introduction is to put them in a wider context of historical development, as well as to provide the reader with some key information about the literature on spiritual kinship and godparenthood that until recently has shown a marked tendency to be sketchy and episodic, but that today is both more abundant and better organised – of which this book, fruit of the cooperation of researchers from eight different countries,³ is proof.

Before proceeding, some lexical clarification is needed. In Modern English, some words describing specific ties of spiritual kinship are no longer in use. In particular, there is no equivalent of the Latin *compater*, which translates as *compare* in Italian, *compadre* in Spanish, *compère* in French, and similarly in other neo-Latin languages, and is transliterated as *kmotr* in Slavic languages, from which the current word *kum* derives.⁴ A *compater* is the godfather viewed in relation to the father of the baptised child, and vice versa.⁵ The word is used reciprocally (father and godfather of the child call each other *compater*). Similarly missing is its feminine equivalent, *comater*, as well as *comaternitas*, a word indicating the social institution corresponding to the relationship between *compatres* in general (translated to *comparatico/compadrazgo/compérage/kumovstvo* in the languages mentioned above). In its turn, English is more precise than neo-Latin languages in allowing us to

distinguish the masculine side of godparenthood (godfatherhood) and the feminine (godmotherhood).⁶ In this book, we will take full advantage of the vocabulary of Modern English, reverting to Latin in the few instances when there is a need to distinguish clearly ties of *compaternitas*.

From the origins of godparenthood and spiritual kinship to the Middle Ages

In the opening words of this introduction, we recalled that in European societies in the past it was thought that baptism was capable of establishing real ties of kinship (of the 'spiritual' kind), with the relative matrimonial interdictions.⁷ However, this description, which closely corresponds to the situation found between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Era, cannot be indiscriminately extended to previous centuries nor to later ones (spiritual kinship no longer exists either among Catholics or Protestants while it survives among the Orthodox). The characteristics of both spiritual kinship and of godparenthood as a social institution are historically determined, and even their emergence within Christian societies needs to be explained because, as Luther would have pointed out, there are no clear references to them in the Gospels nor in other parts of the Bible. We will then provide a very synthetic reconstruction of the appearance and general developments of godparenthood between the fifth century and 1499 (the eve of the period that is the object of the papers collected in this book).⁸

The first appearance of godparents is linked to an important change that took place in Christendom: the widespread use of infant baptism. In the Primitive Church, it was adult baptism that was mainly practised. Between the second and the fourth centuries, the main Christian communities developed a series of practices – together called 'catechumenate' – designed to test and instruct aspiring Christians. To be admitted to this course of instruction, it was necessary to be accompanied and presented by two guarantors (*fideiussores*, *sponsores*) who vouched for the dignity and the suitability of the candidate. After a period of waiting, which could last some years, the candidate was baptised and the ceremony sanctioned his entry into the Christian community.⁹

During this period, Christianity was still the religion of a minority living in a mainly pagan world. By the time infant baptism began to spread, however, it was consolidating as the dominant religion. We are not sure when infant baptism became prevalent (a process that surely differed according to the area), but by the fifth century AD, Saint Augustine was viewing it as the norm (Lynch, 1986: 120). Infant baptism created a ritual and theological problem, given that the baptismal rite demanded an active participation and required at least the use of speech. The problem was solved by godparents, direct descendants of the ancient *sponsores*, responding to the priest's

questions in place of the child. This development also implied a degree of theological elaboration (the distinction between the ‘carnal generation’ and the ‘spiritual generation’), which led to the exclusion of parents as *sponsores* of their own children (Guerreau-Jalabert, 1995: 161–2). This prohibition was clearly stated by the Council of Mainz of 813.

Godparenthood and spiritual kinship, therefore, somehow came into being together, even though it would take several centuries before a complete theological and legal formulation was devised, particularly for spiritual kinship. The Church recognised in the godparents a role as tutors in the Christian education of the child, which they shared with the parents of the child baptised. In succeeding centuries, however, it would prove extremely difficult to convince godparents that they should really care about their educational role.

If the origin of godparents can be traced back to the catechumenate sponsors, the exclusion of parents from godparenthood of their own children does not automatically explain why impediments to marriage would come to be applied to the relationships created by baptism – expanding the boundaries of what would be called spiritual kinship.¹⁰ It would be the taboo of incest, so strongly rooted in Western societies, and the deeply disturbing suspicion that also the ties between people related by godparenthood could create barriers not to be crossed, which led civil and religious authorities to lay down rules that established matrimonial bans also for the spiritual generation.¹¹ Where there is incest there is certainly kinship; the safest foundation of spiritual kinship (far more than any theological reflection) was, right from the outset, the restriction on sexual intercourse (Alfani, 2009a). According to Joseph H. Lynch (1986), the first regulations concerning spiritual kinship would have been engendered as a reaction: the perception of a scandal caused by cases that actually happened led to the intervention of the legislators. The first known ban on marriage on account of spiritual kinship is a letter from the Emperor Justinian addressed to the prefect of the praetorium Julian in October 530, later to be included in the Code of Civil Law, and concerned marriage between a godfather and his goddaughter. The ban was justified by the fact that the very relationship of godparenthood, more than anything else, can generate paternal affection; and therefore this kind of union is ‘incestuous’. In the following centuries, the extension of spiritual kinship would grow and impediments would include marriage between a godfather and the mother of the godson (Trullan Synod of Constantinople, 692), from which the notion of *compaternitas* would develop. These early developments took place mainly within the boundaries of the Eastern Church, while the Western one was slow to accept this theological and regulatory innovation.

Only after the Council of Rome of AD 721, which accepted most of the canons of the Trullan Synod, was the development of spiritual kinship assured also in the West, with bans on marriage due to spiritual