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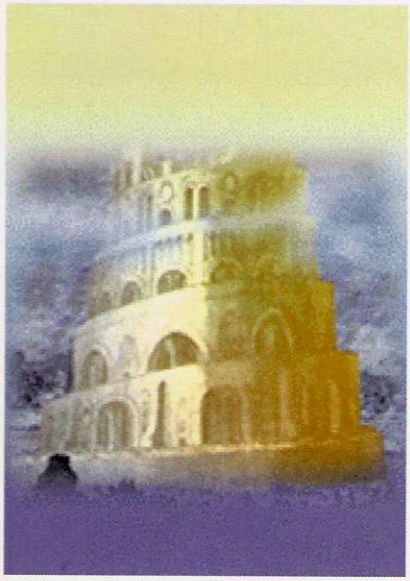

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Collective Religious Memory and the Formation of Italian Identity

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Following the 'religious turn' in ethnic studies (Geertz), interest has grown towards the diversity of religious resources on which social collectivities can draw in the continuous negotiation of their identity in relation to other collectivities.

This paper aims at analysing religion as a form of collective memory. Taking Italy as a case study, I shall discuss how the language of the Catholic Church created across the centuries a set of religious metaphors which contributed to build the sense of Italian identity by providing a common symbolic canon through which successive generations are linked. Religious language and practices will be therefore seen as one of the most important common denominators for a nation which otherwise would appear extremely varied, fragmented in a myriad of different regional cultures, local dialects and languages, municipal traditions and political sub-cultures.

As a relatively newly established State, throughout its life Italy had to deal with questions of national identity strongly advocated by governing bodies but poorly responded to by the population. After nearly 150 years from the unification of Italy, the issue of national identity is still at stake.

The crucial point I shall therefore try to unravel is the answer to the question, 'what makes Italians a people?' Significantly touched by immigration only in recent times, with all the related issues about racial, religious and cultural diversity, Italians undoubtedly share the same culture and the same traditions. What is difficult here is to clearly identify the exact texture of this culture. Even Dante Alighieri in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* could only speak vaguely about 'custom, clothing and speech' (I, xvi, 3). Characterised by an extreme sense of individualism, Italians appear extremely reluctant to identify themselves as a 'nation'. The sometimes pathological need for a strong and well-defined self-identity generates the impulse to draw barriers, underpin differences, and express subtle and improbable *distinguo*.

The pattern of mapping relationships between the 'I' and the 'Other' is of course common to all human beings. Italian people seem nevertheless characterised by the attitude to build a fragmented reality through a process of never-ending oppositions, and Italian sense of belonging is measured against the creation of an opponent. This conflict is visible not only at the macrocosmic level of the dialectic relationship of the individual versus the State, the North versus the South, and the Right versus the Left in politics, the private interest versus the common interest. It is also present at the microcosmic level of parochialism and familism, for which Italy is negatively connotated. As the sociologist Loredana Sciolla points out, here we enter in the domain of stereotypes. It is far too easy (and misleading) to use images of a stereotypical *italianità* to construct the representation of a country. Furthermore, stereotypical images do not remain confined within national boundaries, but travel outside to build a magnified

vision of entirely negative features, which eventually bounce back to generate a distorted image of self-representation. Thus, Italians often remain entrapped within their stereotypical role, while foreign observers are puzzled by the strong paradoxes pertaining to the Italian nature, as in Baranski who comments that 'the reluctance of Italian citizens to think and feel in national terms disappears in special occasions, for example when celebrating the achievements of some great figures of the pre-unification past, or when shouting support for an athlete or a team donning the country's blue international shirt'(11).

Although offering a reductive vision of reality, stereotypes are very important from an anthropologic point of view. They are considered as fundamental parts of the cognitive schema, a schema that works on a metonymic base, where the part functions to represent the whole. In our case, a cultural segment (the part) is considered as representative for the culture of a group (the whole). Thus, the study of stereotypes, images and literary *topoi* is a vital instrument for cultural translation (Piasere).

Between stereotype and reality lies the assumption that 'Italy is a Catholic country'. To clarify my terminology it is important to underline that I am not discussing here Catholicism as a religion proper, but as a diffuse set of beliefs that pervades many sectors of social life and maintains its influence over common values. This cluster of common values tends to unify behaviour and attitudes deriving from both the religious and lay perspectives. It is a sort of popular ethos, which is the manifestation of the spiritual force of Italian collectivity, and creates, protects and transmits the models of everyday life, of its ethic and aesthetic practices.

A recent survey (Marchisio and Pisati) reveals that 41% of the interviewees are dissatisfied with the dogmas of Catholicism, although they are ready to recognise that the Roman Church has provided a set of images or *topoi* through which Italian sense of identity can be imagined and remembered. It is therefore possible to claim that, even if the stereotypical assumption that Italy is a thoroughly religious country is highly questionable, many of the social practices that Italians perform in everyday life are a direct consequence of the Catholic culture.

The thesis of Italy as a society permeated with religious language can be used to explain the reasons of the macroscopic oxymoron that frames its present identity.

The first contradiction is evident at a political level: a survey of 1994 showed that 94% of Italians defined themselves as 'Catholic' (Cesareo et al.). Indeed, the Democrazia Cristiana, a party connected to the Church, headed coalition government in Italy from 1948 to 1992. Yet, the Italian Communist Party has been the strongest and most successful of all communist associations in Western Europe. Another inconsistence with the thesis of Italy as a monolithic Catholic country emerges at a social level, where, despite vigorous opposition from the Church, the Italian parliament legalised divorce as early as 1970 and abortion in 1978.

Only the sharing of the same social habits and public rituals protects the survival of a nation made of 'Comrades and Christians' (Kertzer). The choice for

non-believers to marry and baptise their children in the Church has therefore to be seen as a consequence of the lack of a valid alternative in symbolic references. As anthropology demonstrates, all cultures rely on a specific rituality to celebrate moment of passage, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, death, and so on. Those forms of family aggregation are representational practices that shape our identity.

In Italy, the supply of symbols and rituals to celebrate those rites has always been of Catholic matrix. Church teachings have provided many of the basic conceptions in a cosmology of ideas about human agency, natural forces, fortune and misfortune.

This is true even in the case of the persistence of pagan symbolism that, as De Martino demonstrated, has been translated into the language of the Church. Ancient vestiges are forgotten, and a new memory is created. In our case, a strong cult of the Saints performing all sorts of miracles has been encouraged to obliterate every link to magic practices and non-conventional beliefs.

This is an interesting case to underline the implications of translation in the formation of a cultural memory. Whenever a concept starts to appear dangerous, it is possible to defuse it by the manipulation of its words. We can rephrase it in a language that has previously been pre-digested, so that even the most explosive of the metaphors can be reduced to what Paul Ricoeur calls 'dead metaphors'. And as Halbwachs affirms, language, with the whole system of social conventions attached to it, is the most elementary and most stable framework of collective memory. Here I consider language in its most wide definition of verbal and written signs, but also as a set of visual signs (art, images, icons, gestures) and sounds (music and litanies).

It is then possible to suggest that the vocabulary and semantic tools for collective representation in Italy has been entirely 'copyrighted' by the Church. Let us see now how the Church discourse has come to shape Italian mentality.

It has often been stated that Western culture is rooted in the Bible. This may be the case of Protestant nations, where the church has encouraged its people to directly confront the sacred texts. The same practice does not apply to a Catholic country, There, I would think, religious culture appears to be much more rooted in secondary sources, such as catechism and devotional books. And above all, on oral sermons, where the priest from the altar was considered as the repository of the 'ultimate truth'.

The networks to propagate Catholic culture are numerous and widespread, and were well established soon after the national unification. First, there is the Catholic press, which controls a variety of publications throughout the country. Then there is the tight net of *parrocchie* (the ecclesiastical territorial institutions), which is supported on the territory by a large group of Catholic associational organisations. Together, they provide assistance and guidance to all segments of the society, such as children education, hospital assistance, care of elderly people. Moreover, the strong connections between religion and political life allow the Church to rely on public institutions (school, radio and television) to spread the tenets of Catholic culture.

The dominant feature of church teachings is to create a 'religious enchantment' (Cipriani), to secure the stability of society through a systematic