

Out of Order: Spirituality and System of Belief

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The notion of spirituality in the sociology of religion is examined, starting with the suggestion that spirituality should be conceived in dialectic relation with societal systems of belief. If the sacred is that which exceeds the meaning normally attributed by systems of belief to the experience of the undefined, spirituality may be understood as the tendency to experience the sacred in ways outside conventional systems of belief, or “out of order”. Sociological interpretations of historical gnosticism confirm the utility of the label ‘spirituality’ to classify the ‘multiple choice’ enjoyed by those seeking a meaning for their lives.

If the notion of spirituality is to be used validly in the sociology of religion, at least three conditions must be satisfied:

- (a) it should not be a residual category;
- (b) it should be a relatively free-standing concept;
- (c) it should derive from the basic relationship between a system of belief and its environment, which is, by definition, more varied, complex and broader than the system itself.

In other words, for the category of spirituality to be valid, it must be not only conceptually autonomous but also *in dialectic relation* with a system of belief (or with various systems of belief) which has its own history and hegemony in society.

What in the language of social sciences in the West is conventionally termed *religion* is in fact only the name we give to differentiated, complex systems of belief concerned with the sacred. Systems of belief are constantly defining the confines of the sacred, and it is through this work that they accumulate specialized knowledge and various forms of power (ranging from control of the individual’s conscience to the direct or indirect management of political power).

The systems tend to treat the sacred as an object, thus depriving the individual of the power of direct experience or reducing the potentiality of meaning concealed within the sacred itself. When reduced to an object, the sacred becomes *order* (Durkheim 1922) of the heart and of the mind, of the soul and of the body, i.e. social order. Indeed, the sacred may be seen as a formula by means of which we can explain what happens between the system of belief, on one hand, and the world of believing, on the other (Beyer 1998). The former is dominated by efforts to reduce multiplicity. The latter is the realm of multiple variability of meanings.

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The system of belief and the power of communication

The meaning concealed within the sacred thus becomes normalized as part of a system. The excess meaning that the sacred possesses, which is available to the free experience of individuals, is brought within the functional logic of the system of belief, controlled by its knowledge and its power. The sacred becomes an object of the system's communication, part of its communicative power. What we might call the violence of the sacred (Bourdieu 1971) – i.e. the force of disorder – is thus tamed and transferred within a system which transforms it into a symbolic resource to strengthen the feeling of solidarity in a given group (Girard 1972).

A system of (religious) belief confines the meaning of the sacred within certain well-defined areas (the various liturgies) and times (the various redemption calendars). Thus, the liturgies become rituals of interaction and communication that help to fix the meaning that should be attributed to any given object of faith in the individual's memory, gestures and cultural behaviour. In their turn, the various conceptions of redemption (e.g. eschatological, rebirth and annulment) attempt to dominate time by indicating the direction the individual should take in order to be saved, or rather to *feel* he is saved.

Generally speaking, religions establish an order of the heart, working on people's noble sentiments and profound emotions. By so doing, religions tend to absorb the ocean of meanings that an individual may attribute to what we call the sphere of the sacred, the undefined, that which we imagine beyond the limited confines of human experience.

In theory, the sacred is a broad semantic field in which we can creatively produce infinite meanings pertaining to human existence and relations between the realm of immediate survival and usefulness, on the one hand, and what we imagine is beyond immediate use, on the other (Schütz & Luckmann 1973, 1989; Luckmann 1996).

The problem of communication in the religious sphere stems from meaning, and its surplus of polysemic possibilities. When dealing with this topic, we need to bear in mind that, for systems of religious belief, the believers' subjective behaviour has to be distinguished from the functioning of the system *per se*, which – to the observer's eye – may seem to leave the people out of consideration.

Systems of religious belief are variants of social systems, just some of the numerous possible systems in more or less complex societies. The social dimension of such systems (including those on a religious basis) consists in their being enacted (as understood by Weber and Parsons) within a system through communication. Weber had seen social behaviour as a type of action oriented towards calculation or value (the intentional or subjective dimensions of the action being capable of producing "sociology"). Parsons, dissatisfied with the point of arrival of Weber's theory, went so far as to say that the action *is* the system, i.e. that social action is only possible within socially predefined norms (the role, for instance, and the hierarchy of the

reward in terms of status); Luhmann instead claims that the system is founded not so much on the individual's actions, but on communication.

In fact, communication is a complexity-reducing process, the success of which relies on actions, or rather it needs to be dismantled and rearranged into actions (Luhmann 1990: 253). It is not the actions that build the social systems, but vice versa; in order to function, the latter need to be dismantled into actions. When we speak here of communication, we are not really talking about the transfer of information from a broadcaster to a receiver, but about a *meaning selection process*. Communicating means choosing a meaning from among several possible meanings, processing this meaning and using it in a symbolic transaction with a potential other party, who does not merely receive it, but may also conduct a similar selection process on its possible meaning.

Communication relies on the fragile balance of this dual contingency: what is a clear, unequivocal choice for *ego* may well not be so for *alter*, who may suggest their own choice of meaning. With a given repertoire of possible options (i.e. of possible meanings), I select something that is circulated in the form of a discourse. So communication is seen not as an action, a discourse, the act of enunciating and awaiting a response, but as a unit consisting simultaneously of an item of information and the act of communicating and understanding it (or the expectation that what is communicated will be accepted, since it may also be refused).

As Luhmann explains (ibid: 262), when we read that tobacco, alcohol, butter, frozen meat and so on are bad for our health, we are changed (whether we believe it or not), we become people who should have known better. Once we have received the information, we may believe it or not. The communication changes our attitude, however, obliging us to decide whether or not to believe what we have been told. The new status that we acquire as a result did not exist before – and *did not exist without the communication*. Acceptance or rejection (believing or disbelieving) are consequent actions that are not part of the structure of communication, since this already demands making a selection from among some (and not other) possible meanings. Communication creates the social framework in which actions (of acceptance or rejection) may or may not take place.

Because of its very selectivity, communication must be able to cope with coordinating the reciprocal choices made within a social system as a whole. Politics, economics, science, law, and other 'parts' of a social system each process their own internal communication strategies: the problem that each of them faces is how to coordinate their choices with those made by the other structural elements of the system.

If we apply the above considerations to religions, we can say that a system of belief functions through communication, since agreement or disagreement with the content of truth (the meaning attributable to a given set of propositions of faith) depends less on the inclinations of individuals and more on the ability of a system to choose 'characteristic signs' for each case, i.e. beliefs that can be shared by the largest

possible number of people (allowing for the fact that not everyone will share them), enabling them to be seen socially as *ecclesia*, as a means of symbolic generalization. Nowadays, we conventionally speak of Muslims, Catholics, Buddhists, and so on, though we are well aware from our empirical investigations that societies with a Catholic majority cater for many different ways of being Catholic, just as – in the case of Islam – there are many different ways of relating to the Muslim faith, and so on. Pluralism in behaviour (in actions) is brought down in this case to a means of symbolic generalization – Catholicism ‘regardless’, or Islam ‘regardless’ – that conveys something rather different from what individual believers might communicate in their actions and day-to-day behaviour.

A religion that works as a means of symbolically generalized communication has achieved a high level of self-awareness and/or self-referentiality. It can be said to be universal not so much because it has extended its influence to various parts of the planet, but rather because it has become a system of belief that can disregard the issue of whether the ‘official’ beliefs, selected and communicated as such, are more or less well received. The growing conviction that they are accepted is a consequence of communicative actions implemented by a system to generate and continue to regenerate itself (i.e. of its *autopoietic virtues*).

The surplus of meaning

Therefore, if we regard the sacred as that which *exceeds the meaning normally attributed by systems of belief* to the experience of the undefined, spirituality may be defined as the irreducible tendency to imagine and experience the sacred in ways *other than* those prescribed by a system of belief. This is not to say that there is necessarily an opposition between systems of belief and spirituality. It could be said that a necessary correlation exists between these two notions, since a system of belief can only exist in relation to a vaster and more complex social and religious environment (Besecke 2005; Grant et al 2004; Hamilton 2000; Heelas et al 2005; Houtman & Mascini 2002; Possamai 2003; Van Otterloo 1999).

It is within this relationship that spirituality can be used as a category or concept that serves to explain the irreducible nature of the meaning which exists outside the system of belief. Such systems claim to be able to tell us what we should believe in, but belief has greater degrees of freedom and at times does not follow the words of the system. It is not content to accept the terms laid down by the system of belief, but tends to disregard the symbolic boundaries which the system claims to fix and explore other possible meanings of the sacred. We can thus state that spirituality should not be regarded as a residual category, i.e. what is left when believing is subtracted from belonging. It does not arise from the separation of believing and belonging. Having become an autonomous concept, believing produces meanings which are different from those codified by an institution or by any given religious tradition (Cipriani 2006; Giordan 2006; Houtman & Aupers 2006).

Spirituality, therefore, is the name we give to the environment, or rather, to what in the theory of systems is the environment *for* a system (a system of belief, in our case)

(Luhmann 1995). This is reflected in the great diversity of beliefs which has emerged from recent empirical studies (Halman 1993; Cesareo et al 2005; Garelli et al 2003; Garelli et al 2006; Inglehart & Norris 2004), despite the strict methodology habitually used by sociologists in such surveys.

A recurrent finding is that the meanings which individuals attribute to those beliefs indicated by a dominant religious system as the set of fundamental beliefs without which, from the point of view of a given religious institution, there is no authentic faith, are manifold, contradictory and blurred. Spirituality is therefore a label on the basis of which we name all those *median ways* which in the environment of a system of belief may be paths, with greater or lesser degrees of freedom, undertaken by individuals in search of what Heelas (1995: 1-20) has called “the spirituality of the perennial”, which express the need at the same time to “be true to oneself” and for “intermingled, interfused, forms of the religious – or religious-cum-secular”.

As some scholars have suggested, spirituality in this sense can also be seen as an expression of *dedifferentiation* (Beckford 2003). In the light of the theory of systems, we should make the latter concept quite clear in order to avoid ambiguity. If by *dedifferentiation* we mean the need to cross the symbolic boundaries that religions have traditionally laid down and the urge to garner symbols coming from other religious fields, then it should be made clear that such an attitude – this is not the place to go into the issue of whether it is typical of religious modernity or post-modernity (Hervieu-Léger 2003) – implies a process of differentiation in the socio-religious environment which no system is today capable of controlling, reducing and dominating with the force of its communicative apparatus.

I am tempted to use the expression *out of order* in its more literal sense to describe spirituality in connection with the following phenomenon: national and international surveys reveal that a growing proportion of the population (independent believers and ‘the other third of us’) considers itself to be outside the dominant symbolic and religious order. This has brought about a crisis in the order: there is something which is ‘out of order’, something that does not work in its capacity to turn external differentiation into internal differentiation. At the same time, such people declare themselves ‘no longer in service’ with respect to the standards of belief laid down by a system of belief that attempts to define the boundaries of belief.

Back to the future

At this point of the analysis, in order to give theoretical support to my argument, it may be helpful to go back to the past and to a classic of religious sociology. The past gives us an ideal type of belief: gnosticism, while the classical author is Ernst Troeltsch (1912). The idea of linking the new forms of spirituality with gnosticism was proposed by a prominent Italian historian, Giovanni Filoramo (1983), who has often spoken of neo-gnosticism.

Gnosticism arose and spread as a movement in the second and third centuries CE in the area around the Mediterranean in environments influenced by Judaism and early

Christianity. There was later contamination with certain Islamic currents, especially after the great schism in 680 CE which divided the Sunnites from the Shiites, who, more than other movements, would later feel the effects of the gnostic traditions in the Persian area. Gnosticism is of interest to us here as an ideal type of socio-religious belief. Our interest does not lie in its influence on religious history in that extraordinary period of prophets, preachers, ascetics and mystics who appeared on the scene in the first centuries of the so-called Christian era. This has been very effectively illustrated by the sociology of early Christianity over the last twenty years.

If we take a closer look at the features of the ideal-type gnosticism, we realize that present-day spirituality is in many ways very similar. Briefly, there are two elements which appear analogous or have elective affinity:

- (a) the idea that salvation may be achieved through *knowledge*; clearly such knowledge is esoteric, in the sense that it cannot be reduced to true/false binary logic, but places a value on intuition, mystical experience, (presumed) hidden meanings in the better-known or dominant religious messages; the *gnostikos*, in fact, were those who claimed to know the way to salvation through firsthand experience;
- (b) the idea that knowledge is basically self-knowledge; discovering the divine particle that lies within each one of us enables the individual – if he embraces the gnostic way – to think otherwise, to explore meanings and cross boundaries which the dominant conventions laid down by established religions would prevent him from doing.

In the light of our historical and sociological considerations on gnosticism, we can state that spirituality is a sociological label that can be used to observe and classify the ‘multiple choice’ enjoyed by those who believe and who seek a meaning to attribute to their lives (Roof 1999, 2003; Wuthnow 2001). This would authorize us to talk not so much of a weaker sense of *belonging* as of *multiple-belonging*, and this is confirmed not only by recent research into what is called New Age-Next Age or New Religious Movements (Barker 2004, 2005; Barker & Wilson 2005; Berzano 1999; Bruce 2002; Heelas, Woodhead 2005; Stark & Introvigne 2003), but also by the social and organizational features which modern forms of spirituality produce. Even when groups or movements continue to declare themselves part of a Church or longstanding religious tradition, the individual’s identity is not unified and compact, but multifaceted. Examples of this would be the Catholic Neo-Pentecostal or Neo-Catechumenical movements.

Conclusion

Finally, the classic work of Ernst Troeltsch on the sociology of religion is of great importance to the matter in hand. In Troeltsch’s well-known typology, *Spiritualismus* appears alongside church and sect. Although the German sociologist was reflecting on Christianity, I feel that his ideas may be generalized, naturally with all the due caution of which historians are quick to remind us when we sociologists attempt to

compare different symbolic and religious worlds (Pace 2006). Interestingly, Troeltsch does not regard *Spiritualism* as residual. He shows that, despite attempts to reduce the complexity of Jesus of Nazareth's original message either according to the model of the Church or that of a sect, Christianity was unable to saturate – as it were – the religious semantic field it had opened up by offering room for creativity and free interpretation to those who could not identify completely with a model of belonging such as the portmanteau Church or the community-sect for a select few. *Spiritualism* is a different thing altogether: it is the re-elaboration of pre-existing symbolic material which has become the subject of direct, inner personal experience and releases the hidden esoteric meanings of a patrimony of symbols (Bourdieu's symbolic capital), which is defined and defended, with varying degrees of symbolic violence according to Bourdieu (1971) in its boundaries (Pace 2006).

These may be crossed and explored and re-worked in various ways by spiritualism; meaning can also be kept within mobile boundaries. The great religious institutions are disturbed by the mobility that spirituality creates in believing. As Troeltsch points out, the fact that this type of spirituality finds it hard to tolerate the organization of a Church or sect confirms this impatience of the sense of organized, monolithic and stable belonging to one salvation institution or another. (Along these lines, Weber speaks of the anti-economic nature of charisma, something different from the marketing and consumption of products for the spirit which the modern market for salvation goods has appropriated.) If the individual can save himself by becoming an independent entrepreneur of his own salvation, then we can understand how it is that spirituality, in the light of systems theory, blocks the power of communication which is conventionally attributed to religions as systems of belief. Spirituality is what limits that power; it is the open field of meanings attributed to the sacred which cannot otherwise be reduced.

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