



## 5. Roman Catholicism in Rome midst religion and religiosity

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### Abstracts

The Author discusses the *lived religion* of 29 Roman Catholics resident in Rome. The analysis is based on binomials like *individual/institution*, *spirituality/religion*, *autonomy/membership of a religious community*, and focuses, in particular, on the interviewees' perceptions of God, good-evil, faith and suffering and the figures of various Pontiffs.

**Keywords:** religiosity, spirituality, Roman Catholicism, Rome

La Autora discute la *religion vivida* de 29 católicos romanos residentes en Roma. El análisis se basa en los binomios *individuo/institución*, *espiritualidad/religión*, *autonomía/pertenencia a una comunidad religiosa* y en particular se centra en las percepciones de los entrevistados sobre Dios, el bien-mal, la fe, el sufrimiento y las figuras de los diversos pontífices.

**Palabras clave:** religiosidad, espiritualidad, catolicismo, Roma

L'Autrice discute la *religiosità praticata* da 29 cattolici residenti a Roma. L'analisi si basa su alcuni binomi quali *individuo/istituzione*, *spiritualità/religione*, *autonomia/appartenenza ad una comunità religiosa* e si focalizza in particolare sulle percezioni degli intervistati riferite a Dio, al bene-male, alla fede, alla sofferenza e alle figure di alcuni pontefici.

**Parole chiave:** religiosità, spiritualità, cattolicesimo, Roma

### Premise

For classical sociologists, religion – transversal to all social phenomena – was one of the principal guarantees of the regulation, cohesion and order of collective life, as well as the inspiration of people's deepest values and convictions. Furthermore, for the fathers of sociology, religion was the only factor capable of endowing the reality found

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within the “disorder” and anomie of modernity, with equilibrium, trust in the future and truth (Sciolla, 2002; Simmel, 1994; Habermas, 2015; Gallino, 1993; Rosati, 2002; Belardinelli, Allodi, 2006; Durkheim, 2013). At present, these considerations are being questioned due to processes caused by the radicalisation of reason, of the “horizontality” and “interchangeableness” of transcendence, of the expansion of the “religion of the individual” and the retreat of moral dogmatism, the latter replaced by ethical self-referentiality, by criteria of efficiency and pure practical action (Huber, 2008; Horkheimer, 1962; Sciolla, 2002; Rovati, 2011; Boudon, 2003). It is no coincidence, therefore, that recent sociological studies report a number of formal and substantial changes in the traditional social functions of religion and an individual sensitivity less inclined than in the past to metabolise faith in incontestable and indisputable terms.

Despite the fact that religion in general, and Roman Catholicism in particular, are being undermined as regards consensus and their doctrines revoked by systematic doubt, there is also denial of the simplistic thesis of the irreversible transition from “revelation to pure reason” and of the worn-out theorem whereby rationality equals disenchantment (Taylor, 2015; Habermas, Ratzinger 2005; Prandi, 2014). Furthermore, secularisation, assumed as an explicit category of the contemporary religious scenario, is viewed with growing scepticism, as the concept is unable to theoretically sum up the present-day *Weltanschauung* which does not expend itself in mere transition from a metaphysical *forma mentis* to one which is, today, post-ideological and technical-scientific (Habermas, 1987; Berger, 2010; Pace, 2008). The rapid changes taking place – which have shattered the grand narratives, utopias and ideals –, have actually only subverted people’s “mobile needs”, those most susceptible to the “spirit of the times”, while the reasons of belief, though less solid, remain a constant upon the public-private horizon (Casanova, 2000). In actual fact, the cultural transformations taking place denote, rather than an *eclipse*, a *reflux* of the “problem” of God and some of the structures of plausibility that are impermeable to any kind of innovation (Berzano, 2014; Rovati, 2011). The scientific mind-set has not obscured the universe of the sacred which still represents one – though not the only one – of the many possible anchorages of meaning (Taylor, 2009).



All told, the strength and weakness of this post-modern world, in terms of religion too, reside in the climate of vagueness, incongruity and multiplication of general antithetical views of the world. In this sense, in today's fragmented, pluralistic cultural milieu, people manifest contradictory attractions which may range indifferently – depending on circumstances and personal inclinations – from centres of traditional symbolic belief to vague forms of spirituality, from secular “liturgies” to esoteric suggestions, from miracles to myths (Terrin, 2007; Cipriani, 1997; Horkheimer e Adorno, 1966; Beck, 2009; Maffesoli, 2005). This sort of “ambivalence” between the sacred and the profane (which emerges also from between the lines of some of the interviews obtained during the survey entitled *Lived religion in Rome* examined here), above all within the ambit of Roman Catholicism, seems to have triggered – rather than a definitive breach with institutional structures – a private, contingent kind of religiosity unpermeated by a specific theological education (Beck, 2009; Hervieu-Léger, 1996).

People's readiness to believe or not, – which is, above all, the outcome of a certain historical period because, as Taylor sustains (2009: 26) «one thing is to believe in God in 1500, another is to believe in Him in 2000» – is due mostly to individual “reflection” and to the cognitive, emotive experiences of single subjects (Donati, 2010; Donolo, 2007; Berger, 2005; Garelli, 2011; Castegnaro, 2008). In brief, we have moved from an ascribing-binding to an acquisitive-voluntary model of religiosity, no longer subject to “social pressure” or mere custom, but the result, on the contrary, of subjective decision. Today's *acquisitive* modality of individual sentimentally-oriented religiosity (Cipriani, Losito, 2008), – which, to some extent, designs that «personal and active adherence to the faith», *The Gaudium et spes, Pastoral Constitution* of 1966 (Documenti del Concilio Vaticano II, 1966: 175) – presents itself as an open system, where dogmatic instances are admitted or abandoned having first been re-elaborated subjectively within the ambit of an intimate and personal dialectic between rationalisation of beliefs and fideistic emotionality; between “selective” religiosity (not completely freed from the Church-institution) and a «spirituality without borders», between norms and freedom (Rovati, 2011; Garelli, 2011; Hervieu-Léger, 2003).



## 1. The theoretical-methodological approach to the lived religion in Rome survey

To try to understand the overt and latent aspects of the complex "crisis" of traditional religion, some of the teachings of the classical sociologists may be useful, because their theses offer, first of all, a solid theoretical basis from which to depart. Secondly, their formulations may provide an *ideal-typical* kind of knowledge of the phenomenon to be investigated and, therefore, direct us as we seek to understand which aspects of its dynamics "disappear" and "which remain". Thirdly, by combining theirs with more recent sociological criteria, we are enabled to calibrate better the interpretative pathways that, in the specific case dealt with here, concern the area of belief, which, incidentally, is currently characterised by an unprecedented phase of liminality or of alternation between a perennial "becoming" and a continuous "return" of some of its symbolic traits.

On the premise of the usefulness of turning nowadays to the early sociologists, above all, in view of present-day individualisation of religious sentiment, – where fideistic tension is synthesised within the microcosm of the single subject –, the *lived religion* survey was inspired by a "classic" like Simmel, because he placed the free individual, creator of religious and cultural values, in an emergent position compared to that of doctrinaire-institutional apparatuses. Moreover, Simmel laid the foundations for in-depth investigation of the topic of belief, in that he highlighted not only its functional and substantial aspects, but its manifold declinations at the intersection between various dimensions, which coagulate feelings and experiences concerning the different "worlds of life", of the public and private spheres; of action and the system; of the individual and the institutional; of the subjective, the objective and the ideal (Rovati, 2011; Castegnaro, 2008; Simmel, 1994).

Extraneous to the normative-structural paradigm and the Comtian scientist myth (Dal Lago, 1994; Joas, 2014) of the period, Simmel's speculative approach highlighted two fundamental sociological features: the ways in which subjects interact and how, as a consequence of the mutual interweaving of relations this entails, processes of institutionalisation are determined; the relationship between *life* that flows and the subsequent production of *forms* that express, crystallise and "solidify" this flow (Simmel, 1994; Formaggio, Petrucchi, 1976; Janké-



lévitch, 1988; Jankélévitch, 2013; Jedlowski, 2003). Within the sphere of belief, this theoretical approach considers *life* – therefore *religiosity* – a flow that precedes and activates institutional forms of religion, the «simplest and most complex» kind of social interaction (Simmel, 1994; Martelli, 1991; Marchisio, 2002). For Simmel *religiosity* – which does not identify itself in a stable substance, but is an «original quality of the soul», by means of which everyone "colours" his/her relations and his rapport with God (Simmel, 1984; 2006; Joas, 2010; Simmel, 1994) –, broadens individuals' ranges of action and enhances their personalities. In short, *religiosity* – which is an expression of the fluidity, emotionality, creativity and *vital* impulse of subjects – constitutes the «reunifying principle of the whole of human existence», internal and external, public and private.

When all comes to all, by shifting scholarly attention from the institutional to the private aspect of *religiosity*, Simmel placed the intimate character of religion within the canon of empirical knowledge, inaugurating the "subjectivist" interpretative model. It is no accident that in this specific investigation of *lived religion in Rome*, religion was not observed on the basis of a general norm, but on that of a "humanist" paradigm which included subjective meanings leading to action, with no inclination towards an impersonal study of reality or the ambition to glean statistical evidence. At the same time, its theoretical background did not overlook Weberian thinking, starting from the concept of *religiously motivated action* (that is, action with feeling). Like Simmel, Weber took no interest in religion as such, but was concerned with the impact it might have on people's lives and on the whole texture of society (Colozzi, 2016).

In short, on the basis of the teachings of Simmel and Weber, as well as a number of more recent sociological perspectives like that of Ammerman, for example, a qualitative methodology was chosen (Corbetta, 2003), which took into consideration – as objective data regarding the religiosity of Roman Catholics residing in Rome –, “human material”, subjective feelings regarding faith, the conditions and possible outcomes of the religious sentiment and action of individuals (Cipriani, 1987; Weber, 1980; Guala, 2000). Besides, even the positivist Durkheim, – who refused the concept of the supernatural (Colozzi, 2016) and emphasised only *social fact* from a sociological point of view –, examined the individual-faith issue with some interest (Durkheim, 2013); in



almost “unconscious” syntony with Simmel whom he criticised severely for the distinction he made between *life* and *form* (Frisby, 1986), Durkheim wrote in his *Elementary forms of religious life* that «the believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths [...] he is a man who is *stronger*. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them» (Durkheim, 2013: 416).

## 2. Religion as lived by Roman Catholics living in Rome

Although the overall number of people interviewed during the 2016 *lived religion in Rome* survey was 80 (30 Roman Catholics, 10 Protestants, 11 Moslems, 10 Orthodox Christians, 10 Jews, 9 agnostics/atheists), we focused on the stories of the Roman Catholic interviewees only. It is important to point out that, as far as the narrations of the Roman Catholics are concerned, we highlight only a limited number of the “sensitising concepts” contained in them, such as *images of God; relations between faith and good-evil; faith and suffering*. Furthermore, attention was paid to the impact of the teaching and charismatic-communicative styles of the last three popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. These points were foregrounded because characteristic of the entire experience of belief and because, in some ways, they manage to account for «mutations in religion» (Prandi, 2014).

### 2.1. Images of God

In general, despite the impact of modernisation, the descriptions of God provided by almost all the Roman Catholic interviewees are neither abstract nor distant but refer to a personal God, to a “familiar”, merciful father and friend, with whom it is possible to engage on an intimate footing. From some of the interviews, besides, it emerges how strongly this concept of a God the Father proves functional to the re-configuration of family identity and relationships. Besides, this kind of paternal representation of God, who does not judge but supports emotionally, were noted by a number of national surveys, like that led by Franco Garelli (2011).



The majority of those interviewed in Rome emphasise the merciful God the Father who guides and comforts. One 25-year-old bachelor, an engineer by profession, underlined the fact that his conception of God was «paternal authority combined with the closeness of brotherhood and friendship».

Another interviewee, a 35-year-old graduate, father and scriptwriter, attributed a «manipulative» nature to God who exploits human – though in a positive sense –, when he said that

God the Father has a plan, he knows each one's gifts and uses people, though the great changes are made by God, who intervenes in history.

Yet, there are also some who, like the 33-year-old single, female graduate who works in development, attribute a «woman's voice» to God, providing, therefore, a dual image of the divinity as both father and mother.

Other descriptions of God are *creator of the universe; superior entity; constant presence*, also in *nature*. A 74-year-old interviewee, a father with a university degree, retired from Ibm sees God as «light, the origin of faith and the essence of life» and considers excessive devotion to saints a form of idolatry, because he does not find it correct that some believers who enter a church are inclined «to greet Padre Pio first and God who is the Host (Christ in the tabernacle) afterwards».

The interviewees see God also in terms of their own life experience. One woman, aged 28, married to a Moslem, has an open view of other religious-cultural realities and declares that «there is only one God, although revealed diversely to different peoples; He appears similar in Christianity and Islam».

On a different plane, a law student, a 19-year-old Peruvian girl, close to the *Confraternita del signore dei miracoli* in Rome [the city's Peruvian immigrant confraternity] described God as «present in me [...] He left a fragment of Himself inside of everyone» and on the basis of this conviction, she feels His help even when building up her identity.

## 2.2. *The relationship between faith and good-evil*

The interviewees' concepts of good and evil reveal a kind of bipolarity of thought. If, on the one hand, most of them consider their actions



the outcome of subjective choice because they refuse to accept ethical-dogmatic dictates unconditionally; on the other, also due to the religious socialisation they received within their families, they refer to «a transcendent criterion» when discerning between good and evil, as anchorage and as a normative idea.

We need to foreground the volatility of the moral parameter and of the relativistic criterion adopted by some of the interviewees when making choices regarding good and evil which tend, as underlined by a vast quantity of sociological literature, to opt for a «strategy of caution», a co-presence of different values (Maffesoli, 2005: 62), rather than for a systematic view, opposed to traditional codes (Dahrendorf, 1980; Rovati 2011) and to the «laws of God». Generally speaking, from a number of different answers there emerges a certain distance from codified rules in favour of a lesser degree of ethical imperativeness. There is also a prevalence of the ability to perceive sin and guilt clearly. It is no accident, according to sociological literature regarding the religious phenomenon, that feelings of sin and guilt are fading more and more and, as a result, there is a drop in recourse to confession which, at present, regards only 42% of a total of 86% of Italians who are Roman Catholics (Garelli, 2011).

Some of the interviewees hold that a sense of guilt is not necessarily correlated to sin, because it is more the result of people's ethical-cultural experience and the educational paradigm which favours its interiorisation from childhood.

Other interviewees, instead, sustain that good and evil are relative and that sin and guilt are useful to external forces so that they can «manipulate» people. In this regard, a 34-year-old married female graduate claims that

sin is defined on the basis of laws drawn up by others, therefore by the powers that be, by a religious authority acting as spokesperson, mediator. Therefore, someone else has the power to decide whether there is sin or not, guilt or not.

Another single 33-year-old female graduate denies the existence of a net distinction between good and evil and says

I think that good and evil do not exist in reality. At times what for some may be good for others may be evil; sometimes it is more a matter of the meaning we attribute to people's actions on the basis of an ethos and a moral reference,





which, however, can change depending on the culture to which one belongs, no? Therefore, I do not think it is appropriate to divide the world into good and evil, into black and white, as if a clear line could be drawn between them.

Others still, rather than reflect on good and evil, try to establish a difference between sin, often considered involuntary, and guilt, which is the disquiet caused by awareness of sin.

One 48-year-old married man, a graduate and a researcher in a public organisation, dwells on the concept of guilt declaring that

guilt is a sense of irreversibility. Guilt is Judas, meaning a state of affairs we imagine cannot be remedied.

Finally, another position argues that the real problem is not so much guilt as sin itself which winds its way into everyday life. This is the idea of a 60-year-old family man, a graduate in philosophy and a member of Opus Dei,

sin is separation from God. The greatest sin is estrangement from God.

### 2.3. *Faith and suffering*

At this precise turning point in history, if, on the one hand, one witnesses a drop in membership and a tendency to seek answers to the issues of existence within the scientific-technical ambit and within the sphere of rationality, on the other, as emerges from the interviews, religious concepts, especially at times of “fracture” and/or crisis, continue to compensate for and act as anchors of meaning (Elias, 1985; Belardinelli, 2006; Colozzi, 2016; Garelli, 2011; Joas, 2013; Joas, 2010; Crespi; Garelli, 2006). In particular, when it comes to the issue of painful events, we find in many of the considerations expressed by the interviewees, a refusal of scientific solutions alone, of “affective neutrality”, of the idea of the objective perfection of the world and of what Simmel (1903) called «hypertrophy of the intellect». On the contrary, according to the views expressed by these Roman Catholics residing in Rome it appears as if the processes of modernisation and of technological innovation favour religion, more than foreseen, because rationality has nei-



ther simplified nor reduced «the degree of existence's problematic nature» (Garelli, 2006) nor has it rendered recourse to God anachronistic.

For many of the interviewees, in actual fact, faith and trust in God help people to overcome suffering and life's difficult moments. Some of them claim to perceive God's mercy in suffering itself, to such an extent that recovery from an illness is considered a miracle, the effect of divine intervention. A number of the interviewees claim that negative events have actually provided them with the *opportunity* to convert, because they produced a kind of «emotional resonance», a greater, in-depth investigation of their faith, a reconfiguration of the meaning of life and of the significance of existence.

By way of example, one 45-year-old married male interviewee, with a diploma in accountancy, employed in the administrative department of one of Rome's universities, states that

faith passes through suffering, through sacrifice. The example is Christ.

On the same wavelength a 54-year-old woman, separated from her husband and mother of three children, claims that

illness and death can be lived with faith. I know many people who in illness, even serious illness, turned quietly to the Lord, so that they experienced it serenely and in tranquillity.

The perception of illness and old age may be read in terms of faith; this is the case of a 35-year-old graduate and a father who claims that

God can turn illness into something good and beautiful. Faith can improve old age, make it something grander.

#### 2.4. *The figures of the Pontiffs*

The comments of the Roman Catholics interviewed here regarding the three most Popes brought to light a phenomenon noted and documented by other research projects, that is, that within the sphere of religion, as in other areas of society, the sense of involvement felt by be-



lievers and non-believers towards charismatic personalities<sup>1</sup> is noteworthy. In actual fact, over the last few decades, also thanks to the mediatic impact of images (Terrin, 2011), beginning, in particular, with John Paul II, the Popes have proven particularly attractive from a symbolic-emotional point of view due to their continuous exposition and «event-presence» (Rusconi 2017) on the media. This has made them, a fideistic-existential reference (Costa, 2017; Cipriani 2003), to some extent, greater than that proposed by the institutional Church. It is no accident, therefore, that the words of the Roman Catholic interviewees – though also in those of the Protestants, Moslems, Orthodox Christians and agnostics interviewed- convey the strength of the impact made by the last three popes, starting from Pope Francis.

A 48-year-old interviewee, a married man with a degree, who frequented the *I giovani verso Assisi* [The young towards Assisi] movement, holds that Pope Francis is modernising the Church, although – despite his positive opinion – he would prefer,

the fathers of the theology of liberation to him.

The same interviewee claims that, due to the scandals and *Vatileaks* during the Ratzinger pontificate, mostly young people were estranged from the Church. He is also negative in his judgement of John Paul II – even though he stood for six hours in line to pay homage to his mortal remains – because, in his opinion, «his interreligious dialogue was a bluff».

Another interviewee aged 35, a husband and university graduate advocates a detailed analysis of the last two pontificates, that of Pope Francis, who is

the right Pope for these difficult times of encounters with other religions» and that of Benedict XVI, because «his religious writing and teaching

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most recent Italian national surveys regarding the phenomenon of religion contains many significant data regarding how the Popes fascinate people. The popularity of John Paul II, even after his death, remained high, so much so that the Italian page of *Facebook*, dedicated to him had registered [at the time of the survey] 470.000 likes, far more than those for TV personalities like compere Maria De Filippi, who [at the time] totalled 158.000. See Garelli (2011).



has been fundamental. He adds that

Pope Benedict attributed importance to truth, while Pope Francis has shifted the emphasis onto mercy

yet, he considers John Paul II the Pope of his life, because the 2000 Jubilee taught him to undertake the mission of bearing witness to the love of God.

One of the older interviewees, a 74-year-old man, married and a graduate, considers Pope Francis better than the previous Popes, because, in his opinion,

he pays attention to human things and is the first Pope to speak out against the death sentence and torture. Francis is open to dialogue between the Christian faiths and with him the spirit of Vatican Council II, brought to a standstill by Pope Benedict XVI and John Paul II, has been set in motion again.

### **3. Conclusions**

On the whole, from the interviews administered to the Roman Catholics residing in Rome there emerge a number of recurring data found in other surveys conducted at national level and with statistically representative sample groups. Among these data we find the importance of Catholicism to cultural orientation, for the construction of individual identity and an understanding of the deeper meanings of life.

In Italy, in fact, the inclination to believe in God appears to be more widespread than in the past seeing that over 80% of the Italians declare believing in His presence to some extent (Garelli, 2011). Membership of a religious institution, as far as the majority of the Roman Catholics interviewed in Rome is concerned, takes the form of commitment in the parish or enrolment in an ecclesial movement or in what Ammerman (2014) calls a «spiritual tribe». From this survey regarding religion as it is lived in Rome, one relevant datum emerges in perfect symmetry with the national trend for religion, is the so-called «post-materialistic» symbolic picture (Sciolla, 2004) where the prevalent values are the family, friendship, love, solidarity, relationships, respect for human dignity, social equality and authenticity.



In particular, in the light of the topics examined : the image of God, the rapport between faith, good-evil and suffering, as well as opinions regarding the three most recent Popes – together with the guide lines of this survey, the analytical binomials of *individual/institution*, *spirituality/religion*, *autonomy/membership of a religious community* – it is possible to note, by way of initial hypothesis, three “container” categories regarding the different “lived religiosity” modes emerging from the interviews granted by the Roman Catholics interviewed. These categories would profit by further development and successive interpretation.

The three categories are: first, Roman Catholics corresponding to the *church-religion* model, though they possess some degree of autonomy with respect to their experience within the community.

The second category, on the contrary, comprises those who remain attached to the institutional Roman Catholic religion, but who reveal evident signs of the subjectivisation of belief and tend to remain distant from ecclesiastic demands: a model of *diffused religion* «not Churchless», but «having little Church» (Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Castegnaro, 2014).

The last and third category includes those who, inclined towards doubt, though proclaiming themselves Roman Catholics like the interviewees belonging to the other two categories, are attracted by various forms of the sacred and multifarious religious solicitations, even those of a syncretic nature. One might say that in this instance we are dealing with *open spirituality*, undecided in its sense of belonging and free from doctrine. In brief, this last category is a plastic manifestation of the changes taking place within the reality of belief and of the «multiplicity of types of spirituality, that number almost as many as there are individuals» (Berzano, 2014: 8-11), even within the milieu of Roman Catholicism. So as not to underestimate the socio-cultural environment, especially with regard to the third model (though it holds for the other two too), it is useful to refer to the concept of *lifestyle* (Berzano, Genova, 2011) which sums up the present-day quest by individuals for a definition all their own of the situation, also within the sphere of belief, because single subjects need to find collocations favouring the chance to concretise their own sensitivity and experience new forms of religious belonging and identity.



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