

Identity in Dialogue: Story of the Italian Baptists

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My small people

“We have always to look with *wonderful astonishment* at the work that God is pleased to do through the nothingness of what we have and of what we are.”

These words by Tullio Vinay, a Waldensian pastor who died a few years ago, may be a good start for this presentation of some aspects of Italian Baptist history and identity. I am in fact aware of the little we represent in the whole theatre of human history and of the fact that this awareness should build in us a sense of deep humility. But on the other side I contend that there is a history that is not written on paper as it does not have names of importance but nevertheless it belongs to the great memory of God. It is God who remembers all the names, the faces, the stories of thousands and thousands of simple people who worked in his vineyard for one hour or for their entire life. It is in God's memory that, we trust, nobody is lost. With this deep conviction of faith I come to you today to speak of my little people, the Italian Baptist, the people I met when I was a young university student in love with historical linguistics, already engaged in a part time job, teaching ballet. This people is so small and so scattered on Italian soil that you may live your entire life without encountering one of its members. But I received the possibility to meet a Baptist, another young university student who had the same passion for linguistics and who talked to me of a living God, of a church tradition of freedom, of lay leadership, essential worship, warm faith based on personal encounter with Jesus and a deep love for the Bible. From that enlightening encounter I, an agnostic young student from a Catholic background, was gradually captured in God's net. A small people with a generous heart, a great tradition of resisting faith, a simple ritual language, a spontaneous language to talk to God in prayer.

The beginnings

Our history in Italy started immediately after the country was unified in 1861. Before that date it was impossible to profess any other faith in most of the country but the Catholic faith. In the Reformation many individuals and groups from the reformed tradition spread throughout the Peninsula but the Counter-Reformation destroyed them all. Through six centuries, however, a small faithful minority Christian church survived persecution living on high mountains in the North Western part of Italy. These were the Waldensians, who were persecuted while the Jews were tolerated almost everywhere in ghettos or ever in specific areas of the towns. It was only in 1848 that Jews and Waldensians obtained civil rights in the Savoia kingdom, the same rule that was extended to the whole of Italy in 1861 and had Rome as its capital in 1870.

In 1863 the first Baptist missionaries, Edward Clarke and James Wall, came from England, supported by a group of friends. In 1870 missionaries from the American Southern Baptist Convention arrived while the Northern Baptists who had arrived in 1868 left shortly after. In 1870 one of the British missionaries, James Wall, received the official sponsorship of the Baptist Missionary Society, while Clarke continued his independent mission in La Spezia, a town on the North Western coast.

James Wall, in Bologna, immediately came in contact and received help from the evangelists of the Italian Free Churches, a movement, partially influenced by Plymouthism, which arose almost spontaneously through the witnesses of exiles who had to leave Italy in former years for political

reasons. Having gone to Britain and Switzerland as refugees, they came back to Italy at the rise of the Italian United Kingdom.

The merging of the three strands of the early Baptist work, namely the English, the American and the Italian, in a time of the strong political ideals such as freedom, democracy, equality, represent the imprinting of Italian Baptist identity. The coming of Baptist missions to Italy attracted people and pastors of the Free churches because of such principles as freedom of conscience, the separation of Church and State and the practice of the Church as a gathered confessing community of believers who consciously witness to their faith through baptism.

The first churches were founded by the British missions (there were two at the beginning, the independent La Spezia Mission and the Baptist Missionary Society centred in Rome from 1871) and the American Mission. As happened in other countries, and still today in difficult contexts, the first churches, immediately opened schools, orphanages and kindergartens and only after thirteen years started editing the first journals and periodical publications (*Seminatore* in 1876 and *il Testimonio* in 1884). Another missionary who came to Rome to help Wall in 1875, was William Kemme Landels, a Scottish pastor's son, who worked in Italy for 50 years. The British Mission in Italy was called, Chiesa Cristiana Apostolica d'Italia (Apostolic Christian Church of Italy).

In 1878 the General Baptist Missionary Society sent a missionary, Nathanael Herbert Shaw and in 1881 a third Baptist church was started in Rome. The Southern Baptist Convention of the USA also sent to Italy, William Nelson Cote, who arrived in Rome. After him (he had to leave for serious moral problems) in 1873 another missionary arrived, George Boardman Taylor. In May of 1884 in Turin under the name of the 'Christian Apostolic Baptist Union' all Baptist organizations in Italy were united. In the meantime, amidst difficulties and persecutions new churches were founded in many towns and villages in Italy. In 1890 the Baptist church members numbered around 1000 and by 1900 they totalled 1566.

The churches of the converted Italian migrants

In the beginning of the 20th century there was a great emigration wave toward North and South America and it happened that some of the people who emigrated, mostly peasants, got converted overseas and, coming back after some years to their villages, founded small groups of Evangelical believers. Through the help of various Evangelical churches and missions operating in Italy at that time, they became established churches. According to the support they received some became Methodist, some Waldensian, some Salvation Army and some became Baptist. Some churches changed their denomination more than once in the process.

In 1901 a Baptist Theological School was founded and in 1902 for the first time an Italian President of the Union was elected, Enrico Paschetto. A second generation of young pastors started and new preaching stations were opened in many regions. There was a very interesting debate on the Socialist Movement and many resolutions on the subject were approved in the Assemblies. In 1908 a resolution was voted with the following text: "The Assembly, aware of the various and many difficulties that evangelism directed toward the proletarian classes faces, affirms the necessity that every evangelist engage himself in studies to get to know and understand the life conditions, the feelings, the social and political hopes of the population in the midst of which he works, and that every individual and social injustice, according to the Gospel of Christ, be fought against without any particularity being done toward the quality of the people."

In 1911 a new review led to the founding of a theological school called "Bilychnis." Many outstanding European people of high standard contributed to it for almost 20 years.

The First World War made our church leaders and churches confused and disoriented. Words against the war were heard particularly before the outbreak of war. After the war started this position was still held

but often with expressions of patriotism. Debate was open in the pages of Baptist reviews and journals. One of the clearest voices against war was that of N. H. Shaw who wrote:

“I am astonished by the thought that men of goodwill could at all try to keep together the doctrine of Christ and the idea of war, not feeling the disgust of the attempt to reconcile them by force or to pretend to consider this conciliation possible... If at all they could at least renounce pronouncing the name of Jesus while killing!”

Others defended war taking the “holy war” approach: “Being against the war as a principle does not mean to be against any war.” (Pastor Aristarco Fasulo) During the war Baptist churches suffered a lot, lost financial support and, most of all, many people died. In the post war period the new journal, *Conscientia*, was published. This was strongly promoted by the American missionary, Wittinghill, who became very qualified in the Italian culture of the time and served a useful role as a bridge. The journal was closed during the Fascist Regime.

The Fascist regime

In 1922, shortly after the starting of the Fascist regime, the Baptist Missionary society decided to withdraw from Italy thereby leaving the work to the American mission. The other independent English mission, the La Spezia mission, continued its work. These changes ended the Christian Apostolic Baptist Union and led to the commencement of the Opera evangelica battista d'Italia.

The Fascist regime was a dark time. A Concordat agreement and a Treaty with the Vatican were signed by Mussolini and the Pope and a law was issued to regulate under Police control all non-Catholic Cults (sic!). This law, called the ‘Law for Tolerated Cults,’ thus precipitated Protestants of whatever persuasion into the difficult position of being considered enemies of the state religion and the party in power. They were perceived as being dangerous hidden supporters of foreign powers, which, according to the Nationalistic Fascist regime were opposing the interests of the Italian nation. Persecution grew, particularly in rural areas, at the hands of police supported by Catholic priests and the local authorities. Journals and publications were shut down.

The entry of Italy in the Second World War was opposed by a number of antifascist pastors. The wartime tragedies created enormous difficulties for the churches and the pastors who continued their work as they could, often without any financial support. These were bitter times. Some pastors who did not hide their antifascist ideas were imprisoned, beaten or confined. A number of Baptists entered the resistance movement.

The after war “construction” times

The end of the war marked the end of years of fear, isolation and numerical decline. From the bankrupt policy of a worthless monarchy, Italy became a young Republican Democracy. Paolo Spanu, one of our most outstanding pastors of the Italian Baptist Union writes of that period:

“Encouragement and tremendous support came to our churches from many individuals of Baptist persuasion operating in the American military forces who entered our incredulous congregations and brought a sweeping spirit of confidence and courage. At last and all of a sudden we were confronted with a joyous, free, almost naive Baptist faith: we realized even at the personal level that our Christian faith belonged to a vast number of churches in America, in England and in other parts of the world. Of course we knew that, but when the American Baptist soldiers entered our churches we became physically aware of the vast Baptist reality. We were no longer the isolated and scared minority, but a Church of God that pointed towards salvation both as a spiritual and political reality. We Protestants were the new world of freedom and of hope for the whole humanity: the Catholic Church, which had supported fascism and blessed the monarchy represented the defeated old world which was passing away...”

“We children of a dark era (the color of fascism was black), we all were the people who would gladly carry the burden, not just of reconstruction, as the majority of Italian were to express themselves, but of a construction, a new construction, namely the building of democracy on the basis of fundamental Protestant principles. This was the vision that the end of the war brought for us. But we Baptists were a microscopic minority; we were a church reality made up of lower middle class people scattered all over the country.”

The experience of resistance had marked the Baptist constituency. Those of the people who had survived Fascism and the threat of war, deportation, torture and all sorts of suffering longed for freedom and belonged almost invariably to the Italian left Parties. Italian Left meant Socialist or also Communist of the Italian kind, but at the same time they were pro-American. In a few years Baptist Churches grew from 2500 to 5000 members. Many though became Baptist because of the generous flow of American gifts (mostly clothing and food).

In 1947 the first post war general Assembly of the Opera Battista and the first Women’s Union Rally took place and the youth organization started again in Turin in 1949. Rev. Ronchi, who was President and General Secretary of the Opera reestablished ties with the BWA and some European Unions. A Theological School was opened near Turin (Rivoli) in 1949 and a Training School for girls commenced in Rome. Baptist youth started meeting with other Evangelical friends and in 1954 the Villaggio della gioventù (a youth camp on the coast in Santa Severa, north of Rome) was built. A Printing House was also started in Rome.

During the construction years (roughly 1947-1956) the following factors had influence:

- A flood of American funds came to Italy with the consequence of decreasing Italian Baptists’ sense of financial responsibility, that was traditionally quite low
- There were 21 American missionaries amid an Italian pastoral body of 35
- An American spirituality became dominant and failed to take into consideration the pre-war Baptist experience
- There was a marked difference in the standards of life between American Missionaries and Italian pastors
- A number of Catholic priests became pastors (often after just a short introduction to Baptist work and doctrine)

This “Americanization” could have lead Italian Baptists either to accept the trend or to lead to anti-American feelings, fed by the left wing dominance and mainly proletarian social status. As Paolo Spanu puts it “the Italian Baptists were able to deal with the American missionary pressures without forgetting their cultural and political experience.”

In 1956 the Italian Baptist work took the name it has today—‘Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d’Italia.’ A new Statute was approved in which the Baptist principle of congregationalism was stressed in contrast to the paternalistic missionary attitude. The Union, as an expression of the common service and fellowship among churches encouraged the idea of active cooperation. It took over the responsibilities that had been previously undertaken by the Mission. This changed the complexion of the Baptist work in Italy because the Union had inherited a number of initiatives which were impossible to support without continue strong financial aid from the USA, while at the same time the Italian Baptists had to grow in their responsibility to keep up the work.

Ecumenism and faith-politics controversy: Sixties and Seventies

In the Sixties another exodus started from the south to the north, either to large, northern Italian cities or to Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, with the result of impoverishing the southern churches, particularly in rural areas.

Two major themes characterized Italian Baptist life and discussion in these years—**ecumenism** and the relationship between **faith and politics**.

There had already been many attempts in the past of to make more visible and also structural unity among all Evangelical denominations. The first effort was made in 1884 in Florence followed again in Florence in 1891 through the International Congress of the Evangelical Alliance. These conversations only resulted in the birth in 1900-1901 of the Evangelical Council that only lasted a few years. In 1920 a Congress was held with five denominations and other interdenominational organizations. The proposal of a Federation failed with the only result being a new common hymn book. The withdrawal of the more open wing of the Baptists, the British, was one of the reason for this failure.

Since the fifties, however, among the youth, relations were started particularly with the Waldensians and the Methodists. This same generation was the one that encouraged a closer relationship among the Evangelical churches of the Reformed tradition later on, particularly in the years of the opening of the Catholic Church in the Vatican II Concilium period. It was in Milan in 1967 that a Federation of Italian Protestant churches started that included Baptists, Methodists, Waldensians, Lutherans and the Salvation Army plus some smaller groups. In this same period the Youth Evangelical Federation started which united the youth organizations of the Baptists, Methodists and Waldensians. Italian Baptists also became members of the World Council of Churches and of the Conference of European Churches.

In the same years the old theme of the relationship between **faith and politics** was taken up in a changed context and discussed. This soon became a hot issue. In 1968 when the USA was involved in the Vietnam War, Italy (like many other countries) gave rise to a wave of radical criticism of the Western capitalistic system, largely from a Marxist point of view. For many young Baptists the myth of Protestant America declined largely because no criticism of the Nixon administration and his international policy seemed to be forthcoming from the American Missionaries of the Southern Baptist Convention who were active in Italy. The situation became very difficult in the Assembly of the Union of 1969. The debate became harsh and passionate between the young and the old leadership, particularly among the missionaries. The document that was prepared by a restricted commission and discussed in the assembly and in the churches in that year was entitled, 'The meaning of our faith' (Il senso della nostra fede). The document described a division existing in the churches and in the leadership between the 'dissenter Protestants,' as they defined themselves and the mainline Baptists. The former were radical, politically involved and revolutionary. The latter were conformist, individualist and quietist. The American missionaries accused the Italians of being liberal in theology and adopting models of liberation theology. They were also judged to have landed on the 'Death of God' shores. This judgement was not true since the dissident young pastors were Barthians and, even if inspired by Marxism, their constant attention was on freedom of conscience and on faithfulness to the biblical truths. The opening paragraph contained the following words:

“We all strongly affirm the value of personal faith in Christ as the basis for any Christian work. All our reasoning has as its starting point repentance and faith in the saving work of Christ through his cross and resurrection. Outside this relationship which is direct and personal with the Lord no Christian program is possible, but on this basis it is essential that the believers search and find the meaning for a concrete action as a community witness before the modern world.”

The left wing Baptists tried not to exacerbate the issue, while the Americans threatened to leave or to take sides with churches and individuals that were not of the left wing. It was in this period that the school for girls and the theological seminary were both closed.

The Italian Baptists were able to invent a compromise of sorts that succeeded in keeping the Italian Baptist witness united. The Union did not split but stated important reforms in the direction of independence and self-support. In 1966 the oldest Missionary work in Italy the La Spezia Mission merged into the Italian Baptist Union.

The ethical debate (seventies and eighties)

Since the mid seventies to the eighties the Italian Baptist churches entered a phase of internal discussion and external militancy on ethical issues. The first was the referendum campaign on the law concerning divorce. All the Protestants in Italy were in substantial agreement to make divorce possible. In a country until then dominated by Catholic teaching that tended to leave alone the people who had to (or decided to) separate from his/her own partner, a good divorce law could be a good protection for the weakest party otherwise left without rights. This campaign was lost by the Catholic party.

The second issue involved another referendum that concerned the legalization of abortion. Also on this occasion most of the Protestant churches (the Baptists among them) took a stand of allowing abortion in special and limited cases. Abortion (like divorce) was considered a traumatic experience that in itself contradicted God's will of harmonious living. Christians were called to faithfulness to the Biblical teaching but as citizens they had to consider difficult and ethically controversial situations in which different decisions could be taken. They had to learn to respect different points of view and in specific cases they had to consider whether it was better to allow the legalization of abortion than to leave the women, who so decided, alone and unprotected in the hands of unlawful exploiters of their desperation. Again in this case the Catholic position was lost and a law was issued that allowed abortion in specific limited cases.

A third controversial ethical issue that touched Baptist life and churches at this time was the issue of homosexuality. It ignited in a church in Sardinia (Cagliari) when a declared homosexual young man applied for baptism and church membership. Two opposite positions arose in the church. One held that according to the biblical teaching there is no room for homosexuals in the Christian church unless they repent and change their sexual behavior. The other held that homosexuality, as we know it today, has many aspects. Some maintain that homosexuality is genetically determined while others say this needs to be understood in the light of the personal, social and psychological background of each specific person. They state that Bible was written in a different cultural background that does not speak to all people who are in this condition and live their sexuality in a sound way. This group recommended that Christians should oppose all violence in sexuality, all exploitation of homosexuality and any attempt to impose such behavior on other people. They concluded that they should accept as a brother (or a sister) in the church any homosexual people who confess Christ as Savior. In that particular case the man was accepted and baptized, however, a small group of church members decided to leave. Since that time the issue was debated in many churches. No official decision has ever been taken by the General Assemblies but in most churches specific cases are treated with great care and pastoral concern. Once again a difficult controversy that has divided the hearts of many has been passionately debated but in the end has not massively divided the churches or the Baptist Union. Since the year 2000 there is a working group of the Baptist, Waldensian and Methodist churches which is working on the subject to help the churches to face the matter and overcome prejudices.

Later developments (at the crossroad of old and new centuries)

The last period of our history (1980-2002) has seen important developments. In 1983 a national conference was held on **Ecclesiology** that had various developments in the following years, principally a new Statute was passed with a complete set of rules and bylaws. The 'Ente Patrimoniale' (the juridical structure set up to administer the properties) was modified to allow for easier procedures in financial transactions. A confession of faith was discussed and finally approved in 1990 not as a canon for Italian

Baptist orthodoxy but as a tool for teaching in the churches and as a point of reference for new churches entering the Baptist Union.

The Baptist Union established a **relationship with the State** representation. An agreement was signed that was accepted by the Italian Parliament (law 116/95) to provide religious freedom principles. No financial aid was requested from the State according to the principle of the separation of church and state.

The Union is operating according to a **cooperative plan** for the life and development of the Baptist work in Italy. It is now completely **independent of American** support. Only one missionary couple of the International Mission Board is working with the Union. There are others, however, who work independently from the Union according to the IBM new plants.

I have to add that before withdrawing all financial help from the Italian Baptist Union, the IMB in 1993, honoring the covenant of love issued 100 years before, passed on all the properties the Southern Baptist still had in Italy to the Italian Baptist Union (mostly church buildings). Of such a decision, we will be always grateful to them and to the Lord.

In 1990 an important **agreement was made between the Waldensians, Methodists and the Baptists**. A document of reciprocal recognition of members and ministers was voted by a conjoint session of the Baptist General Assembly and the Synod of the Waldensian and Methodist churches. In the document the theme of Baptism is dealt with and is found in the following words:

“Today Baptist churches share with Methodist and Waldensian churches some of those theological affirmations that underlie infant baptism (for example, insistence on the priority of God’s grace in baptism). However, they do not consider that this authorizes them to accept infant baptism. They leave that responsibility to the Methodist and Waldensian churches. Continued discussion and dialogue are necessary on this issue which so far has neither been resolved nor set aside. In spite of its seriousness and importance, however, this difference does not prevent full communion among us, for the two reasons listed below.”

The two reasons being first, that *“while we adopt different forms of baptism, we share a broad theological foundation,”* the second, that, *“the New Testament places more emphasis on the fruit of baptism than on its form.”*

Mutual recognition is so expressed in its poignant meaning:

“Recognizing each other as sister churches means that the different churches recognize that a degree and quality of fellowship exists among them sufficient to allow each to reflect the other, so that each may discern in the other not its own image, but the image of Christ, his body, his fellowship.”

Since 1990 Baptists, Methodists and Waldensians also have a common weekly journal, ‘Riforma’ and with the closing of the Ruschlikon Baptist Theological Seminary (and the lack of a Bachelor of Divinity degree in the International Baptist Theological Seminary of Prague) our theological students attend the Waldensian Theological Faculty. The Italian Baptist Union has established good relations with other Italian Protestants without renouncing their Baptist identity. Recently we have started a dialogue with the Italian Pentecostal Federation.

Today the situation of our total membership is around 5000, with a total population of 10-12,000. There are 114 churches with 43 full time pastors. The numbers have neither declined nor increased.

We have received and accepted at our last assemblies a number of new **migrant churches** which include Nigerian, Ghanaian, Eritrean, Filipino, Korean, Chinese, Romanian and Latino American. Their presence in our midst constitutes a new challenge for us. Moreover many of our traditional Italian churches have

become multicultural. A variety of liturgical, theological, musical, ethical positions have arisen among us. We are trying to face all the new questions with the same open attitude—great passion, long discussions, a spirit of prayer, social engagement and pastoral awareness. We think that today our churches are called in the first place to demonstrate cultural and human openness towards diversity and support all possible nonviolent opposition to racism. Our fellowship and unity are to be searched every day invoking the one Spirit who created us in all our differences to be organically part of the one body of Christ.

In the last 20 years the Italian Baptist churches have been heavily involved in **peace** campaigns and have established strong ties with the pacifist movement. Their position is not yet pacifist in the sense of the traditional, historic pacifist churches such as the Mennonites or the Quakers but they are walking in that direction. Many young Baptist have chosen not to be involved in military service and act as conscience objectors. In most international crises in which military force was used with Italian cooperation (Iraq, Kosovo and Afghanistan) Italian Baptist churches have on the whole been dissenters. They have been present in campaigns against the production of land mines and in support of a limitation to weapon building and selling. On the occasion of the attack on Afghanistan our Executive Committee issued a declaration against terrorism that declared:

“Our country is participating in the war that is devastating Afghanistan by sending military equipment and personnel, with the declared intent of effectively contributing to the fight against terrorism. The terrorist attacks against American people were indeed an act of war against thousands of innocent human beings. Such acts detract from attempts to heal the injustices of the world, injustices against which the terrorists claim to fight; they destroy human life, eradicate dialogue between nations and peoples and create new and lethal animosities.”

“The military initiative, however, that appears to be also an act of vengeance on innocent people, who have already suffered twenty years of war, is sowing terror, death and suffering. Both acts, of terrorism and war, apart from being ineffective against the evil that they seek to eradicate are actually counterproductive, due to the hatred and fear they generate. The only peace they can obtain is that of the cemetery.”

“We locate our hope for an alternative approach in the teachings of the Bible. We are told there that our battle is not against flesh and blood. That is, not against other human beings (Ephesians 6:12). It is demonic evil that manifests itself variously in people and their relationships which must be combated. The recent history of our churches has been marked by the message and ministry of pastor Martin Luther King who noted that non-violence is the heart of Jesus’ message and his life and death on the cross. In his fight against injustice King refused to identify historical persons as ‘the enemy’ but rather fought against their unjust actions, structures and behaviour. In this spirit we propose an alternative approach based upon the search for justice aimed at unmasking the guilty whilst at the same time defusing the conflict by working to resolve the dramatic situations from which terrorist organisations recruit.”

We see that our way of building and safeguarding unity in diversity is attracting some trained ministers from other parts of the world. We have among our pastors, women and men of different nationalities. We have two British couples, one pastor from Germany, one Danish, one Nigerian, one Spaniard, two Chinese, one Romanian, two from Argentina, two from Brazil, one from the United States, apart from the local pastors of our ethnic minority churches.

We have two agreements with missionary agencies, the Baptist Missionary Society and the Junta Missionaria Brasileira. Both the former, which in recent years revived the old original tie and the latter are based on mutual respect and full cooperation as they help us in financing some specific evangelistic and pastoral projects. The Italian Baptist Union is trying to establish some other partnerships. We are still struggling in many aspects in our secularized (but still massively Catholic) society. Particularly in danger is our work in the field of Diakonia, the work established with American help in the 1950s in Rome (a

orphanage and an elderly home, the “J. B. Taylor Institute”). A similar institution in Turin needs urgent and a very expensive radical renovation. Moreover our Baptist center in Santa Severa, a youth camp, has recently been closed by the authorities and needs a complete and expensive renovation before it can be opened again. Our Womens’ movement hopes to start a project of a house for mistreated women.

We will see what will happen in the next years. It may be that other radical changes will be necessary. But if the future belongs to God and we, his small people, belong to Him as well, we may trustfully think to be in good hands!

Anna Maffei

I want to mention with appreciation some sources of my work:

A book by Pastor Franco Scaramuccia, ‘Un’avventura di fede – L’opera missionaria di Edward Clarke (1820-1912)’ Claudiana, Turin, 1999. This book is the only one published on a portion of Italian Baptist History. A volume on the first years of Baptist Life and mission in Italy is soon to appear written by Professor Domenico Maselli.

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