

DIFFUSED RELIGION AND PRAYER

ABSTRACT

Perhaps the origins of prayer come from the funeral mourning and from ancient rites connected to the death. The prayer is an important indicator of religiosity, but till now it has been used in a vague and imprecise way. There exist various forms of prayer: the worn-hidden prayer and the exposed-manifest prayer. The typology of prayer is based on the religious experience, on the relation between personal prayer and political activism, between prayer and forgiveness, between prayer and religious approach. How can one, for instance, investigate mental prayer? This falls, once more, within the canon of diffused religion and thus in diffused prayer.

THE IDEA OF DIFFUSED RELIGION

“Diffused religion” is a concept that needs clarifying (Cipriani, 1983, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2001). The term “diffused” is to be intended in at least two ways. First of all, it is “diffused” in that it involves vast sections of the Italian population and goes beyond the simple limits of church religion; sometimes it is in fact in open contrast with church religion on religious motivation (cf. the internal dissension within Catholicism on the occasion of the referendum on divorce and abortion). Secondly, it has become widespread, since it has proved to be a historical and cultural result of the almost bi-millennial presence of the Catholic institution in Italy and of its socializing and legitimizing action. The premise for present day “diffused religion” have been laid down in the course of centuries.

As we said, “diffused religion” concerns broad strata of the Italian population. Many studies have consolidated this conviction over time.

However, its most relevant aspect is still the strong historical-geographical – that is, cultural – rootedness of the religion most practiced in Italy. It is precisely the strength of tradition, the practice, the family and community involvement which make the adherence to the prevalent religion compelling and almost insurmountable. Where socialization within the family does not reach, pastoral and evangelizing activity moves in, carried out in a capillary way by priests and lay parish workers.

What “diffused religion” really consists of can be understood even by observing its peculiarities. In a broad sense, its presence is also clearly visible in forms which are not as evident as church religion, although this visibility may appear somehow intermittent.

Values widely shared among Italian society can be considered as a form of dissension with the established institution of the Catholic Church. Italian society shows a peculiar trend towards civic freedom and ethical pluralism. In terms of attitudes and behaviour, Italians appear to disagree with the Church official teachings. Although the Catholic perspective is dominant in many contexts, Italian society prefers a different system of values, though not so very different as regards the Catholic social doctrine. It is like a separate sphere which promotes models of freedom and open discussion, not always in line with the Catholic Church views. Thus a public space is created, where religion is not the only reference point, and other perspectives come into place, somehow building a defence against the Catholic Church influence and religious socialization.

In reality, diffused religion is both diffused “in” (through) many channels of socialization and education (mainly in schools and universities) and diffused “by” (thanks to) specific structures and actions of values

proposals. As a final outcome, it is also diffused “for” (in favour of) other specific religious groups and movements, given that - apart from the intents of the so-called church religion - we can observe the spreading of other creeds (the easy proselytism of other Christian churches, as the “Jehovah's Witnesses”, or of “sects” of oriental origin etc.), as well as the trend towards ethical and/or political choices. In brief, it is possible to think of religion as being “diffused” through the acceptance of other religious experiences at individual or group level, and also because it represents a parameter which can be referred to with regard to moral and/or political choices in the social context.

THE ROLE OF DIFFUSED RELIGION AND PRAYER

Diffused religion, that is that set of values, practices, beliefs, symbols, attitudes and behaviours which do not completely conform to the official model of church-religion, coincides almost entirely, or at least for a great part, with a significant part of civil society.

Diffused religion does not perfectly overlap civil society, but it certainly constitutes a statistically relevant quota of it. In other terms, it embraces a wide range of civil society, and it is representative of its main trend as regards orientations, at least towards the Church (or the churches).

Therefore, it can be said that it is not the whole of civil society that coincides with diffused religion, as the latter includes church-religion, as well as atheism, indifference, agnosticism. Nevertheless, diffused religion seems to interpret some essential expectations whose importance is signified by their influence on the whole society.

However, diffused religion must be distinguished from civil religion. It is not a question of finding in it Rousseau's old idea (1712-1778) as expressed in his *Social Contract* (chap. VIII, book IV), or the more recent concepts of Bellah (1967). Neither fit the Italian case. Rousseau's idea was developed in the context of the XVIII century, with a pedagogical-philosophical connotation; Bellah's concept, although sociological, was related to the territory of the United States, with characteristics totally foreign to the Italian peninsula (from the concept of elected people to that of the centrality of the biblical texts). Above all, substituting the idea of religion itself with that of society does not seem to be legitimated: one thing is religion, another is society, at least as regards sociological analysis.

Since the origins of religious sociology or, better, sociology of religion as an autonomous and non-confessional science, the problem related to the individuation of adequate indicators of the religious phenomenon and of its individual and collective experiences has emerged. At first, it was assumed that ritual practices on a weekly basis could be taken as a reliable parameter, as this was visible behaviour that could be measured in its real dimensions. Therefore in questionnaires the questions were all aimed at ascertaining the interviewees' number of attendances to the official rituals organized by the religious structure to which he/she belonged. Later, however, doubts emerged regarding the reliability of the gathered data, which were based more on the extemporaneous statements of the interviewees than on real practices, empirically verifiable. Above all, it was discovered that attending mass or taking part in any other form of cult, could depend on motivations which were not necessarily or strictly religious: this brought

to other heuristic interpretations, aimed at ascertaining the intensity of a belief and of the related practice. The first qualitative researches then started, allowing the interviewees to express themselves more openly, granting them freedom of action in the organization of their discourse, the narration of their experiences, the definition of their religious feelings. New realities then have emerged, other, more evident, data have resulted, further interpretations have risen in the horizon of sociology of religion. More than the observance of festivities, what has been delineated is the relevance of everyday life, the importance of ordinary religious life experiences, beyond liturgical celebrations, without the presence of officiants legitimated by the religious institution, but with a clear reference to one's own values, to one's own life choices, to personal horizons of belief, to a personal religiosity largely counterpoised to the hierarchical religiosity within church-religion, although not creating real fractures with it.

Meanwhile, the affirmation of new so-called non-standard, that is non-quantitative, methodologies, has brought out some life histories and attitudes and behaviours not easily assessable before, when numeric dimensions, percentages, statistical correlations were almost the only prevailing means. Nowadays, thanks also to the development of computer programs dedicated to qualitative analysis, it is possible to analyze social-religious phenomenology in greater depth, and to discover personal life-paths, not always compliant with traditional classic, that is Durkheimian and/or Weberian, conceptual categories, and whose independence from institutional religion is a harbinger of future developments.

Truly, the importance of prayer had been pointed out also in quantitative research, with a mainly individual connotation. The empirical information about this was clear: there are many more people who pray than people who go to church.

Now it seems that, while the rate of regular religious practices in festivities seems to be decreasing, resorting to a direct dialogue with the divinity seems to be at least tendentially stable, whether as a personal elaboration or as based on formulas learnt during religious socialization, or as simply conversational in style and almost on a par with the supernatural interlocutor.

Each of the different modalities of interaction between human beings and the superior entity which can be defined as God (or god), is not a spontaneous fruit, but the historical consequence of a long process of radicalization of practices and experiences, which are in some cases multi-millenary. The various religious organizations, more or less formalized, operating through the times have posed the premise for a long and solid permanence of behavioural patterns which cannot be easily eliminated or marginalized.

Prayer itself falls within those patterns, and represents the result of a lasting and efficient action, that has brought various generations of social actors to have recourse to it in more or less predetermined situations, not particularly different from one another, not even after centuries.

Besides, it is not by chance that today there is a revival, among Catholics, of the same bodily posture that can be seen in the pictorial documents of the catacombs, where the believer who prays is depicted with open arms, as can still be seen today when the *Pater Noster* is recited during mass.

Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine that a great part of the conventions related to prayer are perpetuated from century to century essentially because of a mnemonic-recalling of the memorized texts, of the most widespread formulae, of the ejaculations continuously repeated, of the rhymed formularies that constitute a formidable aid to the permanence of the memory.

On top of that, the existence of pre-packaged formulae, which are also provided with the ecclesiastical *imprimatur*, or at least officially recognized by the hierarchy, constitutes a significant anchor for those individuals who are not very familiar with personalized religious solutions, and are therefore inclined to take refuge in what has been transmitted orally or in non voluminous, pocket-size texts, easily accessible and usable.

One should not forget that for the most part basic catechism for rites of passage, for sacraments, is taught by making reference mainly to prayers, ritual formulae, recitation of verses and brief sentences, easy to learn by heart.

It is not by accident that the so called “Pius X catechism” is made of a list of questions and answers, simple and concise, to be learnt by heart in order to pass the final exam for accession to the sacraments. This is why this portion and potion of diffused religion persists in time and is resilient to almost everything, to the weakening of belief and practice as well as to the almost complete distancing from the connections with the religion of one’s first socialization.

In addition to the church structures, the family also contributes relevantly to the indoctrination of the new generations, both in terms of exemplary life experiences, and in terms of theoretical and ideological suggestions

provided to sustain their fundamental religious belief. The family religious scenario is not foreign, in general, to the whole normative framework that accompanies and orientates in social life adolescents and young people during their growth.

Finally, other institutions also contribute in the same direction, proposing traces, systems, solutions, which will be re-utilized in the future. Thus prayer itself, although not always consolidated as a “habit of the heart” – as Rousseau and Bellah (1985) would say – resurfaces even when other religious habits are absent.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PRAYER

The origins of prayer are still the object of study, mainly by historians, anthropologists and sociologists. Probably at the basis of the quest for a super-natural interlocutor there is a number of reasons that converge in the act of praying.

Some substance can be found in the thesis of Ernesto de Martino, who wrote that: “in primitive civilizations and in the ancient world, a considerable part of man’s technical coherence is not applied in the technical dominion over nature (where after all he finds limited applications), but in the creation of institutional forms capable of protecting his presence from the risk of not being in the world. Now the need of this technical protection constitutes the origin of religious life as a mythical-ritual order” (de Martino 1975:37).

The risks for human beings in the ancient world were well defined: wild animals, unknown territories, lack of water and food, atmospheric

phenomena, death of livestock, diseases. Nowadays we are better equipped against such dangerous situations, but the risk of one's own or of a family member's death persists. It is a threat common to all generations and populations. There is thus a diachronic line that crosses millennia and that in the ancient world produced expressions such as the funeral mourning (Cipriani, 1996).

Besides, according to de Martino (de Martino, 1975:38), the sacred must be intended as a "mythical-ritual technique that protects the presence from the risk of not being in history". And, on the other hand, it is precisely the ancient ritual funeral lament that presents various convergences with prayer: it can be an individual fact, but also a collective action; it can have one or more alternating leaders; it is accompanied by ritual gestures; it has its own procedural order; it has responsorial forms; it includes a choral participation; it makes use of refrains; it can also have very free developments or alternating recitations between groups of people; it presents a character which is at the same time narrative, evaluative and interpretative; it has usually a conclusion which is ritually resolutive through a striking gesture such as tearing clothes off or scratching or hitting oneself (a sort of concluding *amen* that in truth means "resting on", i.e. "to have faith", in short to believe that something is in a certain way, a belief that matches badly with actions of desperation or self-punishment, unless the intention is that of expressing resignation, a surrendering to a superior will, implicitly and jointly recognizing the inanity of one's own actions in front of the divine power: "this is so, because this is the way You want it to be").

The theme of death remains anyway the keystone that puts on the same level funeral lament and prayer: it is a question of giving, more or less consciously, an answer to lacerating interrogatives: why is life interrupted? Who is the real master of our life? Why the end of existence hits some, and not others? How can the lethal risk be faced? Or, how can the risk be rendered, after Luhmann (Luhmann 1984), more tolerable through religious mediation? And after all, are not the lament and prayer for the dead both inspired by motivations related to the need for the compensation of an unbalance created in the social body by the death of one of its members? Lament and prayer are also forms of elaboration of the mourning process, or elaborations of the sense to be given to death as well as to life.

Instead of suicide, to which survivors can recur, a remedy can be offered by rite (whether crying or praying). Thus, “undoubtedly the ritual which is apt to resolve the suicidal impulse in equivalent diluted and symbolic acts, must be intended as a dramatic measure, to be instituted each time in the concrete event of single laments [...] On the other hand, the mimic of the ritualized *planctus* appears in the ancient lament as oriented towards a progressive symbolic dilution of the current crisis, instead of a real suicide: passing from the incision of the flesh – in established measure –, to some less demanding forms of allusive annihilation, such as hitting oneself, plucking one’s beard or hair, smearing oneself with dust *as if* buried, spreading one’s head with soil *as if* cremated, letting oneself collapse on the ground *as if* fulgurated by death, and other mortifying and abject acts that represent in relatively milder forms the *as if* of the will to die” (de Martino 1975:205). At this point, it can be hypothesized that praying for the dead itself is a form of attenuation of the *cupio dissolvi*, of the desire to

die-together, with the loved one who died. But in a metaphorical sense also prayer, even when not dedicated to a dead person, has nonetheless a latent implication that refers to the ultimate moment of human existence: one prays to thank for an avoided danger; to overcome a moment of great risk for survival; as a form of *captatio benevolentiae*, that is to win special attention by a supreme being; one prays to be able to continue one's own existence; to praise the divinity and its benevolence; to obtain and live non-conflict and therefore danger-free situations.

A peculiar indicator of what has been maintained, is provided by the use, still alive, of the blessing of fields. In effect it is on good harvest that the life of single individuals and entire communities depends. In the act of blessing the land there is the intention to drive out potential drought, ruining of plantations and of fruit. Given that much seems to be uncertain, or not depending on human will, divine protection is invoked in order to avoid deadly risks. And the precautionary and preventive action of blessing is not distinct from the subsequent action of thanking (which is formalized in the USA in the national feast of Thanksgiving). Both relate to the main reference point, which is not earthly but divine, and above all they do not exclude the reference to demands linked to the relationship between life and death, abundance and want, between protection and danger, sowing and harvesting, between fruits of the earth and fruits of the supernatural.

The special connection of prayer with difficult situations is proved at biblical level by the so called *Lamentations*, generically attributed to Jeremiah (650-586 B. C.), but in fact dating back to a community of Judaea remembering the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The five "books" of *Lamentations* have a progression that puts them in relation with the genre

of remembrance, mourning, one could say, for the end of the holy town of Jerusalem. Their recitation is both individual and collective: the topic is the destroyed town, but there is also an invocation to the Lord, who is “just” (verse 18) and sees “how overwhelming is the anguish” (verse 20). So the lament once more becomes prayer, request for help, peroration (from the Latin verb *per-orare*), as it can be read in the final verses of the fifth and last *Lamentation*: “let us return to you, Lord, and we will return, renovate our days as in the ancient times! Since neither you definitely reject us, nor show outraged indignation at us!”

CONTINUITY AND CONTIGUITY OF THE FORMS OF PRAYER

How can the connections between the current phenomenologies and the more ancient ones be identified? Lévi-Strauss, as it is known, has looked for those connections studying populations which had not yet been touched by processes of modernization (Cipriani 1988a). In our case, with reference to the euro-Mediterranean area of the Greek and Roman funeral mourning, we can refer to the Sardinian culture of the *attittadoras* (Cipriani, Cotesta, De Spirito, Di Riso, Fraser, Mansi 1996), the lamenting women who are still now active in funeral rituals, and who present characteristics which render them rather similar to the lamenting women in Egypt, Greece, Romania, Lucania, Calabria, Campania (the latter with the variance of the *ritornelli asseverativi*, that is asseverative refrains where the women in a choral form confirm what the chief lamenting woman says about the dead, or with the variance of the *riepito battuto*, that is the lament accompanied

by the action of hitting oneself) (de Martino 1975:360-364). Not dissimilar is the lamentation documented by Koppers (1947:129-131) in the Yamana population, referred to by de Martino.

Being connoted by an insular territory, Sardinian culture, as a matter of fact, proves advantageous for diachronic analysis, as in such context it is possible to see enduring features that in other places have been overshadowed or have disappeared. Such is the case of the *goigs* or *gogos*, a sort of religious hymns, most probably of Hispanic origin, Catalan in particular, from medieval times: “their content is characterized by the praising aspects, narrative-emblematic and descriptive, which aim at emphasizing the merits, the virtues, the sanctifying graces of Christ, of the Virgin and of the Saints” (Atzori, Satta 1983:41). They could be ascribed amongst the prayers of laudatory character. Their structure is such that they can easily be transmitted orally. Their pattern is originally ecclesiastic and cultured, but then, as it has occurred in many other cases (for instance in the *canto delle zitelle*, chant of the spinsters, in the Sanctuary of the Saint Trinity in Vallepiedra) it has undergone a process of simplification at popular level, where the role of the institutionalized church personnel remains marginal while lay subjects emerge and become the main actors, innovating and proposing new chants and new prayers in honour of the Lord, of the Madonna and the canonized. In conclusion, if the first *goigs* or *gogos* were dedicated, in the culture of the troubadours, to women or to the knights’ “madonnas”, they afterwards became a homage to the Mother of God (*Mar de Deu*) and therefore also to the Saints. The *Ave Maria* itself, sung in Sardinian dialect according to a consolidated popular tradition, in the end is not very different from the religious *gogos*. Besides, the *gogos*

could also be connoted by a protest against both the religious and political establishment (as some events demonstrate clearly). The *goigs* became *gogos* with the Spanish domination in Sardinia; not only, they looked for a symbiosis with the more ancient byzantine patterns which were already present in the island. Lastly, “in the *gogos*, as it had happened with the *goigs*, the exemplary and thaumaturgic qualities of the Saints to which they were dedicated were exalted. The hymn was concluded by an oration in the form of a supplication that was aimed at presenting to the Saint a plea for mercy for oneself, for one’s relatives, for the community” (Atzori, Satta 1983:44). The plea for mercy is a logic consequence of the series of praises sung in honour of the saint: in this way there is a passage from eulogistic prayer to pleading, beseeching for help. There is also a further element that takes the *gogos* back to a single tradition: they are performed in rural contexts and in key moments of agricultural production. A fact that goes together with the tradition of the blessing of fields and with the action of thanking for a good harvest, as we said above.

The exorcistical, apotropaic character of some religious invocations that fall amongst the prayers, can again be found in Sardinia, that is, in a cultural context that more than others has maintained the traces of a centuries old tradition, in exorcizing formulae – not by chance called *preghieras* (prayers) – with which people talk to the saints, pleading for mercy. Many are the rhetorical solutions, the figures, the metaphors, the tropes constellating the *preghieras*, with a symbolic richness peculiar to folklore, where for instance the expression “born with a shirt” (to be born lucky) is connected with “the symbol of the salute to the Madonna or to Jesus to plea for the “mercy” of luck auspicated in the form of protection.

The future of a day is always disconcerting for the individual and the community; and the disconcert can become paralysis, without the intervention of prayer” (Atzori, Satta 1983:78).

In the Sardinian cultural tradition, there are also the *historiolae*, which have already been studied by de Martino (1960) in *Sud e magia* (South and Magic). These are *exempla*, examples in form of tales that justify and reinforce certain behaviours, included recurring to prayer as an efficient solution in difficult circumstances.

A modality quite close to that of the Sardinian *preghieras* can be found in other Italian territories, for instance in Lucania (Cipriani 1988b), with references to God, to the Madonna and the saints, amongst whom, in particular, Saint Nicholas (Cipriani 2008).

There exist also quite unique forms of prayer: the worn-hidden prayer and the exposed-manifest prayer. The former is kept in some glass case or medal and is hidden to the sight of others, being worn underneath one’s clothes; the latter is affixed to a house window, or on a vehicle, with the function of protecting from the evil that could come from the outside world.

THE DIFFUSED RELIGION OF PRAYING

The practice of praying, which, according to Marcel Mauss (2003) – as is well known – is at the same time belief and ritual, and the essence of religion for Durkheim (1995), is certainly the most enduring and common action at the level of universal religions (Max Weber 1993). The same empirical research, studies in constant as well as chronologically and territorially uninterrupted ways, demonstrates that prayers do in fact

constitute the *fil rouge* of many religious behaviours oriented towards oneself and/or towards others (Ladd, Spilk 2002).

Not least, a vast research carried out by Poloma and Gallup (1991) has shown that prayer is important in the life of US citizens. The survey involved 1030 subjects and clearly demonstrated that the use of prayer represents a sort of challenge to the churches, and can decisively influence life at political, moral and social level, especially in relations to the ability to forgive and to be satisfied by life.

Poloma and Gallup operated in particular on the typology, on the religious experience, on the relation between personal prayer and political activism, between prayer and forgiveness, between prayer and religious approach.

The most significant datum is that 88% of the interviewees pray, and these are not only old, black, southern, female, or low-educated individuals. A little decrease, compared to the general average, can be found amongst the young: about 80%.

There are four types of prayer, according to Poloma and Gallup (from the least to the most participative): “*ritual*”, “*petitionary*”, “*meditative*”, “*conversational*”. Thus, one prays through a ceremony, a plea, a meditation, a conversation. But it is the prayer-meditation that manifests a more direct relation with the divinity. Also the experiences deriving from the typology are diversified in five categories, amongst which what prevails is the sense of peace and well-being. Poloma and Gallup also carefully examine the relations between prayer and politics.

Another survey, the *Baylor Religion Survey*, carried out in 2005 on 1721 cases, again in the United States, points out that women, African-American and low-income individuals pray more than men, whites, and high-income

individuals. “Petitionary” prayer is preferred by African-American and low-income and low-education people. Moreover, low-income individuals orient their prayers more directly to spiritual ends, in order to obtain the favour of the divinity (Baker 2008).

According to the data gathered through the “2004 General Social Survey”, 89,8% of the United States citizens pray at least sometimes (Baker 2008:170), and three quarters of the same population pray at least once a day. Moreover, out of those who pray, 67% think that prayers are listened to, and 95% that they are granted (Gallup, Lindsay 1999).

According to a survey carried out years ago, prayer is not connected with the fear of death (Koenig 1988), but one should wonder in what measure the sample used provide data that allow the results to be generalized in other contexts, and whether the modality of the study has allowed an in-depth knowledge of the relational dynamics between prayer and fear of death.

Other motivations on the use of prayer as a solution that renders a difficult condition more acceptable, are provided in various occasions by the results of different surveys. The same can be said for the plea for a divine favour, possibly in connection with admitting one’s own faults, one’s own sins.

According to Baker (2008:171) it is much more interesting and useful to look at the contents of the prayers (not as much to its frequency): economic security, health, confessing and forgiving of sins, a spiritual relation with God. Amongst those who pray, according to what emerges from the “2005 Baylor Religion Survey”, 89,4% pray for their family, 75,3% for an acquaintance, 66,2% for a relation with God, 62,2% for the world, 61,2% for the confession of sins, 57,1% for health, 49,4% as a form of adoration (from the Latin verb *ad-orare*), 46,8% for unknown people, 33% for

economic security. These rough data alone explain that to the decrease of sacramental confessions does not correspond a diminished awareness of having committed sins. And, however, the whole data present a configuration that seems to leave apart the affiliation to a church, although to complete this discourse it must be emphasized that the sensitization to the action of praying derives, presumably, from the content of religious socialization that has taken place in an ecclesiastic domain and within the family and the social community, in which prayer has become a sort of permanent imprinting. In conclusion, it must be taken into consideration that Baker's analysis does not concern ritual prayer, nor group prayer, and not even prayer in liturgical services. In other terms, personal and extemporary prayer recurs so much that it has become quite dominating in comparison to more standardized forms, managed at institutional level. Another important aspect regards the limitation of the interpretations provided by Baker to the sole Christian framework, therefore leaving out modes that are typical of other religious forms.

Out of Baker's study, what must be underlined is definitely the final passage, that comes after many statistical-quantitative analyses on the function of prayer: "qualitative data on prayer content would also be an important advancement to the current understanding of prayer. Content analysis of individual prayer, assessing why people choose to pray about specific topics, and gathering extensive information about prayer habits are but a small glimpse into the issue that could be covered by qualitative research. When dealing with a topic as intensely personal and varied as prayer, certainly this approach deserves exploration" (Baker 2008:183).

Also a philosophical in depth exploration such as the one carried out by D. Z. Phillips (1965) can lead to new interpretations of prayer as a conversation, as a dialogue with someone who does not understand, as a dependency, as a superstition, as a divine voice, as a community event.

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF PRAYING

The different ways in which one prays offer sociologists a good opportunity to carry out a non-conventional analysis, based on minimum indicators, on minute details. How can one, for instance, investigate mental prayer? What are the signals to be taken into consideration when investigating it?

Certainly the social actors themselves possess direct knowledge of it. They and only they are able to make it accessible to others, communicating motives and content.

However, there are other ways of praying with our five senses, and in such investigation great help comes from the work of five Spanish women theologians, among whom two Catholic nuns. In an extraordinarily rich and documented form, they concentrate on a bodily dimension of prayer, otherwise neglected by the usual scientific and cognitive approach (Gómez-Acebo, Fuertes Tuya, Zubía Guinea, Navarro Puerto, León Martín 2000:17-18): the basic assumption is that ““sense” means path; human beings have five senses, five accesses or paths open to reality. Paths towards the outside, towards the world and towards the Other, and paths toward the inner self, starting from the human being and reality. The difference between these roads is not irrelevant as regards perceived reality. Although

in spiritual life everything resides within the intellect, the peculiarity of the senses in the configuration of the spiritual world is relevant”.

This approach paves the way to a more perceptive sociology of praying, to which Michele Colafato (2007) contributes with great care and wide perspectives. Through various specialists he furthers the discovery and understanding of the experience of prayer in orthodox Christianity, of the individual and collective perspective of the *salat*, i.e. the Islamic prayer, of Catholic prayer, of Buddhist prayer, in particular in the *Lotis Sūtra*, and the Jewish prayer (in which the issue of the senses reemerges: “taste: every time we taste something, we must utter a blessing”, “smell: there are specific blessings for aromatic herbs such as rosemary and sage”, “hearing: listening to any news, whatever good or bad, must be accompanied by a blessing”, “sight: the moment we meet a king, a peasant, or we see the sea, blossoming trees...we must pronounce a specific blessing”, “sense of touch: the instrument through which the body gets in contact and perceives all that surrounds it. The precept regarding women is particularly relevant in Jewish religion: the woman must immerse completely in a purifying bath, in which she can strongly perceive the contact between her body and the water”) (Colafato 2007:89).

This opening widens also the field of a sociology of religion that then becomes sociology of spirituality (Heelas, Woodhead 2005; Tirri 2008). It is not by chance that some research shows that there is a preference by the interviewees in defining themselves as spiritual subjects rather than religious people. In this regard, Kirsi Tirri recalls the fundamental contribution of William James (1902) on the variety of religious experiences and writes that “today some writers use the terms “religion”

and “spirituality” as interchangeable to add linguistic variety to their terminology. However, many researchers define spirituality in contrast to religion. In these definitions, religion is usually defined as organisational, the ritual, and the ideological. The spiritual then refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful. The reminder that an individual can be spiritual without being religious or religious without being spiritual, has become a standard part of many papers on spirituality. It seems clear that spirituality must be seen as a wider concept than religion. This kind of understanding about these concepts indicates that religion and spirituality share some common areas but they also have their own areas of interests” (Tirri 2008:155-156).

But Tirri places prayer amongst the religious rituals (Tirri 2008:166). It could be maintained instead that it is not only the connecting point between religiosity and spirituality, but also the instrument through which historical universal religions are able to maintain a function of socialization in transmitting contents and cultural and cultic forms from one generation to the other, according to the perspective of the theory of diffused religion which constitutes the pivot based on primary and secondary socialization through families and religious organizations.

Referring again to classics, and to a contemporary one now (Gardner 1999), Tirri (2008:157) insists on the social character of spirituality, which adds as a fourth element to those proposed by Hay (1999) concerning awareness through paying attention to events taking place, the capability to transcend daily experiences through the reference to mystery and the importance of feelings as a measure of what one appreciates in terms of values.

Amongst the Finnish youth, 69% consider themselves spiritually oriented, and 45% religiously oriented (there are thus also those who perceive themselves both as religious and spiritual). Even amongst those who consider themselves members of a church, the spiritual dimension prevails (64%) as opposed to religiosity (46%). Amongst young adults, 8% define themselves religious and not spiritual, 34% spiritual and not religious, 21% neither spiritual nor religious (Mikkola, Niemelä, Petterson 2007:112-116). Lastly, the results of a research on 500 young adults in an area of Helsinki, somehow representing the Finnish urban young adults, are particularly interesting. In this research, a Likert scale has been used, ranging from 1 (fully disagreeing) to 5 (fully agreeing). In the scale of spiritual sensitivity, the expressions which obtained most consensus are: 1) I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset; 2) I rejoice in the beauty of life; 3) I want to advance peace with my own actions; 4) there are many things in life to wonder; 5) I am searching for goodness in life; 6) I want to help those people who are in need; 7) in midst of busy everyday life I find it important to contemplate; 8) I reflect on the meaning of life; 9) I try to listen to my body when I study and work; 10) narratives and symbols are important things for me in life; 11) I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually; 12) it is important to me to share a quiet moment with others (Tirri 2008:162). The majority of these experiences have to do with what is perceived while praying, and can therefore be included among the characteristics of praying. But there are other intriguing aspects in the Finnish research: spiritual sensitivity is important also for those who are not religious; church members are more oriented towards a spirituality practiced within a community; also those who do not belong to a church

appreciate mystic values; spiritual development is a lifelong process, that can be favored both within and outside a church. Nevertheless one could wonder whether spiritual sensitivity is also the fruit of a previous religious socialization or at least of a contextualization capable of diffusing religious contents also amongst those who do not belong to a religious confession.

THE SITUATION IN ITALY

In Italy Franco Garelli (Garelli, Guizzardi, Pace 2003:77-114) underlines the role of the religious sentiment between spiritual tension and religious expression, analyzing the results of a research on pluralism, which is statistically relevant at national level. The typology individuated is more articulated than the one which emerged in Finland. In fact, seven categories are identified as regards the “awareness of being a religious person and the perception of leading a spiritual life”: atheist/agnostic, that is neither religiosity nor spirituality (12,3%), ethnic/cultural religiosity, that is medium/high religiosity and scarce/no religiosity and medium/high spirituality (8,8%), weak belief, i.e. medium religiosity and medium spirituality (23%), religiosity higher than spirituality, that is high religiosity and medium spirituality (9,5%), and lastly faithfulness, that is high religiosity and high spirituality (18,8%).

Out of this scenario what emerges is that: “a) first of all the term religiosity raises in the population more consensus than the term spirituality, as the people who define themselves as *religious* are more numerous than those who think they are leading a spiritual life. [...] b) amongst the various types of religiosity which have been identified, the one

called *critical spirituality* is particularly interesting, both for the underlying cultural orientation and for the subjects that express it more. [...] c) on the two dimensions here found (religiosity and spirituality) those who express markedly congruent positions are around 50% of the population, while 26% of the cases shows an attitude of significant incongruence. [...] d) on the sidelines of what has been found, it can still be noted that almost the totality of the population recognizes the meaning of terms of religiosity and spirituality, and is able to define his/her degree of involvement in these two dimension” (Garelli, Guizzardi, Pace 2003:88-92, *passim*).

Moreover, it is noted that “the funeral rite is the one that must be re-valued the most, to point out that in our culture the moment of death is the one most closely associated to some form of religious meaning. In the collective imagination this extreme experience of “breaking away” must be accompanied by a religious ritual, whose sense undoubtedly changes according to the degree of religious convictions of those who require it. Death presents itself always as the human experience in front of which even many non-believers accept the religious ritual drawing somehow from a symbolic capital present in our culture to face questions difficult to answer from a secular perspective” (Garelli, Guizzardi, Pace 2003:100). This seems to confirm the value of the ritual and of the funeral lamentation, centered on the sense of death and thus of life itself.

On the other hand, the weight of the social-cultural context becomes apparent in the datum related to the contribution of Catholic religious teaching at school with the aim of teaching religious “literacy”, as the lectures on religion in schools “increase the level of knowledge of those

groups which have less opportunities to know the Catholic religion, in comparison with the level shown by groups who have access to many more sources of socialization oriented in that sense. Specific knowledge offered within the teaching of Catholicism “reaches” the youth in higher proportion than general religious knowledge. Teaching seems to be therefore really able to reduce in a certain measure the differences in the levels of knowledge that extra-school socialization determines” (Castegnaro 2009:219). Also this is a result of diffused religion, which produces in its turn a knock-on effect as regards culture in general and the attitudes and behavior inspired by it, including the attitudes towards praying.

It is not an insignificant fact that the research carried out at national level on religiosity in Italy (Cesareo, Cipriani, Garelli, Lanzetti, Rovati 1995:91) ascertained that “Italians between 18 and 74 years of age who declare to have prayed at least sometimes during the year are 83%. Also non believers pray, especially if they are in a “quest” mood (49%) and those who believe in a supreme being but do not belong to a specific religion are 44%. Even amongst those who define themselves as atheists there is a quota, although small (8%) that prays”. The motivations at the basis of prayer retrace point by point the classic typology that includes the category of mysticism (quest of a relation with the divinity: 44%), the category of impetration-peroration to obtain support in difficult moments (44%), the mixed one that sees the desire of a relationship with God and the request of his intervention, the one of thanking (about 25%) that contemplates both gratitude and repentance for some offence, praying along a tradition that is the result of having been taught so, praying as a personal quest, and lastly praying to ask for a grace (which is apparently the least common in Italy: 10%). The

conclusion is that prayer is “a modality of expression of one’s own religious feelings, still firmly rooted and therefore destined to persist in time, even when circumscribed to a minority in the population” (Cesareo, Cipriani, Garelli, Lanzetti, Rovati 1995:94). Such minority character does not yet present consolidated indicators for the future. Nevertheless it is also true that “the generations closest to us and the most educated people shun inclusive behaviors (pray because it is a duty or because this is the way taught to them) and tend to privilege more than the other interviewees the form of prayer that is more adequate to contemporary people: prayer aimed at shedding light within oneself” (Cesareo, Cipriani, Garelli, Lanzetti, Rovati 1995:96).

Later research keep the same line and confirm the typical modes of praying: as thanksgiving, as repentance; private-individual-separated/public-collective-united; orally-verbally expressed or silent-mental; as a laudation/peroration; trustful/imploring; spontaneous or based on the texts (from the Bible – for instance the Psalms 1, 77 e 118 – to the Lotus Sūtra – for instance chapter XXV that is an impetration to free oneself from all negativity).

Despite this wide range of possibilities it is by no means certain that there will be awareness in the interviewees. For instance in the archdiocese of Urbino prayer takes the sixth place in the actions to be privileged by a believer: only 11% of the interviewees prefer it (Parma 2004:121). Yet when we look at the question on the frequency of prayer (Parma 2004:160), it emerges that 10,4% pray every day, 31,3% about once a day, 15% sometimes during week, 10% sometimes during the month, 11,7% sometimes during the year and 21,6% never prays. And it is rightly

observed, as a premise, that “the importance of analyzing prayer used outside the religious rites derives from the fact that such behavior is present in all religions and it often concerns also those who declare to be non-believers” (Parma 2004:160). (But it must be stressed out that “most of the interviewees, when they pray, use the traditional praying formulae transmitted through the process of religious socialization and heard attending various rites and cults” (Parma 2004:163-164). In conclusion, this falls, once more, within the canon of diffused religion and thus in diffused prayer. Also amongst young people the influence of previous religious socialization remains: if 30% never pray, 26% pray once or several times a day, 16,2% once or several times a week, and 13,4% some times in a month (Parma 2004:303). “The procedures of praying are related mostly to reciting known formulae (59,2%), keeping silent, listening and contemplating (25%), but also reflecting on one’s own life and on what happens around us (50%). Young people, in comparison with the total, privilege personal prayer and inner searching” (Parma 2004:304).

Also in the area of Chieti and Vasto, the youth present considerable rates: 27,56% pray often, 41,99% sometimes, 20,21% rarely and 9,97% never prays (Di Francesco 2008:59). But “they do not seem to be very inclined to use ritualized and traditional modalities, except for those, a far from negligible number, anyway, that can be identified as the nucleus of the “fervent”” (Di Francesco 2008:61). The young people interviewed prefer “communication, contact with God” (27,75%), “dialogue either with God, or with the Saints, or with the dead ones” (14%), “reflection or personal meditation” (12,25%), “closeness to God” (11,5%). It must be noted, amongst these data (Di Francesco 2008:152), the presence of the dead ones

as addressees of prayer, although the question that was posed including also God and the Saints does not allow to discern what is the real importance of the part related to the dead ones in the answer. Lastly, the way of praying must be taken into consideration: 29,66% use their own words, 23,36% phrases or formulae of traditional prayers, 19,95% reflect on their own lives, 13,39% has an inner dialogue with God (Di Francesco 2008:153).

In an inquiry carried out in southern Latium (Meglio 2010:104), the youth say they recur to faith in difficult moments, in varying measure: always 29,3%, often 28,7%, sometimes 32,2%, never 9,8%. There is no explicit reference to prayer, but such element seems to be implicit, also because the stratification of the intensity of the behavior corresponds in general to what has already emerged in relation to prayer amongst the youth.

In the diocese of Oristano in Sardinia (Cipriani, Lanzetti 2010) personal prayer occupies a relevant position as its frequency is “often (everyday or almost everyday)” for 45,4%, “sometimes” for 34,4% of the interviewees and “never” for 20,2% (with a particular accent in the case of male subjects). The average rates registered in Italy in 2009 in a research with a national sample, were slightly different (respectively 50,8%, 31,9% and 17,3), and therefore the population of Oristano appears in some percentage less “religious” than the Italian. As regards the motivations, however, religious feeling is higher: 47% pray to feel closer to God, and the same percentage to obtain support in difficult times, 31% are moved by the desire to thank and praise God, and 23% to repent and to perform an act of penitence. The weight of the teaching received touches just the 11% and that of praying as a duty 14%, while the search for clarity within oneself reaches 18%. The motivation related to asking for a grace are as low as

10%. In conclusion, instrumental prayer pertains to a minimum quota of the population but is not destined to disappear, given that it endures amongst the youth, although contained within the same percentage limits that has been possible to register through the entire research sample.

Provokingly, Introvigne and Zoccatelli (2010) wonder, at the end of a sociological study on the Sicilian diocese of Piazza Armerina, whether mass is ended, whether, in fact, the most emblematic Catholic religious practice for festive days is not destined to decrease in importance or even disappear. A qualifying element in the attempt by Introvigne and Zoccatelli is the verification of the difference that exists between the declarations of practice and the real practice, that is the question of over-reporting. In this specific case, the participation to the festive cult (Catholic or other) regularly (once or more times a week) according to the answers in the interviews reaches 33,6%, yet the control of the real number of presences in places of worship lowers the rate to 18,5%. The authors, however, observe that “if the inquiries on over-reporting carried out during the years in the United States in Poland and in Italy, can “demonstrate” something, it is precisely that declared practice is in fact “declared”: it constitutes the measure of an identity and also an identification, but it does not measure facts and behavior” (Introvigne, Zoccatelli 2010:86). Thus, neither percentages such as 33,6% nor 18,5% should be taken as evidences, as they are both partial and do not adequately represent the entire behavioral set (and, not to be neglected, vocational). Also in that research there is no explicit reference to the phenomenology of prayer, but it can be inferred that data on Sunday practice and methodological reflections on over-

reporting are applicable also to the sociological framework related to the frequency of praying in Central Sicily (Cipriani 1992) and elsewhere. We must then proceed cautiously also in regard of the data gathered in international research on the values carried out in Italy (Gubert 1992:595; Gubert, Pollini 2000:521). Salvatore Abbruzzese, denying the eclipse of the transcendent, recalls that “in the study carried out in 1999, 53% of the Italian interviewees has declared praying outside religious ceremonies and to do it more than once a week” (Abbruzzese 2010:114), indicating “everyday” (37,4%) or “more than once a week” (16,5%), against alternatives that proposed “once a week” (7,3%), “at least once a month” (5,7%), “many times a year” (5%), “seldom” (14%), “never” (12,7%), “do not know” and “does not answer” (1,5%). Out of the whole of the answers to the question (which has remained unchanged since 1990) “How frequently do you pray God, outside religious ceremonies?” it emerged that around three quarters of the Italian population prayed, although with rather diversified rhythms.

In the *European Values Survey* of 1981 the question on prayer was not asked. In 1990 the answer “prays often” had registered 33,5%, while in 1999 the answer “prays every day” has reached 37,4%. Therefore it has been very useful in 1999 to change the options and make them clearer than the rather generic ones that were used in 1990 (“often”, 33,5%; “sometimes”, 32%; “almost never”, 9%; “only in moments of crisis”, 8,1%; “never”, 16,8%; “do not know” (0,6%); “does not answer”, 0%). The answer “never” is more easily comparable because it is identical in the two inquiries of the *European Values Survey* of 1990 and 1999: at the beginning it was at the level of 16,8% and then 12,7%. From the latter perspective,

Italy (together with Portugal) seems to reflect the opposite trend, as in other European countries (above all in: France, 54,7%; Holland, 49,5%; Belgium, 37,9%; Germany, 27,8%; Spain, 25,3%) the rate of those do not pray at all appears to have increased, thus confirming the secularizing trend (Abbruzzese 2010:130-131).

Nonetheless, the centrality of prayer in religions remains a constant feature, from Hebraism to Christianity, from Buddhism to Islam, from Hinduism to Shintoism and so on. Also the migratory fluxes appeal to the patrimony of the cultural capital built by prayers, so much that they use that term in their own denominations themselves, as in the case of *Bethel Prayer Ministry International*, which is active also in Italy (Tellia 2010:99-101).

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS.

Even more than quantitative data one could expect qualitative results to provide corroboration on the nexus between diffused religion and diffusion of prayer. A convincing contribution can be found in a recent qualitative study on the spirituality of the youth (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010). The chapter entitled “In front of death and pain” must be stressed as strategic (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:192-194), as it shows that “the event of death plays still today its anthropological role of connecting worlds, obliging those who experience this tragic event to wonder what goes beyond life, and pushing many to refer to God in the attempt of formulating a plausible answer. This can happen to those who thought they had cut all bridges with religion”

(Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:192). And precisely “through the practice of prayer one can establish a connection with the radically Other: feel his/her hug or rejection; or express one’s own doubts or convictions on the existence or non-existence of something that goes beyond the human; it is possible to refer to one’s belonging to one’s own church or religious/ecclesial group with the possibility of diversifying forms and roles of praying; and in conclusion, through prayer it is also possible to “exercise” one’s own knowledge of the sacred texts. Prayer represents thus a point of potential convergence of the different dimensions of religiosity: practice, experience, belief, belonging and also knowledge” (Castegnaro, Chiese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:385). There are then various examples taken from the documents gathered during the qualitative research on 72 young people from Vicenza, with the technique of the focus group. Emblematically an interviewee re-proposed explicitly the ultra-terrestrial dimension as a *locus* of interlocution: she used to address her dead grandfather because it was easier for her, “recuperating and going beyond a long tradition transversal to religions” (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:395). And obviously God and the Saints are not missing as interlocutors: the series of abstracts from the declarations of the young people is long and articulated and proves the social character of prayer, “between obligation and personalization”, although it is done in private and intimately (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:385-418).

The overall view that emerges from the research in Vicenza is a testimony of the level of incidence of prayer in the mental universe of the youth: prayer is at the twenty-eighth place (followed by the Gospel, values, death

and fear) in a list of “*full words* of medium frequency” which starts with “God” and ends with “choices” (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:611) and in its thematic area (seventh as regards frequency, after “sacred figures”, “relatives”, “mass”, hereafter”, “clergy”, “church”) (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:614) there are “act of contrition, Ave Maria, Credo, Our Father, Praises, praying, community prayer, praising prayer, thanksgiving prayer, free praying, morning prayer, evening prayer, psaltery, vespers and so on” (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:612). In conclusion, the analysis of the convergences puts prayer in relations above all with the sacred figures, the Word and the sacraments, and, on the social level, with the movements (Castegnaro, Chilese, Dal Piaz, De Sandre, Doppio 2010:615).

CONCLUSIONS

The multi-millenary “karstic system” that has allowed the tradition of praying to reach us today, has probably been originated in conjunction with primordial existential crises, with the experience of other people’s death and then with the fear and the risk of one’s own death.

The presence of funeral lamentations aimed at overcoming the “crisis of presence” that starts at the moment of somebody’s death has presumably prompted mechanisms of narration that have later become also mechanisms of more mature reflection on the meaning of life and therefore of death.

This is the moment in which the problem of a presence other than human arises. Such an otherness has given way to an attempt of dialogue, in the form of request for help, that has later become both praise and

thanksgiving, but also much more: request for an extraordinary intervention (the grace of miracle that implies a thanksgiving for the favor received), invocation, repentance, public action, ceremonial action, expression of trust, private dialogue, mental prayer, sacred text and much more, in original forms, diversified according the various religions, but converging in the functions exercised in the cultural domain.

The diffusion of prayer is essentially the fruit of the activity of socialization carried out by religious confessions with their educational and legitimating structures, that perpetuate forms and contents of praying, leaving space also for innovation. Far from eroding the existing patrimony, they re-motivate and re-adapt the proposals, for the benefit of a diffused religion that draws its strength from the contribution of whole generations who have preserved the testimonies in the course of time.

It is not out of place to try to imagine that even the resistance by the youth to use the pre-existing cultural capital reflects – in the long term – a need to preserve which cannot be guaranteed solely by the already operating structures. After all, even if we leave consolidated formulae aside, together with already accessible solutions, a religious and spiritual afflatus seems to keep that “habit of the heart” alive, once again – as Rousseau and Bellah would say (1985) -, a habit which refuses to die because it is connected to death itself, with which it continuously measures itself, through the screen/shield of the sacred figure that serves as a helpful interlocutor, even though it is considered as artificial.

In what measure all this can be confirmed even in the future is difficult to predict, but given its ancient and solid roots its disappearance will not be sudden. If this were the case in fact, it would probably mean that the

problem of death has already been solved, and that the path towards a never-ending life has already been found.

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