

An encounter with Italy: A Note on *An Italian Education* by Tim Parks

Kevin Williams
Mater Dei Institute of Education
Dublin City University
Dublin, Ireland

In learning any language of which religion remains a salient feature we must enter into the religious and the moral life of its people. In Italian, for example, although the religious dimension of such expressions as *Madonna!*, *Madonna mia!*, *O Dio aiuto* (God help us), *Che peccato!* (What a pity! literally What a sin) and *Vai a quel paese* (Go to hell) is negligible, people over forty still say *Grazie a Dio* (thanks be to God) as an expression of genuine gratitude towards God. In dealing with the link between culture, religion, and language, one of the books that I invite my students to read is *An Italian Education* (Vintage, 2000) by English novelist, Tim Parks. In the book Parks describes his experience as a parent of three young children growing up in Italy. The volume also demonstrates the impression that the culture of Roman Catholicism can have on those who come from outside the tradition. Although Parks does not believe in God, he retains his Anglo-Saxon, Protestant cultural and moral presuppositions. He is very much a Protestant atheist. As his children acquire an Italian education, he finds himself acquiring one too and having to adjust to the cultural dissonance that this provokes in his English sensibility.

The Father and the Family

Parks believes that knowledge of the language contributed hugely to his initiation into Italian culture. Knowledge of the language goes beyond what translation can offer because, he argues, translation provides only a “tiny fraction” of the meaning of a word, “only an empty semantic

shell, since so often meaning is nothing more than the stony outcrop of a great mass of cultural bedrock beneath” (Parks, 2000, n.p., Author’s Note). He takes as his examples some expressions that provide a conduit into the cultural universe of Italy. Perhaps the most telling expression that he identifies is *tengo famiglia* (I support a family). No translation can fully disclose “the vast mental iceberg sailing beneath . . . [the] apparently harmless semantic tip” (ibid., p. 311) of this phrase that Parks finds lying at “the crossroads of so many cultural highways” (ibid.). The sense of holding implied in *tengo* contains the notions both of supporting and controlling a family, together with notions of being self-sacrificing and powerful. It also suggests “I am a pillar of the establishment, I am doing my social duty” (ibid.). To invoke the phrase is to affirm a person’s achievement in life and to leave him beyond reproach even when accused of bribery, theft or corruption. The potency of family loyalty to override morality and duties to the wider community is also intrinsic to the culture of the mafia.

The noun *sacrifici* (literally sacrifices) is another family-related term. Parks remarks “how often and in how many ways the word is used. how it seals a crucial joint in the Latin mind frame, [and] offers a vital stepping stone in the Catholic search for good conscience” (Author’s Note). Buying a house or apartment proved difficult because of the tendency of Italian parents to buy property for the future use of their children. “And the refrain was always the same: *bisogna fare sacrifici per i figli* – (one has to make sacrifices for one’s children)” (ibid., p. 43). Part of the reason for the emphasis on the family, suggests Parks, derives from a conviction that every family is sacred and reflects in some way the Holy Family. In making sacrifices for the good of their children, people perceive themselves not as acting from self-interest but rather as performing their Christian duty.

The Mother and the Home

Linked to the notion of family is that of the home. Parks notes the absence of a distinction in the Italian word *casa* (house or home) between “house, the physical place, and home, the emotional base” (ibid., 41). This implies that there can be no living space that it is not also a home. The Italian *casa*, he further suggests, has a sacred quality that gives it much in common with the *chiesa* (church). Local women bring to the business of polishing and cleaning the church the same intense zeal that they bring to this work in their own homes (see ibid., pp.125/6). The profile of the home in Italian life helps him to understand one reason for the big difference

between Italian and English conceptions of schooling. Unlike its English counterpart, the Italian school refrains from the attempt to induce a family atmosphere. One important reason for this is because educational institutions are not expected “to offer a community that might in any way supplant the family, or rival Mamma” (ibid., p. 287). The emphasis on the mother in Italian life, argues Parks, goes some way to explaining the profile of the Blessed Virgin in Italian culture. Indeed, Parks believes that why in the minds of many Italians the status of Jesus derives less from having God as his father and more from having the Blessed Virgin as his mother (ibid., p. 100).

Social and Religious Expectations

The overriding emphasis on family loyalty may go towards explaining what Parks perceives as a general Italian disregard for rules and the dissociation between rules and reality in civic and social life. He notes that Italian has no word for ‘bedtime’ as the concept suggests something coercive that does not fit in with the way of life (ibid., p.85). Among his friends he notes a serious unwillingness to impose upon their children rules of conduct. This failure, he writes, teaches even very young children that they are not really expected to do as they are told. The gap between rules and reality is a feature of civic culture where people tend to disobey laws that they do not like, especially regarding the payment of tax (ibid.,p. 88). He tells a story of his own daughter’s angry reaction when reciting ‘Mary had a little lamb’ on reaching the line “It was against the rules” (ibid., p. 235). Her gestures of defiance express a typical Italian contempt for “stupid rules” (ibid). His young son has anglicised the Italian *non essere fiscale*, *Papa*, to “don’t be so fiscal”, meaning “don’t be inflexible regarding rules of behaviour” (ibid.). Endeavouring to sort out the matter with his wife, she gently ignores his concerns and invites him on the balcony for a drink (ibid., p. 237).

Whatever may be said about the rules of civic life, he finds that there are social rules regarding the place of religion in social life that one is expected to observe whether or not one believes in God. It takes him some time in Italy to appreciate that withholding his children from sacramental preparation and religious class is perceived as an expression of “churlish” (ibid., p. 220) pride. What he has done is to exclude the children from the community for the sake of “dubious notions of sincerity and coherence”

(*ibid.*). Moreover, the exemption of his children from religious instruction in school has not immunized them against religious influence. At first, all who were withdrawn from religion were due to do Peace Studies, but this was subsequently changed to a version of European Studies called *Osservazione all'Europa* (Perspectives on Europe). However, in these classes one of the first things the pupils learn is that what unites European nations is the principal religion of the Italian people, i.e., Roman Catholicism, (*ibid.*, p. 288). So much for the Reformation.

Taking his children out for a country stroll, the proliferation of shrines to local saints makes Parks aware of how pervasive is the place of religion in Italian life. The Italian countryside, he writes, is “never just landscape or nature trails, never just a stroll, but full of roadside gods” (*ibid.*, p. 214). Although withdrawn from religion class his children, he realizes, resonate to this countryside filled with spirits (*ibid.*, p. 216). Part of an Italian upbringing involves learning to inhabit this landscape.

Due to his willingness to enter into its culture, Tim Parks has come to feel at home in Italy. His encounter with Italian culture and language has been in part an encounter with Christianity. Thorough learning Italian, Parks has been prompted, at least to some extent, to decenter from his own secular culture and to enter into a Christianized one. In doing so he has highlighted for us the fact that dealing squarely with religious issues is likely to be unavoidable in any serious encounter with a foreign culture, a fact not always well reflected in foreign language learning materials that emerge from secular culture. Unless the religious dimension of the foreign culture is addressed, then what learners encounter is a seriously limited and impoverished version of that culture. This point is very well illustrated in Parks's book. To adapt language from David Smith and Barbara Carvill, by showing hospitality towards him and changing his horizons, the Italian people have been a blessing to the author (Smith and Carvill, 2000, pp. 57/8).

WORKS CITED

- Parks, T (2000) *An Italian Education* (London, Vintage).
- Smith, D.I and Carvill, B. (2000) *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, Wm. B. Eerdmans).