

DON BOSCO IN THE HISTORY OF POPULAR CULTURE IN ITALY

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1. The meaning of expression «popular culture»

Several decades ago Luigi Russo expressed regret, in an outline of popular culture in Italy, that Mazzini's followers never succeeded in establishing a proper popular culture in opposition to that of their adversaries, because «the artificial popular culture of the Catholic Church had *entered* the bloodstream of every Italian».¹ In his own provocative style he took up this theme of a subterranean thread of national culture which has survived, like a rocky substratum, the many changes that have occurred in Italian society, preserving its own substantial identity in the face of the cultures of the élites. Many of those who are interested in the history of our national culture in its political and everyday dimensions have encountered an analogous problem: the divergent opposition that exists between the culture of the masses and the culture of the élites. The question is, of course, connected with the influence of Catholicism in Italy and has been discussed from the time of Francesco De Sanctis down to Antonio Gramsci, who gave a precise analysis of the problem within the context of his reflections on folklore, «group consciousness» and state domination.² There was renewed interest in the subject after the Second World War, often due to the influence of Gramsci, but viewed within the wider context of the problems that were raised by the attempt to understand fascism and the new political ascendancy of the forces of Catholicism. More recently there has been a fresh flowering of interest as a result of the growing application of anthropological sciences and of fresh interest in the history of forms of consciousness or of «sub-cultures».³

¹ L. RUSSO, *Breve storia della cultura popolare*, in «Belfagor» (1952) 708.

² For the views of De Sanctis cf. especially C. MUSCETTA - G. CANDELORO (edit.), *La scuola cattolico-liberale e il romanticismo a Napoli*, Torino 1953, pp. 231-245; for the comments of Gramsci cf. V. GERRATANA (edit.), *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino 1975, vol. IV; see the index for the subjects of «cultura popolare», «folklore», «letteratura popolare», «senso comune».

³ Cf. E. DE MARTINO, *Intorno a una storia del mondo popolare subalterno*, in «Società»

It is necessary to clarify at once the expression «popular culture», which has undergone many semantic transformations and variations, so that the history of the term is quite instructive and revealing.⁴ Within the culture of the 19th century with which we are concerned the generally accepted meaning of the expression appears to have been quite different from the sense which prevails today in anthropological and ethnological studies; it was also quite different from the more recent notion of «mass culture». At all events, the dominant sense of «popular culture» throughout most of the 19th century allows us to place it alongside other analogous expressions, such as «popular education», «popular instruction», «popular literature», as well as the phrase «popular religion», which opens up a whole range of further questions.

If we adopt this usage, which was that of Don Bosco himself, we shall speak of «popular culture» in the common meaning of culture for the people, or culture destined chiefly for popular consumption. This does not exclude the possibility of examining the effects of interaction between this type of popular culture and the enduring manifestations of popular culture in its anthropological sense; neither does it exclude the existence of a certain link or degree of continuity between popular culture as understood then and certain aspects of the mass culture of a successive age.

2. Popular culture and issue of literacy and schooling

One cannot divorce the question of popular culture in the 19th century from the important issue of literacy and the growth of schooling, however limited, as a growing proportion of the masses began to have access to reading and writing.⁵ The written or printed word was the chief, though not exclusive, vehicle through which a culture could spread amongst the people – and by «culture» I here mean a complex of information and values which was not «popular» in origin but derived from social groups and formative

(September, 1949) 411-445; ID., *Etnologia e cultura nazionale negli ultimi dieci anni*, *ibidem* (September, 1953) 318 et ss.; C. PRANDI, *La religione popolare fra potere e tradizione*, Milano 1983, p. 162; B. BOTTA - F. CASTELLI - B. MANTELLI (edit.), *La cultura delle classi subalterne fra tradizione e innovazione*, Acts of the study conference at Alessandria in March, 1985, Alessandria 1988.

⁴ Cf. A. PORTELLI, *Culture popolari e cultura di massa*, in: G. DE LUNA - P. ORTOLEVA - M. REVELLI - N. TRANFAGLIA (edit.), *Il mondo contemporaneo. Gli strumenti della ricerca*, vol. III, Firenze 1983, pp. 1470-1490; A. NESTI, *Culture popolari e complessità sociale*, in: *La cultura delle classi subalterne* 65-84.

⁵ D. BERTONI JOVINE, *Storia della scuola popolare in Italia*, Torino 1954; L. DALLE NOGARE (edit.), *Quando il popolo cominciò a leggere*. Mostra dell'alfabetizzazione e diffusione della lettura in Lombardia, Monza 1973; C.G. LACAITA, *Istruzione e sviluppo industriale in Italia (1859-1914)*, Monza 1973; E. DE FORT, *Storia della scuola elementare in Italia*, vol. I, Milano 1979.

institutions which had specialised and collective goals. The first and most obvious of these goals was that of building up the nation's cultural life, although, because of Italy's peculiar historical situation, this did not coincide with the building up of one political nation. Moreover, many studies, which have grown in number in recent years, draw attention to other, no less significant aspects of popular culture, such as the crucial stage of socio-cultural development and modernization which followed upon the unification of Italy.⁶

These simple observations serve to show how complex and even contradictory were some of the factors in the process of «improving» the culture of the masses, a process which combined liberation and social betterment, confirmation and discipline and, if you like, indoctrination, in so far as ethical systems, views of the world, even knowledge and skills, had to be imparted under direction from above. The result was that the spread of popular culture in the 19th century was achieved – and this was unavoidable – at the expense of profound dislocation, and at times destruction, of ancient popular cultures. The forced and only partially successful grafting of the national language on to the local dialects is just one example amongst many.

There are at least three good reasons for keeping all this in mind. The first and most general reason is that, hitherto, there had been profound, though far from simple links between the Catholic faith and the anthropological cultures that were now threatened by the new popular culture mediated through the schools and the press.

The second reason is that the instruments and institutions that were to be used in order to spread culture amongst the people contained a modernizing impulse that was somehow independent of the content of the notions they diffused: by their very existence they primed the processes which gave rise to cultural change and which had a direct influence upon the preservation and transmission of the traditional cultures.

The third and most compelling reason is that popular culture became an arena for competition and for potential conflict between ethical principles and worldly ways of thinking, which were for the first time beginning to threaten on a global scale the Church's influence and hegemony, as well as its all-embracing structures.

Early awareness of the radical challenge implicit in the institutions, methods and content of popular culture reveals very clearly the nature of the conflict, which was experienced as a «religious war» between the Church and certain modern ideologies: these ideologies were liberalism, seen as the

⁶ Cf. G. ARE, *Il problema dello sviluppo industriale nell'età della Destra*, Pisa 1965, pp. 253 et ss.; S. LANARO, *Nazione e lavoro. Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia (1870-1925)*, Venezia 1979; G. VERUCCI, *L'Italia laica prima e dopo l'Unità (1848-1876). Anticlericalismo, libero pensiero e ateismo nella società italiana*, Bari 1981; S. PIVATO, *Movimento operaio e istruzione popolare nell'Italia liberale*, Milano 1985; C. OSSOLA, his *Introduzione* to C. CANTÙ, *Portafoglio di un operaio*, Milano 1984.

philosophy of a state which was competing with the Church in the fields of culture and education, and socialism which was regarded as a system that was structurally associated with the life of the lower classes and which, therefore, was judged to be a threat to Catholicism on a popular terrain which the Church had judged to be peculiarly its own.

Symptomatic of the problems that the question of popular culture posed for the ordered existence of Catholicism in Italy were the reactions of those who saw it, during the period of the Restoration, as an attack on the traditional order. This phase of the conflict was marked by the hostile reaction to the very idea of making education available to the masses.⁷ But this opposition between traditional religion and the «new» culture of the people could not continue in the face of the changes occurring in society and of the general movement for wider educational opportunities, which was often spear-headed by eminent ecclesiastics and by individual religious orders and congregations. The area of conflict was shifting and becoming more clearly defined by the fourth and fifth decades of the century: it centred on the ideas, the methods and the institutional aspects of the movements which championed popular education and the spread of culture amongst the masses.

The essential elements of the battle that was to go on, in one form or another, throughout the 19th century were first manifested in the region where Don Bosco received his formation and began his work, the moderately reformist world of Piedmont during the period of Carlo Alberto. This fact is illustrated by the different approach to education and popular culture adopted by the group associated with the «Letture di famiglia» of Lorenzo Valerio, with the «Guida dell'Educatore» of Raffaello Lambruschini and Giampiero Vieusseux and the «Educatore primario», which owed its birth to Rosmini and Aporti.⁸ These, however, were only the early warning signals of the sharper conflicts which would characterise the growing secularization of the territories ruled by the house of Savoy during the period of Cavour, as a unified, liberal state was born and as tentative, fiercely contested steps were taken towards the modern development of Italian society. Amidst all this process the figure of Don Bosco merits attention as someone who promoted popular culture. This is a claim that I shall seek to justify and clarify.

⁷ Cf. G. TALAMO, *Questione scolastica e Risorgimento*, in: G. CHIOSSO (edit.), *Scuola e stampa nel Risorgimento. Giornali e riviste per l'educazione prima dell'Unità*, Milano 1988, pp. 13 et ss. A more general picture is given in G. VERUCCI, *Per una storia del cattolicesimo intransigente in Italia dal 1815 al 1848*, in: *I cattolici e il liberalismo dalle «Amicizie Cristiane» al modernismo*, Padova 1968.

⁸ G. CHIOSSO, *L'educazione del popolo nei giornali piemontesi per la scuola*, in: *Scuola e stampa* 34 et s.; ID., *L'Oratorio di don Bosco e il rinnovamento educativo nel Piemonte carloalbertino*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 83-116. Cf. also L. BULFERETTI, *Socialismo risorgimentale*, Torino 1975; D. BERTONI JOVINE, *I periodici popolari del Risorgimento*, vol. I, Milano 1959; G.M. BRAVO, *Torino operaia. Mondo del lavoro e idee sociali nell'età di Carlo Alberto*, Torino 1968.

3. Two figures: C. Cantù and A. Bresciani

In the history of popular culture within the Catholic sphere two figures have taken on an almost symbolic significance, above all on account of the attention devoted to them by the two great political intellectuals I have already mentioned. One was Cesare Cantù, who was considered by Francesco De Sanctis to be the source of a whole stream of popular literature which represented «decay» of the school of Manzoni and of the Catholic liberal movement;⁹ the other was Father Antonio Bresciani, whom Antonio Gramsci saw as the prototype of a tradition of popular Catholic literature which would produce a host of disciples well into the 20th century.¹⁰

Recent historical writing has somewhat altered our way of viewing the 19th century's literary products destined for popular consumption; interest is now centred not just on works of a purely literary nature but rather on the entire mass of publications, including works which sought to promote popular culture in its most varied aspects. There has been particular interest in the nature and extent of the changes in collective moral values which were pursued, more or less consciously, in the quite heterogenous material that was fed to the masses. This general review has confirmed the importance of the work of Cantù, revealing aspects of his writings which are indebted to Franklin's doctrine of «self-help» and which link him, to a certain extent, with the «new supply» in the field of industry that is associated with Alessandro Rossi.¹¹

The example of Cantù also provides a useful illustration of the crucial process of mediation which was carried out by moderate Catholic groups or individuals between a traditional ethic founded on religion and the fresh demands of popular acculturation.¹² In this context Cantù features amongst a whole group of authors who resembled him, without achieving his fame.¹³ Consequently, histories of the period, instead of concentrating on individual authors, have examined the general trend that was followed in producing and disseminating books, taking into account the nature of the «market» for

⁹ F. DE SANCTIS, *La scuola cattolico-liberale* 202 et ss. Following the same line see also B. CROCE, *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo XIX*, Bari 1947, vol. I, pp. 197 et ss.; the latter sees Cantù as one of the «members of the liberal Catholic school who lost their way».

¹⁰ A. GRAMSCI, *Quaderni del carcere*, IV 2195 et ss. See also L. BEDESCHI, *Letteratura popolare e murrismo*, in «Humanitas» (1972) 846-862; A. FERRARI, *Bresciani A.*, in: *Dizionario storico del movimento cattolico in Italia (1860-1980)*, Casale M. 1984, vol. III/1, pp. 130 et s. (abbreviated to DSMC).

¹¹ C. OSSOLA, *Introduzione* 20 et ss.

¹² G. GINZBURG, *Folklore, magia, religione*, in: *Storia d'Italia Einaudi*, vol. I: *I caratteri originali*, Torino 1972, pp. 666-668; LANARO, *Nazione e lavoro* 98 et s. For a more general view, G. BAGLIONI, *L'ideologia della borghesia industriale nell'Italia liberale*, Torino 1974, pp. 309-365; G. BOLLATI, *L'Italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*, Torino 1983.

¹³ C. OSSOLA, *Introduzione* 38 et ss.

which they were destined and the effect which such works had upon the people.¹⁴

These new historical approaches have so far given only marginal consideration to Don Bosco's initiatives in the field of popular culture.¹⁵ There seem to me to be two main reasons for this. One is the difficulty of placing him within well defined historical parameters; the other is the relative isolation of the Salesian contribution to the religious and civil history of Italy.

4. Features of Don Bosco's contribution

Any general view of Don Bosco's contribution to the spread of popular culture must consider both its content and the educative aims which largely inspired his work, as well as the methods and, above all, structures, which he made use of.

We may begin to evaluate the content of Don Bosco's work by considering it in the light of a critical comment made by Francesco De Sanctis about Cantù: «He believed that when talking to the masses all that was needed was to present parables, examples, stories and anecdotes, in other words, objects of sensible awareness, without having to bother about the logic of what he wrote». What De Sanctis was criticising in the popular writers of the time, like Taverna, Parravicini and Cantù himself, was the piling together of «useful knowledge», of information that was lumped together in encyclopaedic but disorderly profusion, of moral exhortations presented in isolated detail but lacking any design or «unifying key idea».¹⁶ Don Bosco seemed to be similarly aware of the problem and in his writings he clearly tried to centre things round one main idea which would unify the whole, so that it imparted an organised message.

I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that his *Storia d'Italia* contains such a key idea. He was not attempting to be original; his version of his country's history was visibly indebted to the Catholic view prevalent at the time of the Restoration. It was a presentation of Italian history woven inseparably around the Papacy and the Church, based on a point of view that was typically Guelph and papal, and supported by a Catholic apologetic for the Church's social and civil autonomy. True religion was seen as the greatest guarantor of man's earthly well-being and of the orderly progress of the community.

¹⁴ These aspects are well treated in G. VERUCCI, *L'Italia laica* 116-178.

¹⁵ Many references to this question can now be found in: P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980, and in: L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Lectures catholiques» di Don Bosco esempio di «stampa cattolica» nel secolo XIX*, Roma, 1980; more specialised is S. PRIVATO, *Don Bosco e la «cultura popolare»*, in: F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 253-287.

¹⁶ DE SANCTIS, *La scuola cattolico-liberale* 235.

What was original in Don Bosco's account was the way he saw the history of lofty institutions and authorities as forming one indivisible *continuum* with the history of the lowly. The simple, enduring rules of morality and of common sense, illustrated by *exempla* and edifying (or deterrent) incidents, were organically connected with the central realities of dogma, ascetics, Catholic piety and an ecclesiology that was based on the primacy of the Roman pontiff.¹⁷ Don Bosco attempted to weld together the people's general moral sense and a vision of the Catholic religion as safeguarding corporate life by organising that life around symbols so central that they effectively provided a «shared ideology». All this, as has been noted,¹⁸ went hand-in-hand with the attempt to provide an answer to the restrictions imposed on the Church's institutional and cultural role by the secular state, and to the proliferation of different opinions that resulted amongst the faithful. In this attempt he took as his starting point the basic, traditional features of the national, Catholic *ethos*.

The most significant thing about Don Bosco's contribution to popular culture was his insistence that he would have nothing to do with politics.

In this he was merely applying the strongly traditional principle that authority was rooted, like fatherhood, in nature and the divine will. He tended to place the exercise of power in an inaccessible realm, quite extraneous to the interests of the ordinary people, whose duty was conscientious submission. This enabled Don Bosco to declare that it was possible to adapt «to every kind of law and Government»,¹⁹ and to show a fundamental loyalty that was very different from the subversive attitude of Catholic intransigence. He was also able to put into practice on a broad scale the principle that to be a good Catholic and to be a good citizen were really one and the same thing, since «good citizenship» was included within the requirements of good personal behaviour and the practice of virtue, as proclaimed by Catholic moral teaching.

The attitude which he consequently adopted towards the institutional framework of the unified, liberal state was unusual, but revealing: his readiness to adapt and conform to governmental norms was accompanied by the elaboration of a detailed system of duties and obligations based on Catholic teaching and proposed as an alternative to the ethical system derived from liberalism or socialism, yet relevant to the changing values and mentality of a society where capitalism was becoming the dominant system and where the masses were acquiring a sense of nationhood.²⁰

¹⁷ F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e l'educazione giovanile: la «Storia d'Italia»*, in: ID., *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare* 81-111.

¹⁸ PIVATO, *Don Bosco e la «cultura popolare»* 256 et s.

¹⁹ P. BRAIDO, *L'esperienza pedagogica di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1988, p. 79. Cf. also G. COSTA, *Don Bosco e la letteratura giovanile dell'Ottocento*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 341; P. SCOPPOLA, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Quaderni del Centro Studi Carlo Tabucco, no. 11, Torino 1988, pp. 14 et s.

²⁰ P. BAIKATI, *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, in: F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia*

Don Bosco was living through a most significant phase in the evolution of the Catholic ethic. Two points in particular stand out: the emergence of what has been described as the ethic of productive labour, and insistence upon a model of sanctity which is within everyone's reach and essentially linked with respect for the duties inseparable from one's state of life and from one's place in society.

Much has been written, especially in recent years, about Don Bosco's teaching concerning work;²¹ and I have no desire to add to the detailed comments that others have made. I should merely like to sum up these observations, pointing out how, for Don Bosco, work took on a new educative value, because it was no longer seen merely as a form of punishment to which we are condemned but as something more creative and personal, as well as being productive and discharging a duty to society. Moreover, in Don Bosco's educational system work, when carried out with diligence and attention to detail, makes «labour lighter», introduces a disciplined use of time, and helps the individual to appreciate the value of precise rules, of discipline and collaboration; these qualities tend to develop in a productive, group process, where the market economy is readily accepted but is counterbalanced by a spirit of solidarity and mutual support.²²

Within Don Bosco's system of mass education there are several original features that help to connect the work ethic with the call for a particular style of sanctity. In presenting models of holiness Don Bosco did not favour only the saints who had achieved great things in the history of the Church,²³ he also pointed out a kind of personal sanctity that is within everyone's reach without having to practise extraordinary virtues. All that is required is a strong will and strenuous perseverance in fulfilling the duties of one's state of life.²⁴ In his *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, he recommended that «great care should be taken to ensure the practice of easy things that do not scare people off and are not wearisome to the faithful, especially the young [...]. Let us stick to simple things, but let them be done with perseverance». In his *Vita di Santa Zita serva e di Sant'Isidoro contadino*, published anonymously in the «Letture cattoliche» (a point I shall return to), the message was even more explicit: «How many things are necessary if we

della cultura popolare 332 et ss.; F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide* 39-46.

²¹ P. BAIKATI, *Cultura salesiana* 337 et ss.; L. PAZZAGLIA, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco (1846-1886)*, *ibid.*, 29 et ss.; D. VENERUSO, *Il metodo educativo di san Giovanni Bosco alla prova. Dai laboratori agli istituti professionali*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 133-142.

²² P. BAIKATI, *Cultura salesiana* 339 et s.

²³ F. MOLINARI, *La «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 216 et s.

²⁴ For important comments on these aspects of the question see P. STELLA, *Don Bosco II* 205 et ss.

are to become saints? One thing only: one has to have the *will to do so*. Yes, provided you will it, you can be saints: the only thing you lack is the *will*. The saints whose example I am about to present to you were people of humble condition who had to live a very busy life. Workers, farmers, artisans, merchants, servants and children – each one became a saint while doing their daily duties. And how precisely did they become saints? Simply by doing well whatever they had to do [...]. In the lives of the saints that the Church puts before us as models we can witness, at times, extraordinary happenings and amazing exploits; but we can be quite certain that it was not these happenings and exploits that made them saints, but their fidelity in serving God and in carrying out the duties of their state of life».²⁵

We can, I think, agree that there was in this image of holiness, as in a nutshell, the seed of the voluntaristic system spread later also in Italy by the Smiles literature of «to will is to be able».²⁶

It is all too easy to point out the socially conservative element in Don Bosco's recommendation of an ascetical programme which involved resignation and willing acceptance of the conditions of life in which one finds oneself, and which was radically opposed to any tendency to feel «social jealousy». This does not make it any less true that this personal determination to be better was rich in potential for action, in so far as it demanded personal responsibility and gave an almost sacred quality to all forms of work undertaken in a spirit of duty. Sainthood «à la Don Bosco» may have appeared to depend on a stiffly hierarchical and organic view of the social order,²⁷ yet it recommended that one should be conscious of the importance of being faithful to the rules of one's «profession», and, in the long term, this would inevitably cause a clash with the doctrine of a static social order that had been fixed by God once and for all. The conservative wrapping of the Bosconian ethic contained within it the power of an ascetic involvement in the world which would later make itself felt on the historical and social plain.

²⁵ Cf. L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 96.

²⁶ This is the title of a work by M. LESSONA which he published in Turin in 1869, shortly after the appearance of G. Strafforello's translation of S. SMILES' *Self-Help*, which bore the title *Chi si aiuta Dio l'aiuta* (cf. G. VERUCCI, *L'Italia laica* 119 et ss.). A little later came the book by P. LIOY, *Chi dura la vince* (1871). In the case of Don Bosco one could also speak of a «preventive approach» to sanctity and of the tendency towards a social ascetic which was implicit in the secular liberal ethic of «personal success». Nevertheless there remain certain similarities between the two voluntaristic forms of asceticism.

²⁷ G.F. VENÈ, *Letteratura e capitalismo in Italia dal Settecento ad oggi*, Milano 1963, pp. 276 et ss.

5. The connection between mass-media and institutional framework

Any discussion of Don Bosco's contribution to popular culture must include the problems connected with his system of education, his methods and the educational institutions that he founded. I do not propose to dwell on these, since they are dealt with by other contributors to this congress. I should merely like to point out the significance that many educational activities acquired in Don Bosco's work by simultaneously promoting culture and socialization: I am thinking of the part played by instrumental and choral music, the theatre (where one can see the «popular» application of what was a peculiarly Jesuit tradition) and physical education, especially gymnastics.²⁸

I should, however, like to consider another central aspect of the matter, namely the connection between the way that popular culture was disseminated and the institutional framework of Salesian life. It could seem that there is nothing distinctive in Don Bosco's founding of a congregation devoted to popular education, since there were plenty of others around him who did the same; just as there seemed nothing distinctive in his efforts, as a writer and publisher, to spread «good books», because this was a field in which 19th century Catholics were particularly active.²⁹

The project that was gradually unfolding, as his own educational experience matured, was more ambitious: he not only saw that books, as channels of popular instruction, could become educational tools at many levels, he also saw that through the world of Salesian communities he could provide an institution that would be a major instrument in producing and disseminating the written word.

Don Bosco understood that any production of reading matter for the masses would have to take into account the fact that there was still a very small market for such material; this was demonstrated in Piedmont by the limited circulation of the «Lecture» of Valerio and of the «Amico della Gioventù».³⁰ He realised that the production of this material could be done

²⁸ S. PIVATO, *Don Bosco e la «cultura popolare»* 280-282, and also *Letteratura popolare e teatro educativo*, in: DSMC I/1, pp. 296-303. Pivato points out that the preference for gymnastics indicated an approach to physical education based more upon group discipline than upon competition between individuals. I should point out that this was in agreement with secular practice in the field of physical education (cf. G. VERUCCI, *L'Italia laica* 126), which became obligatory in schools. For information on associations and gymnastic activities in relation to the welding of the masses into one nation, cf. G.L. MOSSE, *La nazionalizzazione delle masse. Simbolismo politico e movimenti di massa in Germania (1812-1933)*, Bologna 1975, pp. 146 et ss.

²⁹ E. VALENTINI, *Don Bosco e l'apostolato della stampa*, Torino 1957; F. MALGERI, *La stampa quotidiana e periodica e l'editoria*, in DSMC I/1, pp. 273 et ss.; L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Lecture cattoliche»* 71 et ss.

³⁰ Data concerning subscriptions and circulation for the «Amico della gioventù», which was managed by Don Bosco, can be found in: P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 345 et s.

only if it was subsidised by some organization, since the task could not, at least initially, be self-financing.

Don Bosco's first attempts at publishing were largely limited to providing school texts, even though they were advertised as «useful [...] for every class of person». Examples were his *Storia Sacra*, the *Storia ecclesiastica*, and, later, the *Storia d'Italia*, as well as his dialogue on the decimal metric system. Alongside these there were his books of piety and devotion, especially those written for his boys.³¹ In producing books which were, for the most part, destined for use in schools, Don Bosco met a real need, of which the politicians were conscious but about which for a long time little was done.³²

After 1848 there was a change in the political and cultural climate. Liberty of the press, the steady secularization of the state and the spread of protestant propaganda all induced Don Bosco to begin publishing popular literature of a kind which would reach a wider public than did his scholastic texts.³³ He had to hand the example of the «Collezione di buoni libri a favore della religione cattolica» published in the September of 1849 by Eredi Botta. This appeared fortnightly but was still rather too expensive at 6 lire *per annum*.³⁴ A more direct inducement to enter the arena came from the Piedmontese bishops, especially Bishop Moreno, with whom Don Bosco planned a small popular collection of books round about 1851 to 1852. This was to give birth, in 1853, to the enterprise of the «Letture cattoliche».³⁵

This undertaking was launched with the republication of *Avvisi ai Cattolici*, first published in 1850, and then with *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua religio-*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 331 et ss. For information on the publication of devotional literature in Lombardy during the Restoration, cf. M. BERENGO, *Intellettuale e librai nella Milano della Restaurazione*, Torino 1980.

³² A common way of disseminating books was to introduce them into schools as texts or as prizes. Don Bosco did this, but he did not consider his *Storia d'Italia* a suitable school text (cf. his letter to the minister, Peruzzi, in May, 1863, in E I 269-271 and in MB V 503). On the serious problem over text-books in school, see VERUCCI, *L'Italia laica* 173, and also D. BERTONI JOVINE, *Storia della didattica dalla legge Casati ad oggi*, Roma 1976, vol. I, pp. 173-191, and vol. II, pp. 621-645; G. CANESTRI - G. RICUPERATI, *La scuola in Italia dalla legge Casati a oggi*, Torino 1976, pp. 66 et ss.; I. PORCIANI, *Il libro di testo come oggetto di ricerca: i manuali scolastici nell'Italia post-unitaria*, in: *Storia della scuola e storia d'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Bari 1982, pp. 237-271.

³³ On the growth of printing and publishing in Turin at the time of Cavour cf. F. TRANIELLO, *Torino: la metamorfosi di una capitale*, in: *Le capitali pre-unitarie*, Acts of the 53rd Historical Congress on the History of the «Risorgimento» (Cagliari, 10-14 October, 1986), Roma 1988, pp. 65-112. A sign of new openings for the dissemination of the printed word is provided by the success of the «Gazzetta del popolo», which according to data given by B. Gariglio, had as many as 14,000 subscribers before the unification of Italy (cf. B. GARIGLIO, *Stampa e opinione pubblica nel Risorgimento. La «Gazzetta del popolo» (1848-1861)*, Milano 1987, 11).

³⁴ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 348; L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 76 et s.

³⁵ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 351 et s.

ne, which was one of a long line of good books that went back to the Catholic Friendship. However, it had certain special aspects. The fortnightly (later monthly) booklet was pocket-sized and very cheap, costing between 10 and 15 cents. A subscription for six months cost 90 cents, not including postage; with postage it was 1 lira and 30 cents, and cumulative subscriptions got big discounts.³⁶ The series also included an annual almanac called «Il Galantuomo». Don Bosco was most anxious that the style of the language should be very simple.³⁷ He wanted the publication to be a vehicle for religious instruction, taken in its widest sense, including material on the sacraments and Catholic doctrine, scripture, Church history, lives of saints, devotions, liturgy and worship, right down to edifying stories, especially about conversions. It was also apologetic and entered into polemics with the protestant sects (especially in the first ten years).³⁸ It discussed contemporary issues concerning the life of the Church, such things as Church possessions, the temporal power, civil marriage, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Vatican Council and so on. It made use of a wide range of literary forms: questions and answers, dialogues, stories, plays, presenting arguments briefly in as entertaining a form as possible.

The most obvious aim was to supplement, at times even to supply for, the scanty religious formation that the local pastors were supposed to provide but which was often wholly lacking. This was to be done by a periodical which would ensure continuity, be easy to use and which could even be read aloud to those belonging to sectors of society which were still completely illiterate. The series did not, as a whole, seem to specialise in any one field, but gave evidence of a desire to adapt its material to the requirements of various categories of readers: it did, however, seem to concentrate in a special way on women (mothers of families, wives, widows, maid servants), on the young (orphans, teenagers, farmhands, young workers) and on agricultural and manual workers (farmers, shepherds, shoemakers, cabinet-makers).³⁹ At the same time, sound general guidance was given to ordinary Christians at large, as for example *The Christian's Vademecum*, or «Important advices on the duties of a good Christian, to ensure each person's salvation

³⁶ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 358. One may compare the price with that of the booklets published monthly by the «Libera propaganda», which was associated with the anti-clerical group that produced the «Gazzetta del popolo»: a monthly subscription was 50 cents, while an annual subscription was 6 Lire (B. GARIGLIO, *Stampa e opinione pubblica* 152).

³⁷ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92 et ss.; M.L. STRANIERO, *Don Bosco e i Valdesi*. Documenti di una polemica trentennale (1853-1883), Torino, Claudiana 1988.

³⁹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 355 et s., where it is noted that the «Letture cattoliche» were aimed at boys «of the working classes, especially those from rural areas who periodically migrated to the city». One can, however, note a certain evolution, as the number of subscribers from Lombardy and Veneto gradually increased.

in the state of life to which he is called». ⁴⁰ Out of this miscellany of topics, styles and writers a plan emerges, that is, to illustrate the way a Catholic should live. In the long run it had a considerable impact on the development of Catholic consciousness and was also closely connected (though not exclusively so) with the widening of the influence of Salesian enterprises.

An important stage in the creation of a coordinated system of drafting, production and distribution was reached when the printing, which had previously been entrusted to outside printers like the Paravia and De Agostini, was switched to the Oratory's own printing shop about the year 1862. ⁴¹ Even more significant was the painstaking attention that Don Bosco devoted to the problems of distribution. Recent studies have produced more precise and realistic figures for the circulation of the «Letture cattoliche» and of other books by Don Bosco, including those mailed to subscribers; they show that these publications had a much larger circulation than similar Catholic publications aimed at the general public. For example, the first run-off of 3,000 copies of the «Letture cattoliche» was insufficient to satisfy public demand and a reprint of several issues was required. ⁴²

Pietro Stella has pointed out that after a drop in numbers, largely due to the economic crisis in Piedmont between 1854 and 1855, there was a steady increase in the circulation of the «Letture cattoliche», from about 5,500 copies after 1857 to more than 8,000 copies by about 1860, and in the years following the unification of Italy, the number rose to an average of 15,000 copies. ⁴³ «Il Galantuomo» had, on average, a circulation twice as large, and the more successful works, not counting those used in schools, went through frequent reprints and fresh editions. *La chiave del Paradiso* («The Key of Heaven»), a booklet printed in 1856 with an initial run of 6,000 copies, went through more than a hundred editions in several languages and, as far as can be estimated, sold a total of 800,000 copies. ⁴⁴

So far the information that we have regarding the regions and environments reached by the «Letture cattoliche» and Salesian publications in general is somewhat scanty. Such data as we have suggest that, at least up to the 1870's, the publications were confined to an area that coincided with the boundaries of the ancient States of Sardinia, which also coincided with the limits of Salesian expansion. During the 1880's things changed. The greatest

⁴⁰ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 149 et s.

⁴¹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 366 et s.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 358-361.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 361-365. L. GIOVANNINI gives figures that are somewhat higher, especially for the first years, in *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 197-200. On average, however, the booklets of the «Libera propaganda» association, mentioned above, had a wider circulation, in the time of Cavour, reaching an average of almost 20,000 copies (B. GARIGLIO, *Stampa e opinione pubblica* 154).

⁴⁴ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 201.

difficulty regarding circulation, at least at first, was experienced in the diocese of Turin⁴⁵ and it seems that the most important distribution centres were the smaller towns.⁴⁶ Despite the relatively limited geographical area there were considerable increases in the actual numbers of the publications distributed.

Don Bosco was one of the first to realise that the ecclesiastical network could provide excellent channels of distribution and he was constantly appealing to bishops, vicars general and parish priests to help by recommending the «Letture cattoliche» and persuading people to take out a subscription. Typical was the appeal he sent out in 1863 to 10 cardinals, 85 bishops and 60 rural deans.⁴⁷ He also used the actual issues of the «Letture cattoliche» to advertise the series.

Considerable help was also provided by the support of authoritative Catholic papers and periodicals like «L'Armonia» and «La Civiltà Cattolica». Equally important was the recourse which he had to individuals and families of the Catholic and even non-Catholic élites, asking them to support his campaigns to increase individual and group subscriptions by acting as clearing centres.⁴⁸ He naturally made use also of both the state schools and church schools. Above all he saw that a publishing enterprise of this kind, aimed at such a readership and faced with a total lack of sale outlets, needed to organize distribution around associations and voluntary helpers. As early as 1859 he had founded a «Society for the distribution of Catholic readings and other books», which aimed, amongst other things, to distribute good books free of charge, or at a minimal cost. Each member was to try to «prevent any of his dependants reading bad books» as well as to «disseminate healthy literature» in some chosen place or group.⁴⁹ In fact all the associations of Salesian inspiration shared the general aim of promoting healthy reading and of providing outlets for new series of books on social and other more specialised topics.⁵⁰

The link between the whole range of Salesian institutions and this task of publishing and distributing books became ever closer. An important role in this field, which has so far, to the best of my knowledge, been little researched, was assumed by the «Salesian Bulletin» right from its first appear-

⁴⁵ A letter sent by Don Bosco to canon Filippo Ravina, Vicar General of Turin, on 20 December, 1855. Cf. E I 121.

⁴⁶ See the comparisons made by L. GIOVANNINI with the catalogues of the «Benemeriti Raccoglitori», in: *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 201 et s. Cf also P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 363 et s.

⁴⁷ Quoted by L. GIOVANNINI in: *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 218. Concerning episcopal and papal intervention on behalf of the «Letture cattoliche» cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 362 et s.

⁴⁸ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 365 et s.

⁴⁹ L. GIOVANNINI, *Le «Letture cattoliche»* 207.

⁵⁰ P. BRAIDO, *L'esperienza pedagogica* 74.

ance in 1877. It was distributed everywhere, «to all and sundry»,⁵¹ and helped to bind together and give identity to the growing numbers of people who were drawn to Don Bosco. The Salesian cooperators also need to be studied from this same point of view. Their flexible and functional system of organization, their essential dependence on the charismatic figure of the founder, their readiness to welcome people of other faith,⁵² and their firm political «neutrality» made the Union of Cooperators a kind of parallel movement to that of the «intransigent Catholics», with whom, however, they could not easily be identified. «In so far as they were supported by the Salesians and were organised from the same centre», they had the potential for considerable expansion.⁵³

6. Concluding comments

It is time for us to make a few concluding observations. The first is this: while it is true that Don Bosco's work in spreading a popular culture based on religion is inseparable from the ensemble of educational institutions that he promoted, it also transcends those limits, partly on account of the flexible and wide-reaching nature of the means of communication which he used. It is therefore right that, while giving prominence to all that he did for education, especially for the formation and instruction of youth, we should not overlook the wide-ranging influence that his Salesian «system» had in shaping, or reshaping, the way Christian people thought and behaved, however difficult it may be to attempt to quantify that influence.

A second observation concerns Don Bosco's perception of the new dimensions and techniques that were opening up in the educational world, and which had to be integrated with traditional forms of evangelization. He was amongst the first to perceive that in an age when reading was becoming universal it was not enough merely to provide «good books»; he had also to disseminate them, inventing new ways of doing so. He appreciated also that those concerned with schooling could not ignore the need for ongoing or «permanent» education; he was likewise aware that schools called for books, just as books called for schools if they were to be made proper use of.

My third and final observation concerns Don Bosco's intuitive understanding quite early on, that work for the education of the masses demanded a certain degree of specialization and forms of organization geared specifically to that end. The result was that he utilised to the full the propulsive power of the Salesian congregation and of the chain of associations that it

⁵¹ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 219 et s.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 216 et s.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 225.

generated; these constituted an entire «system», centred, as I have said, upon the charismatic figure of their founder. This made for efficient organization, but it also created the difficulties over diocesan church structures that marked the history of the Salesians in Italy.⁵⁴

Interwoven with Don Bosco's life and work one can find many of the problems connected with the spread of new forms of cultural communication and of religious formation, which largely replaced those that had preceded them. For that reason the place which Don Bosco occupies in the history of popular culture is the same as that which he occupies in the evolution of the way we think about religion.

⁵⁴ Concerning the difficulties with archbishop Gastaldi cf. G. TUNINETTI, *Lorenzo Gastaldi (1815-1883)*, vol. II: *Arcivescovo di Torino (1871-1883)*, Roma - Casale Monferrato, Piemme 1988, pp. 259 et s. It does not seem far-fetched to see a resemblance between these difficulties and those which arose between the associations of the «intransigents» (especially the committees of the «Opera dei Congressi») and some of the bishops of northern Italy during more or less the same period: such bishops as Bonomelli of Cremona, Scalabrini of Piacenza and Nazari di Calabiana of Milan.