



IM@GO

A JOURNAL OF THE
SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Persistence and Transformations of the Sacred

Luigi Berzano

luigi.berzano3@gmail.com

Università degli studi di Torino



Abstract

The aim of the text is to develop the interest which advanced modernity still retains in the sacred and imaginaries albeit transforming them, making them more fluid and adaptable to the most varied uses. On one hand, the sacred connotes not only "the transcendent sacred" but also "the everyday sacred". On the other, imageries in advanced modernity re-appear as techno-imageries, the potency of whose imagery increases the magic of complex machines, referring to other universes and creating their own topography which recalls the "elsewheres" and "hereafters" of their usual loci. Today it is "the everyday sacred" and the creativity of computers which fulfill the functions performed by myths, traditions and literature in the past.

Keywords

Sacred | Imaginaries | Secularisation | Modernity | Future

In the past there was no shortage of researchers foretelling the irrelevance of the sacred in advanced modernity. These hypotheses have been contradicted by what has happened in recent decades: the category of the sacred has remained of great interest in scientific reflection both in the religious and in the secular fields. The modern world has not created an insuperable divide with that enchanted by the sacred, including that organized by historical religions. Fascination by, and interest in, the sacred are still the reverse side of modernity, and numerous elements indicate that relations between science and the sacred, rationality and the mystical, and visible and invisible knowledge will linger into the future.

Nor has contemporary modernity reduced interest in imaginaries; rather has it been selective, as happens in every age, transforming them and making them more fluid and adaptable to the most varied uses. Indeed, societies which favour rational knowledge, effective instrumental action and productivity have intensified them, multiplying their sites and means of production, their users and manipulators. Human mobility, the proliferation of images and signs, communication imitative of needs and the rapid circulation of banalised cultural goods have contributed to a constant solicitation of imaginaries.

In its first section (Sacred perspectives), this text will present the contrasted affair of the sacred in the physical sciences and religions up to recent analyses where the sacred is no longer seen only in connotations of “the transcendent” but also in those of “the everyday sacred”. The second section (The sacred and imaginaries), referring to the imaginaries category, will analyse the persistence of the sacred in the world of technologies and its transformations into techno-imaginary forms where the potency of the images increases the magic of complex machines. The third section (The transcendent sacred and the everyday sacred) will examine the typology which includes both forms of the “transcendent sacred”, which classical authors have written about, and forms of the “everyday sacred”, dealt with by more recent authors. In the fourth section (The dematerialised sacred), the effects of the limitations imposed by the Covid pandemic on the religious world will be indicated. This is the context in which churches, synagogues and mosques, with all their structures closed to the faithful, witnessed a resurgence of online celebrations, either in the form of religion online or online religion, both of which by their very nature are generative of – even religious – imaginaries.

1. Sacred perspectives

In the last century, the sacred did not arouse any great interest on the part of scholars. After the classical theories of the French school of sociology, such as that of the sacred as the opposite of the profane from Émile Durkheim, and those of Rudolf Otto, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Mircea Eliade and nascent phenomenology, the term



“sacred” did not enjoy much specific research¹. The category of the sacred developed greatly when scholars of religion were also historians, theologians, sociologists and jurists. When analysing the bibliographies of European sociology from the 1950s onwards, we find little interest in social forms of the sacred, in contrast with growing attention paid to social forms of religion. It is possible to point out three factors of this partial decline of the sacred in modern culture: a philosophical reason (the sacred as religious immediacy), a theological reason (dialectical theology), and a sociological one (the theory of secularisation).

1.1 The sacred as immediacy

The first factor started in Hegel’s philosophy which was opposed to all forms of religious immediacy considered as “bad infinity” (Ormea, 1972). The immediate is the slim feeling of the absolute, the noose, subjection. Sacred immediacy leads to sentimental and emotional access to mystery. Saying goodbye to the sacred is the sole condition of human emancipation. Criticizing the sacred as the “feeling of dependence” of Ernst Schleiermacher’s philosophy, Hegel’s philosophy considers the sacred – understood as this immediatistic value and total dependence – the gallows of history as well as the legitimation of all domination, suffering and injustice. We find the same comment expressed poetically rather than philosophically in Friedrich Hölderlin:

The immediate, interpreted in a strict sense, is impossible for both mortals and immortals; the divine must distinguish different worlds according to *their* nature because heavenly gifts, in light of their characteristics, must be sacred, uncontaminated, pure. Man too, to the extent that he is a knowing being, should in his turn distinguish different worlds since knowledge is possible only through opposition. For this reason the immediate, interpreted rigorously, is not possible for either mortals or immortals (quoted in Duque, 2007: 107).

In the relationship between mortals and immortals there comes into force rather the law of mediation, of meeting and separation, a relationship which is indefinite because it is at the same time possible and impossible. Here we rediscover Kant’s reminiscences according to which the sacred is the state of regression of every religion when it no longer appeals to reason: the sacred, therefore, of irrationality, imposition and fanaticism. This gives rise to Kant’s appeal for liberation from a purely cultural religion in favour of a moral one. This was the start of a consequent philosophical tradition which can still be found today in treatments which consider forms of the sacred mostly as pathologies or as irrationalistic drifts of the religious rather than as specific social forms endowed with their own identity and autonomy.

Recent evaluations of the sacred as indeterminacy and immediacy – from which religions have taken their distance – can be found in the work of philosophers such as Italo Mancini, Félix Duque and Umberto Galimberti. According to Mancini, the

¹ Filoramo (1994), Berzano (2010a) and Berzano (2010c) can be suggested as introductory reading.



sacred as “ontological thickening” and subjection is responsible for legitimising suffering and domination (Mancini, 1977: 136 ff.). The sacred has the prerogative of justifying the depths, the Abgründe, of being bottomless; hence Hegelian reason and other historical forms of reason have done well to free us from the chains of the sacred. In Mancini’s view, the secularisation process did not take place so much by working within the sacred as by working to liberate us from the sacred.

According to Duque, the only way to save the world from the devastation caused by the sacred is to separate man from God, the only way man will feel God’s absence as an aid; he will feel the pain of his mortality, his being torn from God.

Only by the constancy of such solitude (as opposed to the dwelling of God within us of Hegel and Saint Paul) is a premonition of joy at the future apparition of God also possible. Here are conjoined the greatest sorrow and the greatest pleasure. But pain comes first (Duque, 2007: 112).



According to Galimberti, the sacred – which Téchne Man believed he had consigned to prehistory – is once more threatening. And what is worse, we are unaware of what is happening, being incapable of recognizing it because we have lost not only the origin of the sacred but also the trail of the limit beyond which it was imprudent to venture. An added contributory factor is the contemporary weakness of religion which, as a system of rules and rites, has always fulfilled the function of keeping folly, violence and the sacred at bay.

Religion, by confining and circumscribing the area of the sacred, and keeping it at the same time separate from the community of men and accessible by means of codified ritualism, has laid down the conditions under which men could construct the cosmos of reason, the only one they could inhabit without removing the abyss of chaos (Galimberti, 2000: 29).

1.2 Dialectical theology

The second factor of less interest to the category of the sacred from the beginning of the XX century is the so-called “dialectical theology” whose most noted exponent was Karl Barth (Mancini, 1977: 136 ff.). Considering the sacred as religious residue, dialectical theology – and all the theology deriving from it – has had a field day distinguishing between religion and the sacred, making the latter “bad” theology. First of all, for these XIX-XX century theologians, the evangelical message has redeemed faith in the sacred because it has endowed religious man with the gift of seeking, whereas in the sacred men’s questions are simply suppressed by the answers. Furthermore, in thus taking leave of the sacred, dialectical theology has considered human emancipation as a link with history where great masses of religious life reside. It is these masses of religious experience which theology should understand, interpret and attribute to them their proper prominence. The sacred becomes irrelevant here because kerygma and faith come into play. In this vision there is particular confluence between secular and Christian thought, so much so

that dialectical theology constituted a fascinating chapter of XX-century religious culture.

For dialectical theology the monotheistic Judaeo-Christian has human and political value because he frees from the earthly absolutes which block man by the imposition of taboos and sacrifices. Christianity itself has on one hand contributed to the dissolution of the sacred, and on the other it has been one reason for the secularisation of the West. The thesis of liberation from the sacred through secularisation and as an effect of the Christian message is clearly underlined in all the work of the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten (Gogarten, 1971; 1978; 1981).

Christianity redeemed man from the presence of the – both hierophantic and that of images – sacred. The sacred opens to the field of the profane. Among the significant components of dialectical theology is that of suffering, which links man and God in a common destiny: God will not be freed from suffering until man is freed from suffering. As has been pointed out, this gives rise to the inclination of dialectical theology to bind itself to the history of involvement and social struggles. The body of exegetical research about materialistic interpretation of the Gospels may be considered as the last phase of XX-century theological tradition. From 1968 onwards there was a multiplication of models and practices of interpreting biblical texts according to the Marxian categories of means of production, conscience and class struggle, of economic, political and ideological needs, and social practices.



1.3 Positivistic culture

The third factor in the partial decline of the sacred in modern culture depends, on one hand, on the positivistic interests of the beginning of contemporary culture and, on the other, the prevalence within them of structuralistic models. It is enough to note that in the area of religious beliefs and behaviour alone, scholars did not apply supply-side or rational-choice theories. Only recently has the irrationalistic approach to the sacred been substituted by other models borrowed from psychology, microeconomics and other sciences. However, it is clear that we are not discussing here the truthfulness or falsity of what refers to the sacred (e.g. beliefs, behaviour, institutions); we are concerned only with the problem of understanding the sociocultural processes produced by the sacred. Modern culture has shown little interest in the sacred – more in discrediting than in describing or interpreting it. In truth, this third factor is closely related to the overriding assumption of Weber's theory of disenchantment/secularisation rather than Durkheim's theory of "transference of sacrality", which will now be dealt with.

1.4 Transference of sacrality

According to Durkheim, every society has its sacred forms which are borrowed and transferred from one society to another. This is the theory of the

“metamorphosis of sacrality” (Durkheim, 1912)². In his view, the sacred is not pertinent to a relationship with a divine being, real and transcendent, but is a symbolic set of functions where sacred figures and objects which endow individual and collective lives with sense to the extent that they are recognized. Thus historical development reveals only a continuous transference of the sacred. Sacred matters are those which are protected and isolated from interdiction; profane matters are those to which these interdictions refer, and must be kept distant from the former. Religious beliefs are representations which express the nature of religious things and relations among them and with the profane. Rituals are rules of behaviour which describe how man should behave in relation to sacred things. A religion is an agreed system of beliefs and practices regarding sacred things – separate and forbidden – which unites those adhering to it in a single moral community called a church.

In every society religion is what creates a distance from ordinary (profane) things and from everyday life. For Durkheim the idea of society is the spirit of religion, and this is why the sacred is the collective sentiment that society inspires in its members. In this function of strengthening social ties, religion cannot completely disappear from a society but is transformed into at least three sacred forms: traditional, elementary and modern. The last is the one which corresponds with material and mental structures of scientific, urban, technological society.

Today too forms of the sacred reappear not only as the residue of the past or renewal of precedent versions but in forms more congenial to modernity. Whatever form the sacred assumes, the three essential functions it fulfills remain the same. The first is to remove man from existential inconsistency and disorder, for example by organizing the world into profane and sacred things and thereby an interpretative cognitive framework of all things. The second is as co-ordinator of time, festivities and rites: the sacred time among other times. A third function of the sacred is to integrate the individual into the group of which it constitutes the closeness, the organic link, the mystical net of unity. A strong, cohesive group demands passion, duties recognized by all, legitimation of violence and war under certain conditions and forms, recognition of a transcendent dimension. It is the sacred as the matrix of all social life or – to quote Durkheim – the matrix of the “social divine”, which is to say of the aggregational force which is the basis of every society and collective behaviour.

2. Sacred and imaginary

Like the sacred, imaginaries too have undergone in the past interpretations which considered them as limiting the world of technology and reason. Modernity seemed to abolish imaginaries. Nothing appeared to escape from scientific appropriation of the world and meticulous rational mapping of reality. Technological applications

² In all his work, the sacred is considered the “social divine”, that is the aggregational force upon which every society is based. See also Prades (1987), and Santambrogio, Rosati (2002).



would intervene in everything indifferently: communications, production, daily life, consumption and education, and biological economics of man and the environment. Technologies would develop like generations, but more rapidly, accompanying man even in his most intimate moments: complex household appliances, miniaturised devices, video systems, personal computers, medical engineering operations with fantastic, spectacular outcomes (Fanizza, 2018; Camorrino, 2015; Legros, Monneyron, Reynard, Tacussel, 2007).

But today the most significant aspect of imaginaries in advanced modernity is their reappearance in techno-imaginary forms where the power of images increases the magic of complex machines, referring to other universes and creating their own topography which recalls the “elsewheres” and “hereafters” of their usual places: in the past, myths, traditions and literature had transformed these into their congenial forms. Today it is the creativity of the computer which favours such elaboration, to the point of assuming the aspect of a technotronic messianism capable of solving all the great problems through the universalisation of informatised societies. What is new in this context is a different relationship with space which has become more open in every direction, more “infinite”. Relations with spaces and universes, in vehicles with or without pilots, has become more complex, and almost every region of Earth has become more accessible. It is an unexpected mutation compared with early European modernity during the great discoveries of the XV and XVI centuries. Today, explorers seek other worlds, while travellers hurry through the confined spaces of urban agglomerates. In addition to these two forms of exploration and travel, that of the space of telecommunications networks is growing, transmitting messages and images of the surrealism of imaginaries.

The effects of the secularisation of surreality can be found in this third form. Standing with one’s feet on the heavenly body which for millennia has produced wonders in the tales of children and the dreams of adults cannot but disenchant and demystify it. Moonstones are no longer imaginary objects but material subjected to scientific investigation. What is more, these interstellar voyages have opened up new worlds for a new imagination where science and science-fiction increasingly cohabit. Thus is formed a technology of imaginaries which, in addition to gathering and elaborating cosmic products, plans the first spatial islands in the cosmos with inhabitants adapted to artificial environments and future tasks. All of this evokes a nascent new order which the anthropologist Georges Balandier calls “cosmic romanticism” (Balandier, 1971; 1988). Already today this new order – fuelled by filmed images, photographs transmitted by space probes, astrophysics research findings and divulgatory scientific reviews – only develops other imaginaries of matter. This in turn feeds requests for information and the need to evade a merely earthly condition. A recurring conclusion in the works of Balandier is that the time of finite world has ended (Balandier, 1967).

The repercussions of these transformations on religious phenomena are such as to cause sociologists to say that by now one finds oneself facing nebulae where the sacred and the religious are new theoretical floating configurations, quite different from the traditional religious systems of the “religions of memory” (Hervieu-Léger,



2008; Vecoli, 2013: 119; Sironneau, 1997); while, on the other hand, the sacred encompasses within itself everything referring to mystery, transcendence, the generation of sense and values, occupying the space left free by the reduction of historical religions anchored in tradition.

According to Balandier these imaginaries guided by science may be ambiguous because they could cause a different itinerary towards the sacred or, on the contrary, to the discovery of a potentially-equipped scientific “witchcraft” (Balandier, 1994: 145 ff.). In the former interpretation an unknown world is opened up, glimpsed thanks to mysteries unveiled by science, arousing fascination, questions and a new awareness of the sacred.

New cosmologies, illuminated by images never before received, are from these points of view the most efficacious revelations generated by science. They rediscover some of what belonged to them when myths protected them: recounting the beginning of the universe, narrating its history, collocating man in the cosmos (ivi: 145)³.



These are the imaginaries which rewrite the biblical Book of Genesis in unheard-of images, in modern fables, endowing them with a scientifically accredited version in theories and equations inaccessible to the profane. It is a new Genesis with a scientific version accredited by its symbolic and dogmatic bases prefiguring an unprecedented form of religiousness where Gaia – the cosmic particle which is Earth – has an ecomythological function. “The beyond where faith germinates is no longer the seat of transcendent powers but that which man discovers through his progress in knowledge, through the practices which accompany him and the renewal of the questions therefrom deriving” (ibid).

In such a context the sacred occupies spaces going well beyond those of religious institutions, which become increasingly irrelevant although throughout history they were the main instruments of management of the sacred and its relations with the secular world. Now that religions too, like most traditional institutions, have lost the function of exclusive management of the sacred, the latter finds itself more liberated, no longer obliged to spread only through religions. There are historical precedents for this, especially among political religions which have “sacralised” politics and power. But what is new in modernity is the great mobility of the sacred, the diversity of the objects in which it is invested, and its transformations associated with the multiplication of collective experiences. Since it is now freer, the sacred has come back into its own: producing energy deriving from the exuberance of not-yet-organized collective life, impregnating secular soil, ritualising daily life, and contributing to an “enchantment” by which the harshness of reality in situations of serious crisis is softened. Furthermore the sacred, by means of the work of the intense, symbolic solidarity which it generates, legitimates cultural, social and political experimentation (Hojsgaard, 2005; Krüger, 2005).

³ Italics in Balandier, 1994.

3. Transcendent sacred and everyday sacred

An interpretative model of the sacred which contemporary man continues to experience in emotive immediate, symbolic and collective – which is to say, sacred – forms is that proposed by the sociologist Gian Antonio Gilli (2021). According to this Turin sociologist, in its present technological and cultural mutation, the sacred manifests itself in the two modalities of “everyday sacred” and “transcendent sacred”. In his chapter entitled “From the Sacred to the sacred”, Gilli defines daily-life forms of the sacred in opposition to the “transcendent sacred” which has been dealt with by classical authors such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade (Otto, 1917; Eliade, 1956). Differently classical perspectives where The Sacred is a noun with capital letters, in Gilli’s view – framed by Émile Durkheim’s sociological aura – “sacred” is only a lowercase adjective foreseeing, moreover, different levels of intensity. The problem from which Gilli starts out is that there are not only subjects for whom the sacred is the experience of what Otto calls *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, subjects which can be taken as ideal, exclusive protagonists of a theory of the sacred. Not all individuals have received a heritage of symbols and emotional alignment enabling them to accede to such an experience – which, in any case, is not of interest to everybody.



There have always been subjects (the majority, we believe) for whom spirituality does not require access to a Supreme Being with the characteristics attributed to it by Otto. What is more, there are subjects for whom minor beings and minimal “supernatural” phenomena are sufficient. And, above all, subjects to whom the category of the Divine appears distant from their daily lives – subjects for whom the Divine is less significant than the sacred (ivi: 172)⁴.

It is for these subjects – for whom the sacred is entirely personal, impossible to enjoy in the company of others – that the sacred may “materialise”, which is to say become connected with an object, a place, a presence or an “apparition”. And it is by means of such experiences that this kind of sacred, in a different way for everybody, is built/discovered through personal vicissitudes, events, small “apparitions” and every type of familiar memory.

The “tone” with which contacts with it take place is common to all these forms of the sacred. They are often expressed in micro-ritualisations, in ways of looking at it, of handling it, as well as “compensatory” rituals if one drops it, or the like (ivi: 174).

Gilli calls it “do-it-yourself” sacred for subjects who are poor in symbols (or rather in their capacity to gather and make use of them), a means of access to any personal “spirituality” whatever.

⁴ Italics in Gilli.

The sacred (this sacred) is purely experiential and self-referring: the subjects feels, more or less consciously, that this is so only for him/her; it cannot be shared. Nevertheless, the familiarity of this sacred – its unassuming character and its availability to be enjoyed almost “on request” – does not mean that everything in the sacred is clear, that the reasons for its narrow confines are clear, for the mini-rituals to which one feels bound in the face of it, or that its sources of its benefit are clear (ibid: 180).

Thus there emerges from Gilli’s work the ascertainment of the modernity of the sacred in general reflection, including secular spiritualities which are increasingly gaining strength alongside traditional religious spiritualities. Indeed sometimes in these secular spiritualities too, references to a “supernatural” sphere find space, elaborated from an individual perspective which may range from the construction of a “personal god” to a more segmented practice of the sacred, a “sacred” tailored to the subject.



4. Dematerialised sacred

The unexpected recent events of Coronavirus and the limitations imposed on individual and collective lifestyles have produced a sudden sequence of dematerialisation of social relations involving all of society. The same thing happened in the religious world with the closure to the faithful of churches, synagogues and mosques. The consequence was a general recourse to online tools of communication and meetings which are, by their very nature, generative of – even religious – imaginaries. These experiments had already been going on for some years, whether in the form of religion online or of online religion. The former pertains to religious institutions who use the web to advertise activities, transmit documents, communicate messages and preserve texts. On the contrary, online religion produces different, deeper effects on the identity of the faithful and their spiritual experiences (Enstedt, Larsson, Pace, 2015). The power of institutions is weakened in online religion, and individuals like sailors view a superior condition, changing into outright cyborgs in a symbiotic relationship with digital technology. Online religion also creates new imaginaries.

In the Christian world the phenomenon has had a paradoxical course because, on one hand, the de-materialised online world clashes with the material world of technology, of goods, of consumption and secularity in general; on the other hand, it clashes with the Christian world structured upon the materiality of its corporeal and material signifiers. Devotion, for example, has always been woven with corporeality: veneration of relics, of places, of stones and memories – all marks of sacrality. A pilgrimage was seeking proximity to the desired “holy body”, longed for and fulfilled. The secular condition (the effect of secularisation) has transported everything to “another” level, that of transcendence and closeness to the divine. Therefore no longer a God who becomes man but a man who rationally wants to become God-like.

In the contemporary context it is no longer only consumer or ideological materialism that dominates cultural tendencies but also another current leading in the direction of “anti-materiality”, to be found in the contemporary spirituality of the increasingly sophisticated forms of dematerialisation of the signifier⁵.

What are the effects of this dematerialising revolution on religious worlds? It is a question posed, especially after recent Coronavirus events, of all religions, above all those structured socially such as the post-Tridentine Catholic Church. Indeed, particularly when churches were closed because of the virus, liturgical experiments sprang up within the Catholic Church with online celebrations, meetings and prayer in which millennia-old sacred rituals were stripped of their material, interactive with the faithful, essence, becoming videos and programmes to be viewed. Everything has been involved in a general dematerialisation through which many collective religious practices (real signifiers) have been replaced by online events which can be followed from home via television and cellphones. In this way religion too loses its corporeal reality, becoming a visual “performance”. The religious world becomes immaterial, liturgical celebrations are transformed into images, and all becomes digital reality, a simulacrum.

The above evokes Guy Debord and his *La société du spectacle* from 1967. Today the French situationist would say that religion becomes show and show becomes religion. “Everything which had been experienced directly has grown remote in a representation” (Debord, 1967). This sentence describes what happened to the world of Catholicism at the beginning of 2020 without its protagonists being aware that religion, conceived as immaterial, is no longer a constructed experience but one to be consumed because of its symbolic, spectacular office and its emotional value. All belongs to the dimension of spectacle which invades not only economic and social reality but also interior life, aspirations and dreams.

Other great transformations of religion-communication relations had already taken place in the past and it would be useful to recall them before listing the new questions which the present situation asks of religion.

Initially the invention of writing allowed the rise of monotheisms, imposing themselves on oral cultures which, however, still survived for a long time. Many centuries later Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press enabled easier circulation of written communications and the passage from manuscripts to printed culture, democratizing and facilitating broader transmission of knowledge. In Europe, printing paved the way for the Renaissance (by permitting wider diffusion of classical texts), for the Protestant Reformation (by making it possible for everybody to own and read the Bible), and even for the birth of sciences as disciplines autonomous from religions. That was the start of secular modernity which weakened the traditional powers held by “priestly castes” and handed over the Bible to all the faithful. Today this autonomy continues to evolve: any sacred text can be interpreted

⁵ In linguistics, the *signifier* means the acoustic, visual, social image of a *sign*, its “outer face” (its “inner face” being the *signified*), which is to say the formal element which allows identification of various concrete, phonic, social productions of the sign. A *signifier* is therefore an event, a group, a person, a piece of music, a rite, an institution or other. Every *signifier* is the carrier of, and contains within itself, what is *signified*.



in other languages and cultures, surpassing the miracle of Pentecost recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. The miracle in Jerusalem was that the apostles' message could be understood by all who heard it, each one in one's own language. Today, on the other hand, almost five centuries after the invention of the printing press, it is "transcendence" which is becoming "polyglot", being translated into every language. It is what happened with the passage from a religious vision which could only be incarnated in one linguistic, historical and spatial context to another vision which accepts the "confusion of Babel", diminishing the signifiers and the "magic value of the sacred word. Today everything is modern which does not "fetishise" the signifier and accepts as "natural" that the meaning of divine revelation may not only be expressed in any language but also be addressed to any interlocutor. Everybody is the carrier of a revelation, whether personal or shared with small groups. Everything becomes portable: time, the sacred word, ritual and transcendence. From Protestantism onwards, even theology breaks up the religious language which had been constituted in the past, democratizes reading the Bible and contributes to the devaluation of its traditional signifiers.

Universalisation of religious sense had already begun with Christianity's utopia of a universal community. Now research sets itself to analyse also individuals and digital religious phenomena, which is to say spirituality without materiality. On one hand, the irrelevance of matter in the constitution of rites and religious forms seems to evoke the iconoclastic utopia of all religions which have rigorously protected their spiritual centre so as not to cross the border into immanence. On the other hand, Christianity could not share this rigor of transcendence because it was built on the mystery of divine-humanity and had the Eucharist as its main rite: there each time it is celebrated the transformation of matter, bread, into "divine bread" is renewed. This constitutive mystery of Christianity would not be possible in the absence of bread and wine which, however, are "transubstantiated" into spiritual matter (Leone, 2014: 46).

To what religious forms and lifestyles will the current digitalisation, which transforms not only signifiers but also the signified, lead? Will the individual be able not only to re-invent the language of transcendence but also to restructure its message? Will the opening of sense which the web makes possible lead to a digital refoundation of transcendence? Or could it be an immaterial ritual or community which will articulate its commonality?

The first effect of this autonomy of ritual from materiality is the creation of a universal community going beyond the recognition of only one language, culture or theology, flexible and adaptable to every context, without needing a temple, formulae or a calendar for celebrations. Everybody builds an invisible temple and a complex of rituals around which to invite other faithful. Protestantism is the authentic religion of modernity, that which springs up and is nourished by the invention of human uniqueness coming out of the Middle Ages. Some Protestant currents are as close as can be to spirituality without materiality: the divine makes itself known without any need of finite forms fixed in time and space (Berzano,



Rafele, 2018: 91; Berzano, 2010b). The single believer communicates with transcendent with no need for shared signs.

God becomes an infinitely transportable entity inhabiting time and space without any need to take root in the finite form of an object, a time, a liturgical calendar. Such a rarefied religious community of spirituality is thus the vibrating together of individualities rather than a communion, a paradoxical sharing of the same taste for silence and solitude (Leone, 2014: 23).

It is fundamentalisms, on the contrary, which indicate nostalgia for a centrality of real signifiers, that is to say a sacred language, an inviolable temple, unmodifiable rituality. The truth is that they are all different forms of communication with the divine: the materialisation of forms in Catholicism; the reduction to essentials of silent, interior prayer in Protestantism; nostalgia for an abundance of imposed rituals as in contemporary fundamentalisms; and the present reduction of materiality in online spiritualities.

The second effect of autonomy from the materiality of ritual is the lesser relevance of the community (signifier) in the transmission of religious sense. Religious messages travel incorporeally, free from the encumbrance of signifiers. Dematerialisation brings transcendence back to life, but in bit and non-bit modalities rather than in languages formed over time. The trajectory of religious cultures just drawn shows the passage from a context where religious sense was experienced in the communion and identity of the materiality of the rite, albeit with different spiritual styles, to another context, typical of modernity, where individuals, without denying transcendence, live and experience a dematerialised sacred without either time or space. What matters for these individuals is the single person's interior, invisible intention and not the materiality of ritual and community. The individual lets her/himself go in the community flow, from which s/he receives a feeling of possible continuity.

The third effect is the risk that dematerialising languages and historical rituals of transcendence might devalue transcendence itself, reducing it to a simple reflex of individual conscience. The word indicating the name of God reached out to this transformation: at the beginning of monotheism the word was unpronounceable and contained the force of a sacred randomness. It later became a pure word which could be substituted from one language to another because the link between sign and object – between signifier and signified, expression and content – had become a linguistic convention. Whatever name God is addressed by, He responds, providing that the voice comes from the sincerity of the soul. Common objections to the dematerialisation of languages and rituals of transcendence concern the authenticity of online religious experience, its evanescent nature without the check of being present. What's more, the indirect character of technological means reduces the authenticity of religious experience which is mystery, physical immediacy and direct emotion. Online religious experiences would then be lacking in substance, almost a *loisir* of creative imagination. It is possible to answer these objections by stating that



offline religious practice too, such as attending a church ceremony, is not always closely participatory.

A fourth effect, with reference to previously-mentioned imaginaries, is the production of an autopoietic spiritual imaginary. Autopoiesis, a notion first developed in the biological field and later applied to social systems as well, here indicates the construction of one's own personal spirituality. Just as the tiniest biological elements can be self-producing, so can sensibilities, ideas and spiritual practices compose themselves on the basis of elements inside and outside the individual. The external factors are the various types of already-existing spirituality which the individual appropriates. But the process which generates a new spirituality in each individual integrates the background of past experiences with other, new, sensibilities. This is what George Barna concludes regarding the US context, speaking about "310 million people with 310 million religions" (Barna, 2011: 87). From the theological point of view, David Augsburgur defines this individualistic character of religion as "monopolar spirituality".



Within it comes about the subjective meeting with one's universal interior self which is universally present in all human beings. This universal interior self, if realised in the most complete way, flourishes into an interior experience without places, rituals or the traditions of formal religions.... In its most individual forms, monopolar spirituality tends to become designer spirituality which everybody puts together with the themes and harmonies which are most consonant with one's personality and preferences (Augsburger, 2006: 96)⁶.

Augsburger notes that whereas on one hand this type of spirituality constitutes a new form of exploration characterized by creativity and openness, on the other it risks becoming a matter of mysticism which no longer leads to meeting an Other, as its definition becomes progressively less clear by including elements of fantasy, superstition and magic.

The fifth element is the insertion of transcendence in a game, understood as temporary, voluntary experience of the sacred (Leone, 2014: 45 ff.). In the game one submits to a group which regulates its behaviour, imposed reciprocally as is necessary for transcendence. The player leaves one dimension of reality and accedes to a parallel dimension to which, however, he does not rise up individually, as in mystical prayer, but in a group. All this contains an aesthetic element which also involves the religious field. Practices transfer their original meaning to other meanings and references far beyond their nascent religious belonging. It is part of a general process which can be defined as "aestheticization of society". Whereas modernity and its associated process of secularisation initiated the separation of the various economic, legal, moral and aesthetic sphere, now the last in the list dominates the others. A proof is the flourishing of spiritual trends and lifestyles which, making use of various religious practices, recompose them into different symbolic alphabets – personal or collective liturgies – which exalt the symbolic

⁶ Italics in Augsburgur, 2006.

creativity of every religious individual or group. This fascination with aesthetics also transforms traditional religions, multiplying new symbolic systems which are more seductive and changeable than in the past. It is the difficulty historical religions meet in overcoming the real in a new sacrality which drives digital communities to try out new, temporary signifiers, always striving to respond to the same anthropological need as that of religious individuals: how to live the sacred in community and live the community through the sacred (Belk, Tumbat, 2005; Maffesoli, 2013).



Bibliography

- Augsburger D. (2006), *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor*, Grand Rapids (MI), Brazos Press.
- Balandier G. (1967), *Anthropologie politique*, Paris, PUF. Tr. it. *Antropologia politica*, Roma, Armando, 2000.
- Balandier G. (1971), *Sens et puissance. Les dynamiques sociales*, Paris, PUF.
- Balandier G. (1988), *Le Désordre. Éloge du mouvement*, Paris, Fayard.
- Balandier G. (1994), *Le Dédale. Pour en finir avec le XX siècle*, Paris, Fayard.
- Barna G. (2011), *Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World*, Carol Stream (IL), Tyndale House Publishers.
- Belk R. W., Tumbat G. (2005), "The cult of Macintosh", *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 8, 3: 205-217.
- Berzano L. (2010a), "Forme del sacro", in *XXI Secolo. Norme e idee*, Roma, Enciclopedia Treccani, 651- 658.
- Berzano L. (2010b), "Lifestyles and religion", *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 1: 383-401.
- Berzano L. (2010c), "Sociologia e sacro", in Fabbri E., Mongini G. (a cura di), *Il sacro nel Novecento. Prospettive interdisciplinari*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 19-34.
- Berzano L., Rafele A. (éds) (2018), "La dématérialisation du sacré", *Sociétés*, 139: 91.
- Camorrino A. (2015), *La natura è inattuale. Scienza, società e catastrofi nel XXI secolo*, Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Ce), Ipermedium.
- Debord G. (1967), *La Société du spectacle*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel. Tr. it. *La società dello spettacolo*, Milano, Baldini & Castoldi, 2004.
- Duque F. (2007), *La radura del sacro*, Milano, Edizioni AlboVersorio.
- Durkheim É. (1912), *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, PUF, Paris. Tr. it. *Le forme elementari della vita religiosa*, Milano, Mimesis, 2013.
- Eliade M. (1956), *Le sacré et le profane*, Editions Gallimard, Paris. Tr. it. *Il sacro e il profano*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1973.



Enstedt D., Larsson G., Pace E. (2015), "Religion and Internet", *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 6: 1-10.

Fanizza F. (2018), *The Sociological Imagination on the Horizons of Contemporary Society*, Milano, Mimesis International.

Filoramo G. (1994), *Le vie del sacro*, Torino, Einaudi.

Galimberti U. (2000), *Orme del sacro*, Milano, Feltrinelli.

Gilli G. A. (2021), *Locus sui. Religioni di luogo*, Milano, Mimesis.

Gogarten F. (1971), *La questione su Dio*, Brescia, Queriniana.

Gogarten F. (1978) *L'annuncio di Gesù Cristo*, Brescia, Queriniana.

Gogarten F. (1981), *Demitizzazione e Chiesa*, Brescia, Queriniana.

Hervieu-Léger D. (2008), *La religion pour mémoire*, Paris, Cerf.

Hojsgaard M. T. (2005), "Cyber-religion: On the cutting edge between the virtual and the real", in Hojsgaard M., Warburg M. (eds), *Religion and Cyberspace*, London, Routledge.

Krüger O. (2005), "Discovering the invisible Internet: Methodological aspects of searching religion on the Internet", *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1.1.

Legros P., Monneyron F., Renard J.-B., Tacussel P. (2007), "Sociologie de l'imaginaire", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 138: 152-251.

Leone M. (2014), *Spiritualità digitale. Il senso religioso nell'era della smaterializzazione*, Milano, Mimesis.

Maffesoli M. (2013), *Imaginaire et postmodernité*, Paris, Éditions Manucius.

Mancini I. (1977), *Novecento teologico. Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Barth*, Firenze, Vallecchi.

Ormea F. (1972), *La religione del giovane Hegel*, Roma, Edizioni Roberto Napoleone.

Otto R. (1917), *Das Heilige*, Auflage, Breslau. Tr. it. *Il Sacro*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1938.

Prades J. A. (1987), *Persistence et métamorphose du sacré*, Paris, PUF.



Luigi Berzano
Persistence and Transformations of the Sacred

Santambrogio A., Rosati M. (a cura di) (2002), *Émile Durkheim. Contributi per una lettura critica*, Milano, Booklet Milano.

Sironneau P. (1997), *Figures de l'imaginaire religieux et dérive idéologique*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Vecoli F. (2013), *La religione ai tempi del web*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.

