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Socialization and Diffused Religion

Introduction

Everyone who enters this world already finds myriad religious options, established over time within different territorial and cultural contexts, awaiting him. This pre-existence is, to a large extent, also their strength, consisting as it does in a heritage that is transmitted from one generation to another almost without a break. People and organizations, beliefs and rites, values and symbols, traditions and acquisitions are able to resist the most drastic changes and adapt to the less important ones. Thanks to this, in the course of history, in the various societies of the north as well as of the south, the east and the west, the salient features of religions are consolidated and remain, as a whole, a more or less important point of reference for billions of individuals or also for more restricted groups of people.

The Value of Inheritance

The transmission of ideals, norms and values (Joas [2000](#)) from one generation to another within the same society assumes the character of a hereditary process which does not take place with the death of predecessors but

comes about much earlier in the course of years and decades, very slowly, minute by minute, step by step, without showy and/or improvident leaps. In metaphorical terms, it might be said to be a gradual distillation that has taken place over a considerable period of time and the decantation of which is as gentle and almost imperceptible as dripping water which will eventually carve out even the hardest rock. This transition, moreover, has a typical connotation in that it is global (Margotti 2012), not fragmented and, at least tendentially, systemic in its organic unity and completeness. Parents pass on to their children what they, in turn, have been taught by those who are the grandparents of those children and the generators of contemporary educators and inculcators of culture.

A line of descent does not regard one's DNA alone, but something more directly verifiable, even when it comes, for example, to choosing clothes for one's children who, especially during their early lives, are not only literally dressed by adults but also resemble adults in their attire in almost every detail: how many daughters are dressed like their mothers and how many sons imitate their fathers? This co-formation which leads to conformation and homogeneity in clothing and mental habits, in body language and gestures and in verbal expressions and tone of voice does not bracket religion but, on the contrary, is often its keystone: the beliefs and religious practices of adults influence those of their children almost by force of inertia.

At first, the impact of the cultural inheritance handed down by adults is usually gentle, almost sinuous, but as young people advance in age, so too does their critical spirit which questions the meaning of everything. Subsequently, there may also be a noted detachment from the attitudinal and behavioural models acquired but, nonetheless, a trace of them persists like a Karstic process, unexpressed and yet not exhausted. The spillover of inherited values may take place at a later stage in the least foreseeable or most problematic occasions which call into play the value of life and the meaning of existence.

It is unlikely that a legacy of values may occur in partial or segmented form. In short, a set of values does not break up into myriad events or interventions but has its own basic compactness. Hence, each value is not a "bequest" in itself, limited to its specific content but rather a sort of more consistent baggage capable of containing multiple principles,

articulate guiding ideas and specifically targeted aims. It is precisely the interconnection between values that would seem to be an effective solution in that it is able to direct in a tendentially uniform way the actions of the social individual.

Obviously, with the passing of time, new possibilities of choice and action occur whereby during the course of his life, the individual puts aside certain elements and attributes importance to others. Rarely does a received inheritance remain identical and not undergo decrements or increments. What is more, an inheritance is not always left in its entirety with its every detail intact but tends, within a given cultural context, to reproduce the same propensities of the past, the same traditions of an earlier age and, basically, the same essential values. Its global compactness is, likewise, a guarantee of its greater holding power compared to other more fragmentary operations.

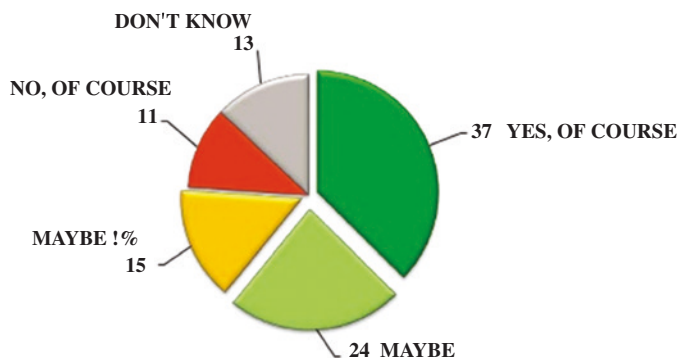
In inheritance, succession in does not simply imply the creation of inspiring principles and behavioural patterns but also the transmission of the means by which to exercise the role of culture-education-training inculcator. Therefore, passing the baton in a hypothetical relay race of life marks both entrusting a set of values and attributing a role of responsibility that concerns the future of succeeding generations. In the multi-century sequence of a cultural inheritance which passes from hand to hand, there is, in fact, an implicit duty rather than the right to ensure the continuity of a common reference basis used to cover the need for identification and solidarity—in this respect Durkheim (1912) hit the mark.

If we think about it, each inheritance of values carries with it aspects and styles from the past from which it derives its validity. But with every generational change, it is possible to note an avalanche effect that gathers whatever meets in its path and transports a much more conspicuous and varied inheritance than that with which it started out, down to the plain. Think, for example, of the house-museums (Besana 2007) of the many families who have gathered together heirlooms and memorabilia of their lineage and of their adherence to a religious faith (photos of ancestors, works of art, sacred artefacts); these are all messages that communicate the existence of a cultural capital that is precious and versatile and worthy of being preserved not only for future generations but, above all, for future inculcators of culture: educators.

Culture, Socialization and Education

Religious content also possesses the characteristic of an underlying inheritance as yet to be received by those who have the right and the means of accessing it. This happens, amongst other things, in the case of a phenomenon that in the past sociologists of religion considered an index of low religiosity: delays in baptisms (Burgalassi 1956) within the Catholic environment especially in areas where there is a high level of atheism, or more generally, of religious indifference. Nowadays, there are many reasons for the fact that baptism is not carried out immediately after the birth of a child and these reasons are more conspicuous than they were in the past: differences in the religious background of the parents, a more developed spirit of criticism, less attachment to tradition, a weakened hold of society on behaviour and a more problematic attitude regarding a religious choice which is considered premature and something of which the child directly involved is unaware. The following figure illustrates the current situation.

Non-Catholics that have baptized or will baptize their children, in Italy, 2014%



Meanwhile, however, the postponement of baptism weakens the influence of the inheritance accumulated in the past and, insofar as it represents a capital that has not been invested, it tends to lose value and

efficacy. Furthermore, this happens during the phase of the inculcation of culture in which the bases are laid for the construction of the personality and for the social construction of reality itself, in other words for the vision of the world that the individual in society will have when he reaches the age of reason, according to the classical perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966).

The succession of operations in the inculcation of culture possesses no continuous solution, not even in the case of those parents—the presumed educators—who deliberately and explicitly abandon their role/task of transmitting a cultural inheritance which may or may not include religion. Indeed, even in the case of a decided refusal to transmit ideas, an ideological option—in the neutral sense of the term—, a refusal, it may be argued that there is a kind of inculcation of culture insofar as the very absence of a message is, in itself, a kind of communication that signals the non-relevance of certain ideas held by others and proposes, instead, alternatives that are not devoid of a content that is, broadly speaking, ideological or that expresses value judgments. In other words, there is always a content that is emitted so that it reaches the person to whom it is directed or rather the infant, the child, the adolescent and the young adult.

As regards the experience of death which even young people have to face, some explanation must be given: either death may be seen as the final act in a person's life, the termination of a personal journey that has no possibility of continuing or it may be seen in metaphysical terms as a continuation of life according to religious precepts. To this regard, it is worthwhile considering the words of the poet Eugenio Montale who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1975: “in practice as part of my inheritance I am a Christian and I cannot refute the idea that some part of us can and indeed must endure”.

Nor, in the field of sociology, should the impact of inter-cultural (Surhone et al. 2010) relationships—education—formation be forgotten since it represents the major inheritance of a religion with all its practising faithful or its occasional practitioners who say that they do not belong to any religion (Davie 1994).

The cultural inheritance that we may transmit to our children is itself subject to interaction, in that the kind of education carried out by

adults is subject to the personality of the young person and his capacity for reacting to and re-examining the values he has received. In any case, we cannot ignore the fact that familiarity with the domestic relationships experienced, above all, during the early years of life, in the transmission of values means that a young person becomes part of them right from the beginning and almost always identifies with them.

The Variables of Socialization

The future of an individual, roughly until the age of 15 or 16, depends on his social and educational formation. It is during these years that the bases of the agency required by a person to become part of a society will be laid. Obviously, the socializing work of parents with regard to their offspring is strategically important. But other people involved are also important: teachers and other people operating in the field of education (whether religious or not), friends and groups of friends, peer groups, variously accredited educators—such as cultural entertainers, lay and religious figures, group leaders, etc. (Cipriani and Costa [2015](#)).

All these people, both working together and separately, prepare the ground for the course that the adolescent will then have to pursue alone.

In different cases, during this phase the diffusion of a religion, which is prevalent within a given context wide or restricted as it may be, takes place. Hence, the diffused religion, which originates in the family of origin (the biological family) and proceeds through the subsequent generations puts down roots. From one generation to the next, the religious creed is passed on almost uninterruptedly except for personal modifications on the part of one or other of the parents or educators.

Without this initial phase in the transmission of religious content, it is unlikely that those specialised in catechizing and religious formation may enter the scene. The seeds of the first religious socialization bear immediate fruit with the initiation of young people and their participation in public religious life. Later on, one may note a further investigation of the parameters of reference of the religion or even a partial withdrawal from it with attitudes that are more or less accentuated. However, it will be at a much later stage that the values diffused within

the family and external environment will begin to operate, representing a discrimination between one action and another, between one choice and an alternative one and between a virtuous and a non-virtuous act.

Modern diffused religion is not very different from that of the past. Indeed it is precisely its persistence that gives it its peculiar, almost structural, characteristic which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) would have understood as a solid core not easily touched by time but subject, nevertheless, to variations that may not be easily perceived. If anything changes, it does so at a secondary level regarding details rather than substance. Diffused religion is the result of a vast process of religious socialization that continues to pervade cultural reality and not only that.

The pervasive character of religion remains because it arises from the religion itself and is heavily imbued with religious connotations. Even atheism, for example within a Catholic country, is not always necessarily an anti-Catholic phenomenon, just as it is not anti-religious in other contexts in which a religion is dominant and has become diffused as in the case of Islam or Hinduism or of Shinto and Buddhism. It is also true that a person who adheres to a diffused religion is usually not very devout and pays more attention to teachings that are directly linked to immediate practical consequences rather than to those of a general kind of orientation.

A separate discussion would need to be undertaken in the case of reference values as a whole or that of the Protestant ethic which, broadly speaking, has not got the characteristics of universality or, in any case, of dominance that Catholicism has. On the other hand, the diffused values that are more or less linked to Protestantism do not always pertain to a strong commitment in the field of work. Indeed the opposite would seem to be true. For this reason, the Weberian Protestant work ethic is not the ideal matrix for capitalism which, in fact, expands and takes root in territorial contexts that are far removed from Protestantism as the phenomenon of the *nouveaux riches* in ex-Soviet countries clearly shows.

Furthermore, references to religion found in the speeches of politicians—whether they be American or Iranian, Russian or Israeli, English or Italian—are confirmation of the existence of a specific characteristic, that is at once emotive and persuasive, of diffused religion, the force of which is certainly not lost on those who are looking for levers by means

of which to increase their political–electoral consensus. It should be pointed out, however, that there is no direct link, for instance, between the civil (not civic) religion of the United States and the diffused religion of Italy even in metaphorical terms.

What Robert Bellah (1970) says, on the basis of concepts such as “exodus”, “chosen people”, “promised land”, “New Jerusalem”, “sacrificial death” and “resurrection”, when referring to a presumed national and cultural inheritance of the American people, cannot be applied elsewhere and even less to Italy, Europe or other countries where historical events are chronologically very different and are transmitted, from generation to generation, without any reference to an exodus or to divine predilection for a nation or to a palingenesis after the destruction of the “Old Jerusalem” or after choosing the supreme sacrifice in hopes of a rebirth and renewal. These are US scenarios extraneous to the European cultural heritage or which, at least, are not prevalent. This means that, in the long run, we must recognize that there are many ways of inculcating culture or of transmitting values from one generation to another and, therefore, of considering a religious inheritance that was already diffused in the past, still operative in the present and destined, one way or another, to continue in the future.

The Content of Religions

It is possible to conduct the content of religion back to the meaning of existence and to the decisive guiding influence of values over action. In short, we may consider as religious, actions that do not normally belong to any historically recognized religion. However, in order to avoid unjustifiable diversions, we should emphasize the fact that the presence of values is so relevant as to assume a pre-eminent position concerning ways of thinking and acting. To this regard, it is appropriate to draw a line between other ways of thinking, as suggested by authors like Thomas Luckmann (1967) for example. But we are not interested in pinpointing modern religious themes or functional religious substitutes but ways of seeing reality (and its subsequent consequences) that have the power of permitting society to opt for all possible solutions,

according to basic guidelines constituting regarding individuals and societies. This non-religious outlook allows us to investigate commonly acknowledged historical and innovative experiences.

Hence, we face the problem of the distinction between religions and non-religions (in the latter category, Buddhism has often paid the price, in that it was recognized as a philosophy rather than as a real religion, sociologically speaking). And so, we come to a different proposal that does not exclude a priori any cult that can present even the semblance of a religious context. Often, in the past, there prevailed, even among the most advanced sociologists, the idea of a sort of official definition of religion that was taken for granted insofar as it entered into the historically legitimate canons of Churches, sects, movements, communities or any other self-proclaimed religious group.

Moreover it does not seem indispensable to establish beforehand what a religion should be. We might start from a simple “theoretical sensitivity” towards religious modalities and then go on to gather and analyse data to which we might finally apply certain “sensitizing concepts” deriving from the data themselves. In short, an approach in the manner of the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967), re-elaborated and modified, might turn out to be very useful when seeking to free oneself from the trammels of a predefined, preordained and pre-oriented sociology of religion. It is not a question of having trust in a generic cognizance of the results of our research but rather in an avoidance of preconceived and unfounded labels or, in other words, in ingenuous and ill-informed stances.

Deep down, sociology did not emerge as a comfort zone for institutions nor did the sociology of religion, in particular, work in its own interest keeping, as it were, a paid-up book of accounts in Churches and religious congregations and movements. Sociology continues to aim towards critical analysis and is not, therefore, slave to the defence of the *status quo*. Indeed, the critical role of sociology is one that works at 360° in that it casts light on the past and the present. Sociological research is, perforce, at the service of science, not in itself, but as a correct methodological approach set on a procedural and disenchanted plain as far as facile, institutional sirens are concerned. Especially in a field such as the religious one, a professional ethical code is required to do its best

without jumping onto the bandwagon of some temporary winner or the triumphal chariot of a powerful victor who goes beyond his religious domain in order to conquer other territories.

In any case, the most effective action on the part of religions and Churches has already taken place, both in the past and in the present, by creating and favouring conditions that lead to the adhesion of millions of people to a religion. The number of those who practice their faith is, generally, much lower than the number of believers in or sympathizers of that religion. This, however, does not mean that the influence of a particular religion loses in vigour in correspondence to the numerical difference between its faithful and its more or less convinced supporters.

The best working solution for Churches and religious groups is to intervene at the early stages and, generally, within the first 15 years of life—in other words, at the dawn of people's development when many of their choices will be made.

On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that diffused religion can also be easily subjected to exploitation since calls to religious values always exert a certain appeal. Rather than to biblical terms or to the contents of other sacred texts, politicians make use of simple, popular references usually linked to well-known personages within the context of the diffused religion of their region: Padre Pio or Mother Teresa or a pope, a Madonna known as the protector of a certain place, a saint considered a miracle worker, a holy man or a guru, an ayatollah or a prophet, a charismatic leader or a marabout, a rabbi or an imam, a shaman or a bonze.

In any case, it is not easy to distinguish between diffused religion and the religion of values: the former is included in the latter which, in turn, embraces a broader section of any population characterized by different levels of belief. In effect, diffused religion as such concerns a category of people who do not regard religion as their *raison d'être* but who, nonetheless, fall back on the values of religion when they have to make important decisions requiring more ethically relevant choices.

Conversely, the religion of values concerns a wider spectrum of attitudes and behaviours that may be more or less superficial with respect to the so-called official model of the religion to which one belongs and/or refers to. Hence, in the religion of values, we may find orthodox

forms of religion as well as forms that are more critical, if not actually opposed to the credo and official rites of that religion. But the widespread effect of the religion as a whole does not exhaust itself within its own ambit. It also manages to influence areas of thought and action which lie outside its more typical sphere of influence and, indeed, distances itself from them. Here, we are talking about those contexts where it is possible to trace a moral dimension which, although not in line with that of the pre-eminent religion, still preserves a trace of it—at least as a universal ethical afflatus which is not altogether extraneous from some previous impact with religious values whether they be the result of biographical factors linked to the family of origin or to the education received or to the kind of socialization experienced.

In the end, social and political contingencies and, above all, electoral results too, cannot be explained in terms of confessional support or reference to religious issues: many more complex factors are at play that go beyond official and/or private religious pronouncements.

The Resilience of Religious Belief

The capacity for resilience or, in other words, resistance to crises, is usually greater in religions with the largest number of followers, but careful management of periods of difficulty also allows so-called minor (quantitatively speaking) religious groups to rise above moments of difficulty, anguish and suffering. Especially in religions that are limited to a specific locality, without a worldwide diffusion, progress can be rather unpredictable: the number of their adepts might remain the same for quite a long time only to register a sudden and numerically exponential growth that corresponds to an extraordinary event or to the influence of a particular leader and the movement created by him. In the case of the so-called new religions, a court case, amplified, perhaps, by the mass media, can generate suspicion and interrupt the flow of even conspicuous numbers of adhesions.

On the other hand, a positive outcome of civil and penal actions with regard to religious expression may rekindle a spirit of proselytism and attract new members who are no longer inclined to harbour doubts

about the trustworthiness of a religious choice. In a long-range historical scenario, religions that were once prevalent in a given context were subsequently reduced to entities that were hardly ascertainable sociologically. In other cases, unforeseeable developments led to an increase in influence capacity and diffusion. Generally speaking, it is not possible to single out the reasons for this without investigating them one by one.

The fact remains that, according to the increase in religious allegiance, we might almost think of a system of communicating vases whereby an increase in one religion seems to correspond to a decrease in another, as though the total quantity of religiously oriented subjects does not change significantly but is variously distributed between religions. We should not underestimate the fact (one that is quite constant regardless of latitude and longitude) according to which some form of religion is, in any case, to be found almost everywhere. This does not mean supporting the inevitability of religious faith but simply to point out a recurrent sociological element which has not, however, many possibilities of being compared with other aspects of social life that are not so widespread.

However, the presumed universality of religion, or, in other words, the idea that it is a byword in all societies, needs to be debunked. By now we know that there exist populations devoid of common religious connotations but, not for that reason, should they be classified as people who have no real religious feeling. Once we have raised these questions, we must ask ourselves what makes a religion what it is and what its sociological characteristics are. It should be made clear that any reference to transcendence or the supernatural, to the existence of something before birth or after death, is not, necessarily, to be qualified, sociologically, as a religious phenomenon.

There is also no law saying that a religion needs to observe beliefs and rites: it can observe the former and/or not the latter or vice versa. If it is also ascertainable that recourse to a divinity, to a being other than human, is a characteristic that may be traced in the so-called universal religions, it is not, nonetheless, outside the bounds of thought to talk about a god, in order to define as religious a habit or an attitude. In effect, there may well be attitudes and actions that have a religious content without the need to recognize the existence of a superior being to

whom we owe devotion, cultural homage, recognition of his superiority and all that the latter entails.

Conclusion

Starting off from a theoretical proposition which may be summed up as “religion diffused by means of values”, it is then possible to go on to an empirical procedure aimed at building up a further, basically medium-range theory or one with a reduced potentiality of implementation in relation, essentially, to the data obtained in the course of research. With regard to this, we can speak of a new form of triangulation between quantitative and/or qualitative methodological instruments, but first and foremost, between the basic theory and the research theory (in other words one based on data, the *Grounded Theory*, in fact).

This way, a double scientific guarantee would be provided, derived from a dual, converging theorization both of the basic theory and the research theory and also from a triangulation of methods that is usually a harbinger of a more in-depth and more convincing theory and one that is better supported by research results than is generally the case.

By following a similar pathway, the idea of a “religion diffused by means of values” would acquire an adequate overall profile enriched by a wide-ranging examination without preclusions of any kind.

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