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Preface to the Special Section: Socialization and Religion

*Cecilia Costa**

Author information

*Department of Education, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy.

Contact author's email address

*ceciliaromana.costa@libero.it

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Preface to the Special Section: Socialization and Religion

*Cecilia Costa**

Introduction

Socialization is one of the main categories of sociological analysis, because it tends to satisfy the needs of all *types* of society, which range from maintaining almost unaltered, from generation to generation, the structures that bestow plausibility on institutional worlds and sub-worlds and enhance the exercise of the functions favouring conservation, breeding, limitation, control and social cohesion; from the inclusion of individuals in their reference contexts to the regulations governing relations between people. According to this classical interpretation of Durkheimian and Parsonian derivation, the socialization process plays a central role in the transfer of knowledge and the survival of a shared system of roles, values, symbols and norms of behaviour. It enables individuals to see themselves as sharing a culture, a social identity and a religious creed which are prevalent at a given historical time and in a specific place; it also ensures the creation of an organic, stable model of the self, capable of making the subjective personality unique and recognizable.

If socialization has always occupied a significant amount of space within the ambit of sociological reflection, so too has religion and to no lesser an extent. In fact, at the time when the first social scientists paid attention to phenomena of modernity they also became aware of the essential role played by religion as a transmitter of meaning, ideas, standards and as a means of strengthening the links between collective and subjective identity while legitimizing the existing social order.

*Department of Education, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy. E-mail: ceciliaromana.costa@libero.it

For the fathers of sociology, religion structured and destructured institutional behaviour; it constituted the feedback that human beings expressed regarding various aspects of their own particular experiential reality. Not surprisingly, in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim argued that: “it would not be possible to understand the ways in which we represent the world today, our philosophical conceptions of the soul, immortality and life without knowing the religious beliefs that represent the primordial forms” (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 484 - 485).

In the wake of the long wave of the contemporary phenomena of globalization, rationalization, secularization, immigration, pluralism, – and, according to Morin, of “overabundance of separate, scattered and partial knowledge” (Morin, 2014, p. 12) –, pre-established unifying, teleological principles, are subjected to constant personal negotiation, also because of the greater importance assigned to the expressive, creative and fluid aspects of the individual personality, little inclined to make *stable sense* of biographical narrative and definitive choices, starting with religion.

In this context of relativisation of unique codes, of limitation of durable regulation-value systems and of protest against the bureaucratization of the intimate-private sphere, there has been a waning of the influence of the agencies responsible for social reproduction which has weakened socialization as an obligatory, one-way traditional condition, and caused it to assume an informal, de-institutionalized, bi-directional and low-definition educational, identity-building role.

In turn, religion, which has been affected by the dynamics of change that have jeopardised and undermined its ability to transmit, cogently, dogmas – no longer considered by most people as “a legacy to inherit” – is now a matter of subjective quest for the sacred, open to ambivalent experience. Basically, in a cultural environment of perpetual becoming and faced with the exponential growth of subjective self-preferentiality, some of the factors that have intervened to make the rigid-formal socializing paradigm almost impassable have changed and introduced the metabolization of fideistic memory, fluctuation between religious inspirations and forms of non-religion, belief without belonging, spiritual alternatives, syncretism between Catholic and Christian beliefs.

The research carried out and the arguments contained in the eight articles

The eight articles in this special issue of the Journal, although apparently very different from each other (because they range from general considerations, such as the breach of the ancient link between Christianity and national identity in different countries, to a specific, detailed description of the monastic habit in two Greek-Orthodox convents used to construct an *angelic spiritual* self) are, nonetheless, all in a line with a certain kind of speculative continuity that sheds light on many of today's dynamics that may be considered, also from a Weberian perspective, among the possible causes of the educational emergency and the complexity of the role religion plays within the present-day Western-European scenario.

In any case, it is well worth while to outline some of the significant details contained in the single papers, which provide not only a precise analysis of the two main issues examined here – socialization and religion – but also favour a more general sociological understanding of other phenomena related to them, for example, the strategic performative function of the 'world of things'.

In the first article, starting from a public debate solicited by the Emeritus Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and a speech by British Prime Minister David Cameron, Hunt notes that in the United Kingdom (with the sole exception of Northern Ireland) there has been both a weakening of the socio-ethical influence of Christianity, which no longer coincides with national identity, and an emergence of a sort of secularization of the mind. At the same time, as emphasized by a great deal of sociological literature (to which the author makes extensive reference) and empirical data acquired thanks to a number of surveys and recent censuses, a new modality of religious socialization is emerging, conveyed also by a less assertive pedagogical style than that of the tradition. These new modalities favour the spread of personal devotion to the Christian doctrine rather than strong institutional affiliation, promote an increase in religious pluralism, in *non-Christian* beliefs and in the numbers of those without religion.

Hunt, in his paper, also emphasizes the theoretical and methodological issues across which one may stumble when trying to interpret the 'nebulous matter' of religion, especially in today's multi-religious and multi-cultural

reality. One such difficulty is that generated by surveys that are, at times, promoted more for instrumental purposes than to satisfy authentic scholarly curiosity. A second problem arises from the fact the verbal variations used to formulate the questions administered by surveys can generate different results. Finally, a third type of problem, which often makes it impossible for a survey to represent a 'concrete and precise gauge' of the religious phenomenon, stems from the use of concepts like affiliation and belief which are difficult to calibrate for a variety of reasons, starting with people's different levels of theological knowledge.

Mayer, Trommsdorff, Albert, Barni, Friedlmeier, Kasearu and Lubiewska, on the basis of the cross-cultural and multi-level analysis they availed of to examine, in depth, the complex nature of relationships between changes in religion and transformations of the family, following economic, social and cultural development and the advance of secular-rational values. More specifically, they analysed the links between the sphere of religion and the ways in which families influence adolescents, this, in order to understand the effects of religiosity, in correlation with economic status, with traditional or non-traditional normative-hierarchical aspects within the private ambit of the family, as well as with more personal and psychological issues like the self-expression and socialization of the new generations.

Starting from the fact that religion and family are strictly linked to society and the individual, this group of scholars also raises a question which is the true focus of their scientific speculation. They ask the extent to which religion's current loss of significance may have undermined the power and the formative influence the family is capable of wielding over the individual, or vice versa. To answer this query, the authors present two theories related to the main question: the first thesis interprets the diminution of the importance of the family as a direct consequence of a decline in religion. The second, on the contrary, defines a trend in the opposite direction, whereby an impoverishment of the symbolic-normative strength of the family causes a decline in religious practice. In any case, the percentages obtained from surveys, in their view, tend to show that personal religious and cultural tendencies are positively related to greater guidance of teenagers by the family and a persistence of its social and individual significance.

On her part, Eugenia Roussou on the basis of data drawn from a qualitative research project conducted in Lisbon and still on-going, reports

a non-linear transition from the classical paradigm of religious socialization to a new model of ‘individualized spiritual socialization’ where subjects become the active agents of their self-development. In recent decades, according to this scholar, Catholicism has become progressively less able to structure Portuguese religious identity, so that the experience of faith seems less anchored in institutionalized schemata and in networks of collectively-organized religion and increasingly determined by variability of individual religious choices. This tendency towards subjective spiritual creativity and the erosion of traditional denominations, the author holds, do not imply, however, either a tension between religion and spirituality, or a veritable uprooting of Catholicism from the individual conscience, because the Catholic faith is an expression of forms of religious identification acquired in the family, making its total abandonment as a horizon of meaning, difficult.

In her article Roussou does not fail to emphasize the fact that the breach of the bond, which is taking place in Portugal, between Catholic Christianity and ethnic-cultural identity also seems to manifest the will of the Portuguese to change not only their personal religious conscience, but their very social and national identity. Finally, for reasons of scientific speculation one should not underestimate broader reflections regarding the opportunity – in the present era of selective freedom of individual action – of critically reconsidering the subordination of practice to structure and the theoretical solidity of certain concepts, proposed by Weber and Bourdieu, such as charisma, religious power, socially-constructed *habitus*.

The aim of the article by Theoni Stathopoulou and Trine Stauning Willert is to provide an objective view of the situation regarding religious education in Greek schools – along with a comparison between it and the Danish education model, as well as an overview of regulations regarding the how religious education is implemented in other European states- in view of the socio-cultural, political and economic changes occurring due to phenomena like immigration, which is impacting significantly on several Western countries at present. The two scholars also outline attempts made to modernize the relative legal framework in Greece with a view to changing teaching practices and curricula in schools there, because of an urgent need to adapt religious education (traditionally mono-confessional) so that it become capable of catering for unprecedented demographic diversity, multiculturalism and the principle of inclusion.

Moreover, according to the authors' findings, in the present socio-religious context in Greece, it has become practically mandatory that the education system enable young people to acquire hermeneutical and critical-reflective skills such as to enable them to understand that religion is not a marker of identity that makes people different and that in Greece, as in all other democratic countries, one has the right to believe in a plurality of faiths, or in no faith at all. Finally, this article presents a *partial* qualitative research, which seeks to remedy the lack of specifically targeted investigation of the experiences and personal views of students concerning the teaching/learning of religion in the Greek school system.

Two further notes of sociological relevance contained in this study are: the first, the way it reflects (in terms of a precise definition of the role of religion in Greek schools) *sensitive* issues such as the relationship between secularism and modernity, Church and State and society and religious communities; the second important element is its dialectic declension of a number of up-and-coming sociological concepts like 'intercultural', 'free and responsible citizens', 'national conscience and religion' and 'religious literacy'.

In her ethnographic research, Eleni Sotiriou focuses on the phases and rituals, – from entry into the convent to the climactic ceremony of the *tonsure* and pronouncement of religious vows –, that mark the pathway of religious socialization and *reconstruction* of the self and the body undertaken by novices in two Greek-Orthodox convents. The scholar, in several paragraphs, highlights the fact that the configuration of the monastic identity of future nuns is not anchored in biblical and liturgical studies, but in manual work spiritualized as prayer, the ritualization of daily life, in an 'experiential knowledge' and the socializing action of the *schema* (habit). In brief, the habit object – seen as the garment of salvation and the uniform of the soul – is the fundamental symbolic and practical instrument of *monasticization*, especially because by means of it the novices master their new religious self and irreversibly change all their earlier secular attitudes: from eating to sleeping; from washing to their verbal and body language. Even more so, dressing in black marks a sort of boundary of no-return that the sisters cross between their new monastic spirituality and their previous worldly desires, their 'death' to the secular world, their rebirth to an *angelical, a-sexual* life.

The essay is precious not only due to the specific subject matter treated, but also because it provides general theoretical considerations concerning

the reconstruction of the personality that, at times, may be achieved also thanks to the strength of objects.

Turcotte, availing of a participant-observation methodology, offers an account of some educational variables present, abandoned or neglected, in numerous universities, from the American to the French (with particular reference to the Catholic Institute of Paris). In particular, the author wishes to emphasize the effects of modernization on socialization processes and discuss how the space allotted by universities to the teaching of the sociology of religion contributes to shaping socio-cultural identity, strengthening social ties, encouraging the individual personality to strengthen the structures of its symbolic-value plausibility and its openness towards a philosophy of life that includes transcendence. Sometimes, however, the author complains, when voicing more dialectical considerations, how some academic institutions and schools, due to the assumption of specific technical and professional information and immediate-utilitarian knowledge, are less committed to a type of education which seeks to encourage the students to cultivate a desire to refer to a unified vision of knowledge as well as foster a critical kind of thinking inclining them to gain a sense of responsibility and autonomy.

Openness towards transcendence and the importance of theology and religion in university curricula (considered, as mentioned above, by Turcotte), are the theses advanced a long time ago, in 1851, by Cardinal Newman, when he was called to Dublin by the city's then Archbishop, Paul Cullen, to found a Catholic University in Ireland. The plan to create a new university reality required, according to the intentions of the ecclesiastical institutions, stemmed from the need to compensate for the replacement by the cultural policy of the time of the didactic authority of the Church by more general, 'completely secular educational' moral principles. In his article *Religious Education and John Henry Newman's Idea of a University*, Marchetto, in providing an exact account of this innovative idea, highlights the central axis of Newman's theory of a liberal education and its guidelines, such as, for example the system of universal knowledge; the preparation of the philosophical mind and the function of philosophy with regard to knowledge; the expansion of the idea of reason; the supposed irrationality of religious belief; the reasons for the inclusion of theology in the university system; the hypothesis of a 'Christian humanism'.

In the last of the eight essays, besides summing up a number of studies regarding the religious phenomenon, sport and physical exercise (in the author's opinion, still too few), this analysis centres, in particular, on places that bring these three institutions together because it is in these environments that opportunities for encounters between the native population and immigrants may occur, and promote inclusive and relational dynamics capable of promoting inter-religious dialogue. The attention given to these meeting places has a twofold objective: on the one hand, that of emphasizing the value and role of social relations to socialization processes; on the other hand, that of dispelling a number of prejudices concerning religion and sport, which are not often seen as social resources and 'agents' of immigrant integration. Martelli dwells, moreover, on some of the heuristic tools he believes capable of correlating different angles of the integration process and empirical indicators and, in doing so, raises the issue of redefining the meaning of 'social integration'. Finally, this scholar argues that only by availing of a sophisticated multicultural and multidimensional perspective can one best grasp the aggregating function of religion, sport and exercise, because a similar methodology permits one to evaluate both the material and less tangible aspects of integration processes. In this sense, one of the objectives of this article is, in part, that of denouncing the lack of development in Italy – and in other European countries too – of social broad-range political and economic strategies capable of paying attention not only to the implementation of immediate intervention, but to also of considering other significant spheres within which to enact policies in favour of the cultural integration of non-EU migrants, in host countries.

Conclusion

Despite the different 'objects' analysed here, the different and sophisticated methodological approaches applied, – either personally or during national and international research projects on whose findings the authors base their reflections – the eight articles, as we have attempted to emphasise in these introductory notes, share a common level of scientific rigour, a similar effort at understanding, an analogous request for partial semantic reformulation of certain (now saturated, exhausted) interpretive categories and a constant theoretical problematization of the close

relationship between socialization and religion as well as the *crisis* in the relationship itself. Furthermore, the different essays also present transversal links that exist between macro and microsociology; between the paradigm of action and that of structure; between religious, institutional, socio-economic and cultural identity; between religion/religiosity and the family; between religion, sport and inclusion; between the social and subjective aspects of religion; between the individual personality and national identity.

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