

Article

Diffused Religion and Prayer

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Abstract: It is quite likely that the origins of prayer are to be found in ancient mourning and bereavement rites. Primeval ritual prayer was codified and handed down socially to become a deep-rooted feature of people's cultural behavior, so much so, that it may surface again several years later, in the face of death, danger, need, even in the case of relapse from faith and religious practice. Modes of prayer depend on religious experience, on relations between personal prayer and political action, between prayer and forgiveness, and between prayer and approaches to religions. Various forms of prayer exist, from the covert-hidden to the overt-manifest kind. How can they be investigated? How can one, for instance, explore mental prayer? These issues regard the canon of diffused religion and, therefore, of diffused prayer.

Keywords: prayer; diffused religion; secularization

The Idea of Diffused Religion

“Diffused religion” is a concept that requires clarification [1]. In this article the term “diffused” refers particularly and not only to Italy and is approached in at least two ways. First of all, religion is “diffused” in that it involves vast sectors of the Italian population and goes beyond the simple limits of ecclesiastical religion; sometimes it is even in evident contrast with church religion and religious motivation (see, for example, the keen debate about the referenda on divorce and abortion generated within Italian Catholicism). Secondly, it is widespread because it is the historical and cultural result of the almost bi-millennial presence of the Catholic institution in Italy and the outcome of its socializing and legitimizing action over time. The premises of present-day “diffused religion” in Italy were laid down many centuries ago and have evolved and changed down through the ages. As we have just said, “diffused religion” concerns broad strata of the Italian population. Numerous studies carried out over

time appear to confirm this state of affairs. However, what strikes one most is the strength of the geographical and historical roots of Italy's most commonly practiced religion. It is the very strength of tradition, of practice, of family and community involvement which makes membership of the prevalent religion compelling, almost inevitable. Where socialization within the family fails to arrive, pastoral activity and evangelization, carried out in a capillary fashion by priests and lay parish workers, do.

The true significance and impact of "diffused religion" can be understood simply by observing its peculiarities. In a broader sense, its presence is clearly visible even in domains less obvious than the church, although its visibility may be somewhat intermittent at times. Some of the values widely shared by Italian society may be seen as manifestations of disagreement with canonical Catholic thinking. Because Italian society shows a peculiar tendency towards civil freedom and ethical pluralism, in terms of attitudes and behavior, Italians often appear to disagree with the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Catholic perspective is dominant in many areas, Italian society often opts for a different set of values, though not fundamentally in contrast with Catholic social doctrine. Italian society is like a separate sphere which promotes models of freedom and open discussion, not always in line with the official position of the Catholic Church. This leads to the creation of a public sphere, where religion is not the sole reference point, where other perspectives are brought into play, generating a defense mechanism against the influence of the Catholic Church and its capacity for religious socialization. In reality, diffused religion is spread both "in" (through) many channels of socialization and education (mainly schools and universities) and "by" (thanks to) specific structures and actions which represent and promote particular values. Furthermore, religion is also diffused "for" (in favor of) other religious groups and movements, given that—beyond the intentions of the so-called "church religion"—we may witness the spread of other creeds (easy proselytism by Christian organizations other than the Roman Catholic Church, like the "Jehovah's Witnesses", or by "sects" of eastern origin, etc.); it may also impact favorably on ethical and/or political involvement. In brief, it is also possible to consider "diffused" religion as acceptance of other religions at individual or group level, also because it represents a parameter capable of underscoring and evaluating and measuring moral and/or political choices within society.

The Role of Diffused Religion and Prayer

Diffused religion, seen, generally speaking, as a set of values, practices, beliefs, symbols, attitudes and modes of behavior which do not conform to official church-religion models, is typical, if not entirely, at least in large part, of substantial sectors of civil society. Diffused religion does not coincide perfectly with the whole of civil society although it certainly regards a statistically relevant part of it. In other words, it embraces large sectors of society and is representative of many of society's commonly-shared attitudes towards the Church (or churches). We can say, therefore, that civil society does not overlap diffused religion completely, seeing that it includes not only church-religion, but atheism, indifference and agnosticism as well. Nevertheless, diffused religion seems to underscore quite a number of essential issues, which achieve significance thanks to their influence on society on the whole. However, a distinction between diffused and civil religion is mandatory. It is not a question of adopting the idea Rousseau (1712-1778) expressed in his *Social Contract* (chap. VIII, book IV) or the more recent concepts advanced of Bellah [2]. Neither fit the Italian case. Rousseau's idea was

developed in the eighteenth century, and was characterized by strong pedagogical-philosophical connotations.

Bellah's concept, although contemporary and sociological, regarded the United States, which is a nation with religious notions quite alien to those of Italians (concepts like those of "chosen people" or the centrality of Holy Scripture, for instance, are foreign to the Italian mentality). Above all, the idea that religion as such may be replaced by society would not be legitimized in Italy: religion is one thing, society quite another, at least as far as sociological analysis is concerned. Another difference between diffused religion and civil religion belongs to the domain of mass psychology. The religious element is often capable of producing unity and harmony among individuals or groups otherwise at loggerheads with each other. Thus, religious identity can at times compensate partially for lack of national identity. Seen from this point of view, civil religion is believed to have contributed significantly towards the birth and development of the United States of America. In Italy, to the contrary, religious fervor impeded and delayed the achievement of territorial unity. At most, one may speak of a diffused type of religion within civil society, and even of a civil religion (to be redefined each time) within secular society.

On the other hand, the role of diffused religion is primarily that of providing a self-defense mechanism for non-conformist believers, for those believers who are not attuned to the doctrine and directives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. One undesired effect of forms of diffused religion not particularly bent on ignoring or contesting official dogma which must be taken into consideration is a certain tendency to favor individualized thought and action, with the result that active participation in movements in favor of civil and political social betterment is slackened. If one presumes that the civil and political aspects of society are closely connected and mutually functional, one must say the same of diffused religion, which is capable of legitimating, though indirectly, the religious structures underscoring its own milieu. In conclusion, it is an 'inextricable intricacy': diffused religion supports the Church anyway, and both, together, support the civil society of which they constitute a significant part. Furthermore, the virtuous behavior of individuals can provide the *status quo* with considerable support, as compliance with existing norms by single citizens helps reinforce it significantly.

With the emergence of religious sociology or, more appropriately, of the sociology of religion, as an autonomous and non-confessional science, the problem of devising adequate indicators of religious phenomena and of individual and collective experience also emerged. At first, it was assumed that weekly attendance at religious services might be considered a reliable marker, as this practice could be regarded as a real and visible measure of attitude. Therefore, in questionnaires, the questions administered were mostly aimed at ascertaining the number of times interviewees attended the official rituals organized by the religion to which they belonged. Later, however, doubts emerged regarding the reliability of similar data, which were based more on the extemporary statements of the interviewees than on real, empirically verifiable practice. Above all, it was discovered that attendance at mass or any other form of worship might often depend on motivations not necessarily or strictly connected with religious conviction: this led to further heuristic interpretations, aimed at ascertaining the intensity of a creed and its related practice. The first qualitative research projects then began to allow interviewees to express themselves more openly, granting them greater freedom when organizing their discourse, providing accounts of their experiences and definitions of their religious

feelings. New realities then emerged and other, more evident data resulted which permitted further interpretations to arise within the panorama of the sociology of religion.

More than the observance of feast days, what emerged was the impact of belief on everyday life, the importance of ordinary religious experiences, regardless of liturgical celebration and without the presence of officiants legitimated by other religious institutions. These experiences had a clear bearing on people's own values, to their choices, on their personal beliefs, on personal kinds of religiosity as against hierarchical expressions of religiosity typical of church religion, without creating any real fracture with them. Meanwhile, the development and affirmation of new, so-called "non-standard" or non-quantitative methodologies led to the discovery of numerous life histories, of attitudes and behavior styles which were not easy to access previously, when numerical dimension, percentages, statistical correlations were practically the only means used. Thanks also to the development of computer programs dedicated to qualitative analysis, it is possible to examine social-religious phenomenology in greater depth, and to reveal personal life-paths, not always in compliance with classical, traditional parameters (that is, with Durkheimian and/or Weberian, conceptual categories) and whose independence from institutional religion may be seen as ushering in future developments. One must add that the importance of prayer of a mainly individual-connotation type had been pointed out by quantitative research too. The empirical information to this regard was clear: there are many more people who pray than those who go to church.

Currently it seems that although the rate of attendance at regular religious worship is decreasing, recourse to direct dialogue with the divinity (whether as a form of personal invocation or one based on formulae learnt during religious socialization, or a simple conversation with the supernatural interlocutor practically considered a peer) appears to remain stable. Each of the different modalities of interaction between human beings and the supreme being, whom people may call god, does not appear as the result of impromptu spontaneity, but rather as the historical consequence of a long-term radicalization process of practices and experiences, which in some cases are thousands of years old. The various, more or less formalized, religious organizations, operating down through the ages, have created the premise for a long and solid permanence of behavioral patterns which cannot be easily eradicated or marginalized. Prayer is an aspect of these patterns, the outcome of lasting and efficient action, which has led several, successive generations of social actors to avail of it in certain more or less predictable circumstances, which continue to appear fundamentally the same, despite the passage of time. It is by no mere fluke, therefore, that today there is a return, among Catholics, to the gestures one sees in the drawings and graffiti found in the catacombs, where those who pray are depicted with raised open arms, the same posture assumed again today by the congregation when reciting the *Lord's Prayer* during mass.

It is not difficult to imagine that many of the conventions concerning prayer have been handed down from century to century essentially as an underpinning of mnemonic recollection of sacred texts, of the most commonly used formulae, of continuously repeated ejaculations, of the rhymed, rhythmic formularies which act as a formidable aid to memorization and recall. Furthermore, the existence of stock 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 overly familiar with personalized religious solutions, and are therefore inclined to take refuge in what has been transmitted orally or in small, pocket-size texts, easily to access and use. One should not forget

that the basic catechism regarding rites of passage and access to the sacraments is taught mainly through reference to prayers, ritual formulae, the recitation of verses and brief sentences. It is no coincidence that the so-called “Pius X catechism” is a list of simple, concise questions and answers, easy to learn by heart and required to pass the exams foreseen for admission to the sacraments. This is why this portion and portion of diffused religion stands the test of time and resists almost everything, the weakening of belief and practice as well as the almost complete estrangement from the religious links of one’s early social life.

Besides the church as an institution, the family also contributes significantly to the instruction of the new generations, both as far as exemplary conduct, and the theory and ideology underscoring their fundamental religious beliefs, are concerned. The religious scenario of the family is generally not foreign to the framework of norms that accompanies and orientates adolescents and young people during their development and maturity. Finally, other institutions contribute in a similar manner, proposing pathways, systems, solutions, to be resorted to again in the future. Thus, prayer itself, although not always consolidated as a “habit of the heart” in Bellah’s terms [3], surfaces once more even when other religious habits have been forsaken.

The Historical Roots of Prayer

The origins of prayer are still the object of study, mainly by historians, anthropologists and sociologists. Stemming, most probably, from the quest for a super-natural interlocutor, a variety of factors converge to produce the act we call prayer. Of considerable significance to this regard is the thesis of Ernesto de Martino, who wrote that: “in primitive civilizations and in the ancient world, a noteworthy part of man’s technical endeavor aimed not so much at technical dominion over nature (where after all technology found only limited application), but at the creation of institutional forms capable of protecting his presence from the risk of absence from the world. Nowadays the need for this technical protection, constitutes the origin of religious life as a mythical-ritual order” [4]. The risks run by human beings in the ancient world were all pretty well defined: wild animals, unknown territories, lack of water and food, atmospheric phenomena, death of livestock, diseases.

Currently we are better equipped against such dangers, but the risk of one’s own death or of that of a member of the family still persists. The threat is common to all generations and populations. There is, therefore, a diachronic line crossing the millennia, which, in the ancient world produced expressions like funeral mourning [5]. Furthermore de Martino adds [6], the sacred may be seen as a “mythical-ritual technique capable of protecting presence against the risk of absence from history”. Ancient sacred funeral lamentation ritual converges with prayer: it may be expressed individually or as a collective act; it may be initiated and conducted by one or more alternating prayer-leaders; it may be accompanied by ritual gestures; it may follow a particular procedural order; it may contain responsorial forms; it may involve choral participation; it may avail of refrain; it may also contemplate free development or alternating recitation between groups of people; its character can be at once narrative, evaluative and interpretative; it may often lead to dramatic ritual gestures of resolution such as the tearing of clothes or self-inflicted bodily harm (a sort of final *amen* meaning “resting on”, *i.e.*, “to have faith”, in short, acceptance of the fact that things are as they should be, that belief is ill-suited to demonstrations of despair or infliction of self-punishment, unless as an expression of resignation, of

surrender to a superior will, of implicit and joint recognition of the inanity of human action in the face of divine power: “this is so, because this is the way You want it to be”).

The theme of death remains that most capable of creating parity between funeral lament and prayer. It provides a more or less conscious answer to some lacerating questions: why is life interrupted? Who is the real master of life? Why does the end of existence strike some, and not others? How can this lethal risk be faced? Or, how can the risk be made, after Luhmann [7], more tolerable through religious mediation? And after all, are not lamentations and prayers for the dead both inspired by the need to compensate the imbalance created in the social body by the death of one of its members? Lament and prayer are elaborations of the mourning process, or of the intention to attribute meaning to death and life alike. Rather than suicide, to which the survivors might wish to resort, an alternative is available in ritual (whether crying or praying). Thus, “undoubtedly, rites capable of resolving the suicidal impulse through equivalent attenuated and symbolic acts, must be intended as dramatic measures, to be taken each time in the concrete event of single laments [...] On the other hand, the mimicry of the ritualized *planctus* appears in the ancient lament as oriented towards a progressive symbolic diminution of the current crisis, in the place of real suicide: passing from the incision of the flesh—in an 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, allowing oneself to collapse on the ground *as if* fulgurated by death, and other mortifying and abject acts representing in relatively milder forms the *as if* of the will to die” [8]. At this point, it is possible to hypothesize that praying for the dead is itself a form of attenuation of the *cupio dissolvi*, of the desire to die, along with the loved one who has actually died. However, in a metaphorical sense also, prayer, even when not specifically related to death, has nonetheless a latent implication that refers to the ultimate moment of human existence: one prays to give thanks for being saved from danger; to overcome the risk of non-survival; as a form of *captatio benevolentiae*, that is to attract the special attention of the supreme being; one prays to be allowed to continue one’s own existence; to praise the divinity and its benevolence; to obtain and experience danger-free situations. In ancient times, primeval acts of prayer, spontaneous exteriorizations of individual pain and fear of death, became social rituals because the death of the individual affected the whole community and not only the single mourner or mourners.

Generation after generation these ritual expressions of bereavement and grief were codified and transmitted socially by the family or the religious community or both. The repertoire of formulaic orisons was enlarged to embrace a vast range of human needs and handed down from parent to child, from celebrant to congregation. The prayers thus developed were learned and taught especially during infancy and childhood to all the members of a community, which custom can help explain why even lapsed believers, many years after they have rejected their faith and/or church, in moments of danger, stress, need, above all in the face of death, recur to prayer as a reaction, a strongly ingrained cultural reflex acquired when young.

An eloquent example of the social purpose of ritual prayer is provided by the still-practiced custom of blessing fields. In actual fact, it is on a good harvest that the life of single individuals and entire communities depends. The act of blessing the land contains the intention of banishing potential drought, destruction of seeds and crops. Given that much seems to be uncertain, or independent of human will, divine protection is invoked to avoid deadly risks. Also the precautionary and preventive

action of blessing is complementary to the subsequent action of giving thanks (formalized in the USA as the national festivity of Thanksgiving Day). Not only do both practices relate to the main reference point, which is divine rather than earthly, but, above all, they do not exclude demands linked to the relationship between life and death, abundance and want, protection and danger, sowing and harvesting, between material and spiritual reward. The privileged connection between prayer and difficulty is demonstrated at biblical level by the so-called *Lamentations*, generally attributed to Jeremiah (650-586 B.C.), but, dating back in actual fact, to a community of Jews recalling the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The five “books” of *Lamentations* enter progressively into a rapport with the genre of remembrance, mourning, one might say, for the end of the holy city of Jerusalem. Their recitation is both individual and collective: the topic is the demolished city, but there is also an invocation to the Lord, who is “just” (verse 18) and sees “how overwhelming is the anguish” (verse 20). So once more the lament becomes prayer, request for help, peroration (from the Latin verb *per-orare*), as it can be seen in the last verses of the fifth and final Lamentation: *Restore us to yourself, Lord that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.*

Continuity and Contiguity of the Forms of Prayer

How can the connections between present-day and more ancient phenomenology be identified? Lévi-Strauss, as it is known, looked for these connections studying populations which had not yet been in touch with processes of modernization [8]. In our case, as far as the Euro-Mediterranean area of Greek and Roman funeral mourning is concerned, we can refer to the Sardinian culture of the *attittadoras* [9], the keening women who still participate in funeral rituals, and who present characteristics similar to those of keeners in Egypt, Greece, Romania, Lucania, Calabria, Campania (the latter with the peculiarity of the *ritornelli asseverativi*, that is the asseverative refrains where a chorus of women confirms what the chief keener says about the deceased, or the use of the *riepito battuto*, that is a vocal lament accompanied by the action of hitting oneself) [10]. Not dissimilar is the lamentation documented by Koppers [11] in the Yamana population, referred to by de Martino.

Being insular, the culture of Sardinia is a very useful source of diachronic analysis, as in a similar context it is possible to witness enduring features that in other places have been mitigated or have disappeared altogether. Such is the case of the *goigs* or *gosos*, religious hymns, most probably of Catalan origin and dating back to medieval times: “they are characterized by aspects of praise, and by narrative-emblematic and descriptive content, aimed at emphasizing the merits, virtues, sanctifying graces of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints”. They might be considered as belonging to the laudatory category of prayer. Their structure is such that they are easy to transmit orally. Their form was originally ecclesiastical and cultured, but, as in the case of many other chants (for instance the *canto delle zitelle*, the chant of the spinsters performed at the Sanctuary of the Holy Trinity in Vallepietra) it has undergone a process of simplification due to popular intervention which reduces the role of the institutionalized clergy while the laity emerges as protagonist, innovating and proposing new chants and new prayers in honor of Our Lord, Our Lady and the Saints.

In conclusion, if originally the *goigs* or *gosos* were dedicated, in the troubadour tradition, to women or to the knights’ “madonnas”, they were later modified to pay homage to the Mother of God (*Mar de*

Deu) and therefore also to the Saints. The *Ave Maria* itself, sung in the various Sardinian dialects according to a consolidated popular tradition, when all comes to all, is not very different from the religious *gosos*. Besides, the *gosos* were also used to 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 sought symbiosis with the more ancient Byzantine patterns already present in the island. Lastly, “in the *gosos*, as in the case of the *goigs*, the exemplary and thaumaturgical qualities of the Saints to which they were dedicated were exalted. The hymn concluded with an oration in the form of a plea to the Saint begging mercy for oneself, for one’s relatives, for the community” [12]. The plea for mercy is a logical consequence of the series of praises sung in honor of the saint: this way there is a transition from eulogistic prayer to pleading, an appeal for help. There is a further element which leads the *gogos* back to a single tradition: they are performed in rural contexts and at key moments of the agricultural cycle. A fact that ties in with the tradition of blessing fields and the act of giving thanks for a good harvest, as mentioned above.

The exorcistic, apotropaic character of some religious invocations belonging to the realm of prayer, is again to be found in Sardinia, that is, in a cultural context which more than others has maintained the traces of a centuries-old tradition, in exorcizing formulae—called and not by chance *preghieras* (prayers)—with which people talk to the saints, pleading for mercy. The rhetorical devices, the figures, the metaphors, the tropes constellating the *preghieras* are numerous; these compositions are rich in symbolic content peculiar to folklore, where for instance the expression “born with a shirt” (to be born lucky) is associated with “the symbol of the plea to the Madonna or to Jesus for the “gift” of luck auspicated in the form of protection. The future of even one day is always disconcerting for the individual and the community; and disconcert can become paralysis, without the intervention of prayer” [13]. In the Sardinian cultural tradition, there are also the *historiolae*, which have already been studied by de Martino [14] in *Sud e magia* (South and Magic). These are *exempla*, examples in form of tales that justify and reinforce certain behavior, including recourse to prayer as an effective solution in the face of difficulty. A modality quite close to that of the Sardinian *preghieras* is found elsewhere in Italy, for instance in Lucania [15], with reference to prayers to God, to the Madonna and the saints, in particular, Saint Nicholas [16]. Unique forms of prayer also exist: the wearable-hidden prayer and the overt-manifest prayer. The former is kept in a cameo or medal, hidden from the sight of others, worn underneath one’s clothes; the latter is attached to a house window, or a vehicle, for protection from the evil coming from the outside world.

Perhaps the most meaningful contribution to the study of prayer is provided by Heiler’s book, first published in German as *Das Gebet* in 1918 and afterwards in English as *Prayer* in 1932 [17] (by the way, it seems useful to remember that since 1909 Éditions Félix Alcan in Paris printed the thesis of Marcel Mauss on prayer but the author asked not to publish it even though he distributed some copies and quoted it many times). Heiler distinguishes between seven types of prayer: secular (spirituality), primitive, ritual, cultural (Greek), philosophical, mystical, prophetic. Each of them has a specific reference context and a number of characterizing features: secular spirituality is a conversation with god but within the world, that is to say, nature; primitive prayer concerns the risks of life, therefore fear and needs, but it goes beyond ancient cultures and reaches industrial societies too; ritual prayer is in line with Durkheim’s approach (according to his definition of religion as a set of rites and beliefs) and is based on repetitive formulae which derive from superstition (and magic) and are aimed at

obtaining results; Greek prayer stems from classical Greek culture and insists much more on ethical needs; philosophical prayer regards relationships between the deity and nature; mystical prayer communicates and converses with god; prophetic prayer is at the apex of relationship with god because it follows the biblical tradition where prophets are able to speak directly and personally to god, without intermediation, magic formulae or mnemonic prayer.

The Diffused Religion of Prayer

The practice of prayer, which, for Marcel Mauss [18], as we know, is at once belief and ritual, for Durkheim [19], the essence of religion, is certainly the most enduring and common aspect of universal religions [20]. These very same empirical studies, carried out with chronological and territorial continuity, demonstrate that prayer does in fact constitute the *fil rouge* of much religious behavior oriented towards oneself and/or towards others [21]. Equally important, a vast research project carried out by Poloma and Gallup [22] which has shown that prayer is important in the life of US citizens. The survey involved 1,030 subjects and clearly demonstrated that recourse to prayer represents a sort of challenge to the churches, and can have considerable influence on people's lives at political, moral and social level, especially as far as the ability to forgive and to be satisfied by life is concerned. Poloma and Gallup focused in particular, on typologies, religious experience, relations 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 admitted to praying, and that the subjects did not fall into the senior citizen, Afro-American, southern-states, female, or poorly educated social categories. Compared to the overall average percentage, that for the young was only slightly lower: 80%.

There are four types of prayer, according to Poloma and Gallup (from the least to the most participative): “*ritual*”, “*petitionary*”, “*meditative*”, and “*conversational*”. Thus, one prays as part of a ceremony, as a form of plea, as a kind of meditation, to converse with the godhead. But it is the meditative type of prayer that reveals the most direct relationship with the divinity. Also the outcome deriving from the experience is divided into five categories, where what prevails is a 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 to examine 1,721 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 poorly educated people. Moreover, low-income individuals direct their prayers towards more spiritual ends, to obtain the favor of the divinity [23]. The data gathered by the “2004 General Social Survey”, indicate that 89.8% of United States citizens pray at least sometimes, and three quarters of them pray at least once a day. Moreover, of those who pray, 67% think that their prayers are heard, and 95% that their requests are granted [24]. According to a survey carried out some years ago, prayer is not connected with the fear of death [25], but one should ask to what extent the sample used provided data allowing the results to be applied in other contexts, and whether the modality of the study was geared to produce in-depth knowledge of the relational dynamics between prayer and fear of death.

Other motivations why prayer is seen as a solution making a difficult condition more acceptable are provided on various occasions by the results of different surveys. The same can be said of the plea for divine favor, possibly in connection with admitting one's own faults, confessing one's own sins. According to Baker it is much more interesting and useful to look at the contents of prayers (rather than their frequency): economic security, health, confession and forgiveness of sins, spiritual relations 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% to confess 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 a decrease in sacramental confession does not correspond to diminished awareness of having sinned. And, however, the data taken on the whole, present a picture that seems to disregard affiliation with a church, although to complete this discourse one must emphasize the fact that sensitization towards the action of praying derives, presumably, from the content of religious socialization within an ecclesiastic domain and the family and the social community, where prayer becomes a sort of permanent imprinting. In conclusion, it must be taken into consideration that Baker's analysis does not concern either ritual prayer, or group prayer, or even the prayer expressed in liturgical services. In other terms, personal and extemporary prayer recurs so much that it has become dominant compared to more standardized forms, managed at institutional level. One of the limitations to the interpretations provided by Baker is that the study refers to the Christian framework alone, thus disregarding modes typical of other forms of religion. Of Baker's study, the final passage, which comes after many statistical-quantitative analyses on the function of prayer, is particularly worthy of attention: "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".

Furthermore, philosophical in-depth explorations like the one carried out by D. Z. Phillips [26] can lead to new interpretations of prayer as a conversation, a "dialogue" with someone who does not understand, a dependency, a superstition, a divine voice, a community event. Some suggestions about the possibility of investigating mental prayer come from Archer's [27] analytical dualism concerning existing structures and future agents. This dualism is solved by analyzing the morphogenetic sequence which intervenes between the antecedent culture-structure and actions of agents, involved in a process of reproduction or transformation of previous cultural and structural contexts. There is a relationship affecting both structure and agency in terms of internal conversation, which takes place through the agent's evaluative reflexion (like *ruminatio Dei verbi*, rumination of the divine word, according to Augustine of Hippo) of the situation, and the agent's evaluation of his projects within the context of his situation. Archer has interviewed 20 people (including a nun) in order to understand their modes of reflexion: it can be communicative reflexive (extroverted: think and talk); autonomous reflexive (self-directed towards action: think and act); metareflexive (continuously critical: think and think); fractured reflexive (uneasy: think and talk, but with distress and confusion). Mental prayer is similar to metareflexion, but it also resembles autonomous reflexivity, even though it is present in fewer cases (communicative reflexivity does not exclude previous meditation, and fractured reflexivity includes

different modalities of internal conversation). In any case the reflexivity of mental prayer can be understood as a meditation (not so different from Augustinian rumination, and from Archerian mediation of meditation), therefore a quest *in foro interno* for the meaning of life, of old age, for the solution of personal identity, and the evaluation of a situation.

Towards a Sociology of Praying

Different ways of praying offer sociologists an excellent opportunity to carry out non-conventional analyses, based on minimum indicators, on minute detail. How can one, for instance, investigate mental prayer? What are the signals to be taken into account when investigating it? Certainly only the social actors themselves possess direct knowledge of the experience. They and they alone can make it accessible to others by communicating motives and content. However, there are other ways of praying using the five senses and, in this area of investigation, noteworthy help is provided by the work of five Spanish theologians, all women, including two Catholic nuns. Extraordinarily rich and documented in form, the work concentrates on the bodily dimension of prayer, otherwise overlooked by the usual scientific and cognitive approach [28]: the basic assumption is that sense means pathway; human beings have five senses, five accesses or pathways open to reality. Pathways leading outwards, towards the world and the Other, and pathways leading back to the inner self, starting with the human being and reality. The difference between these roads is not irrelevant as far as perceived reality is concerned. 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 towards a more perceptive sociology of praying, to which Michele Colafato contributes with great attention, broadening horizons even further. Following the work of various specialists, he goes more deeply into the observation and understanding of the experience of prayer in Orthodox Christianity, of the individual and collective outlook of the *salat*, i.e. Islamic prayer, of Catholic prayer, of Buddhist prayer, in particular the *Lotus Sūtra*, and Jewish prayer (where the issue of the senses re-emerges: “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, whether 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 enters into contact with and perceives all that surrounds it. The precept regarding women is particularly relevant in the Jewish religion: the woman must be immersed completely in a purifying bath, where she can strongly perceive the contact between her body and the water”) [29].

The Situation in Italy

In Italy, Franco Garelli underlines the role of religious sentiment when analyzing the results of research into pluralism, statistically relevant at national level [30, pp. 88-92]. It is interesting to note that this survey indicates as the occasion most strongly associated with the desire to pray is “the funeral rite... suggesting that in our culture death is the event most closely associated with some form of religious meaning. In the collective imagination this extreme experience of “breaking away” must be accompanied by a religious ritual, the meaning of which undoubtedly changes according to the

degree of religious conviction of those who require it. Death presents itself always as the human experience in the face of which even many non-believers accept the religious ritual, drawing in some way on a symbolic capital present in our culture to face questions difficult to answer from a secular perspective” [30, p. 10]. This seems to confirm the generative impact of funeral rituals and lamentation (centered on the meaning of death and thus of life itself) on prayer.

On the other hand, the weight of the social-cultural context emerges from the datum concerning the contribution made by the inclusion of a weekly lesson on the Catholic religion in Italian school syllabi, aimed at teaching religious “literacy”, seeing that this lesson “increases the knowledge of the Catholic religion by groups who have fewer opportunities of becoming acquainted with it, than those who have access to many more sources of socialization oriented in that sense. The specific knowledge provided by the teaching of Catholicism “reaches” the young in proportions higher than do sources of general religious knowledge. Teaching seems, therefore, truly capable of reducing, to some extent, the knowledge gap produced by non-scholastic socialization contexts” [31]. This too is an outcome of diffused religion, which produces, in turn, a knock-on effect as regards culture in general and the attitudes and behavior inspired by it, including attitudes towards praying.

It is significant that research carried out at national level on religiosity in Italy ascertained that “Italians between 18 and 74 years of age who declare having prayed at least sometimes during the year number 83%. Even non-believers pray, especially if they are in a “quest” mood (49%) and so do those who believe in a supreme being but do not belong to a specific religion (44%). Even among those who declare being atheists there is a quota, although small (8%) that prays”. The motivations underscoring prayer coincide, point by point, with the classical typologies: the mystic, who aims at entering into direct relations with the divinity: 44%), the impetration-peroration type, bent on obtaining support in difficult moments (44%), the mixed-category person who wishes both to enter into a relationship with god and request his intervention; the thanks-giver (about 25%) who expresses gratitude as well as repentance for some offence; the traditional worshipper, whose prayers are the result of teaching; the supplicant who asks for personal favors; and, lastly, those who pray for a grace (which is apparently the least common in Italy: 10%). In conclusion, it appears that prayer is “a way of expressing one’s religious feelings, still firmly rooted in culture and therefore destined to persist in time, even when circumscribed to a minority of the population”. A similar minority character does not as yet present consolidated indicators for the future. Nevertheless, it is also true that “the generations closest to us and the best educated people shun inclusive behavior (pray because it is a duty or because this is the way they were taught) and tend to privilege more than the other interviewees the form of prayer best suited to contemporary people: prayer aimed at shedding light on one’s innermost self” [32].

Recent research detects a similar tendency and confirms the typical modes of praying: thanksgiving, repentance; private-individual-separated/public-collective-united; orally-verbally expressed or silent-mental; laudation/peroration; trustful/imploring; spontaneous or based on scripture (the *Bible*—for instance the Psalms 1, 77, and 118; and the *Lotus Sūtra*—chapter XXV—that is an impetration to free oneself from all negativity). Despite this vast range of possibilities it is by no means certain that interviewees are always aware of the implications. For instance in the archdiocese of Urbino prayer took sixth place among the actions to be privileged by a believer: only 11% of the interviewees placed it first. Yet when we look at the question on the frequency of prayer, it emerges that 10.4% pray every day, 31.3% about once a day, 15% sometimes during the week, 10% sometimes during the month,

11.7% sometimes during the year and 21.6% never pray. And as rightly observed, as a premise “the importance of analyzing prayer as used outside of religious rites derives from the fact that such behavior is present in all religions and often concerns even those who declare being non-believers”. However, it must be stressed that “most of the interviewees, when they pray, use the traditional prayer formulae transmitted through processes of religious socialization and heard while attending various rites and practices” [33]. In conclusion, this datum falls, once more, within the canon of diffused religion and thus of 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% more than once a month. “The procedure of praying is 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, compared to the overall total, privilege personal prayer and inner searching” [33, p. 304].

In the area of Chieti and Vasto, too, the percentages for the young are considerable: 27.56% pray often, 41.99% sometimes, 20.21% rarely, and 9.97% never pray. However, “they do not seem to be very much inclined to use ritualized and traditional modalities, except for those, a significant number, that may be identified as the nucleus of religious “fervent”” [34, p. 61]. The young people interviewed prefer “communication, contact with God” (27.75%), “dialogue either with God, or with the Saints, or with the dead” (14%), “reflection or personal meditation” (12.25%), “closeness to God” (11.5%). It must be noted, among these data, the presence of the dead as addressees of prayer, although the question that was posed, which included god and the saints, does not allow us to discern what the true significance of the data related to the dead contained in the answers may be. Lastly, the manner of praying must be taken into consideration: 29.66% use their own words, 23.36% the phrases or formulae of traditional prayers, 19.95% reflect on their own lives, 13.39% have an inner dialogue with god [34, p. 153]. In an inquiry carried out in southern Latium [35], the young people interviewed claimed recurring to faith in difficult moments, in varying proportions: always 29.3%, often 28.7%, sometimes 32.2%, never 9.8%. There is no explicit reference to prayer, but it appears 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 young. In the diocese of Oristano in Sardinia [36] personal prayer occupies a relevant position as its frequency is “often (every day or almost every day)” for 45.4%, “sometimes” for 34.4% of the interviewees and “never” for 20.2% (in particular male subjects). The average rates registered in Italy in 2009 during research availing of a national sample, were slightly different (respectively 50.8%, 31.9% and 17.3%), and therefore the population of Oristano appears in some cases less “religious” than the general Italian population. 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 stands at a mere 11% and that of praying as a duty at 14%, while the search for clarity within oneself reaches 18%. Reasons for requesting a grace stands at only 10%. In conclusion, instrumental prayer pertains to a minimum quota of the population but does not seem destined to disappear, seeing that it endures amongst the young although contained within the same percentages as those registered for the entire research sample.

Provokingly, Introvigne and Zoccatelli at the end of a sociological study on the Sicilian diocese of Piazza Armerina, ask whether “the Mass is over,” whether, in fact, the most emblematic of Sunday and feast-day Catholic religious practices is not destined to decrease in importance or even disappear. A qualifying element in Introvigne and Zoccatelli’s investigation is the verification of the difference existing between declarations of practice and actual practice, that is, the issue of over-reporting. In this specific case, attendance at the festive service (Catholic or other) regularly (once a week or more) on the basis of the answers provided, totaled 33.6%, yet monitoring of actual numbers of worshipers present brought the rate down 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 identity and also identification, but it does not measure facts and behavior” [37]. Thus, percentages like 33.6% or 18.5% should not be taken as evidence, as they are both partial and do not adequately represent the entire behavioral (and, not to be neglected, vocational) set. Furthermore, the research project in question makes no explicit reference to the phenomenology of prayer, but it may be inferred that data concerning Sunday practice and methodological reflections on over-reporting are applicable also to the sociological framework related to the frequency of praying in Central Sicily [38] and elsewhere.

We must proceed cautiously then, also in consideration of the data obtained thanks to an international research project on values carried out in Italy [39]. Salvatore Abbruzzese, denying the eclipse of the transcendent, recalls that “in the study carried out in 1999, 53% of the Italian interviewees declared praying outside of religious ceremonies and to do it more than once a week” [40], indicating “every day” (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 total answers to the question (which has remained unchanged since 1990) “How frequently do you pray to God, outside of religious ceremonies?” it emerged that around three quarters of the Italian population prayed, although with markedly different frequency.

In the *European Values Survey* of 1981 the question on prayer was not asked. In 1990 the answer “prays often” registered 33.5%, while in 1999 the answer “prays every day” reached 37.4%. Therefore it proved very useful in 1999 to change the options and make them clearer than the rather generic ones 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 stood at 16.8% and then came to 12.7%. With regard to this latter perspective, Italy (with Portugal) seems to reflect a reverse tendency compared to the overall sample; the number of those who pray has increased while 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 who do not pray at all appears to have increased, thus confirming the secularizing trend. Nonetheless, the centrality of prayer in religions remains a constant feature, from Judaism 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 created by prayer, so much that they use that term in their own denominations as in the case of *Bethel Prayer Ministry International*, which is active also in Italy [41].

The New Perspective of Qualitative Analysis

Even more than quantitative data one might expect qualitative results to provide corroboration concerning the nexus between diffused religion and diffusion of prayer. A convincing contribution is to be found in a recent qualitative study on the spirituality of the young. The chapter entitled “In the face of death and pain” must be stressed as strategic, as it shows that “today the event of death continues to play its anthropological role of connecting worlds, obliging those who experience this tragic event to wonder what lies beyond life, and urging many to refer to God in the attempt to formulate a plausible answer. This can happen to those who thought they had cut all their bridges with religion”. And precisely “through the practice of prayer one can establish a connection with the radically Other: feel his/her embrace 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 the 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, therefore, a point of potential convergence of the different dimensions of religiosity: practice, experience, belief, belonging and also knowledge”. There are then various examples taken from the documents gathered during the qualitative research involving 72 young people from Vicenza, availing of the focus-group technique. Emphatically, 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 to do so by “recuperating and going beyond a long tradition transversal to religions”. Further, 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 carried out in private and intimately.

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 young: prayer is at the twenty-eighth place (followed by the Gospels, values, death and fear) in a list of “*full words* of medium frequency” starting with “God” and ending with “choices” and in its thematic area (seventh as regards frequency, after “sacred figures”, “relatives”, “mass”, hereafter”, “clergy”, “church”) there are “act of contrition, Ave Maria, Credo, Our Father, Lauds, praying, community prayer, prayers of praise, prayers of Thanksgiving, free prayer, morning prayer, evening prayer, psaltery, vespers and so on”. In conclusion, the analysis of the convergences puts prayer in relation, above all, with sacred figures, the Word and the sacraments, and, at social level, with religious movements [42].

Conclusions

The multi-millenary “Karst system” that has allowed the tradition of praying to come down to us today, probably originated in conjunction with primordial existential crises, with the experience of other people’s death and, consequentially, 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 led also to

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. A similar otherness leads to an attempt at dialogue, in the form of a request for help, that later becomes both praise and thanksgiving, but also much more: request for extraordinary intervention (the grace of a miracle that implies giving thanks 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 to the various religions, but converging in the functions exercised in the different cultural domains.

The diffusion of prayer is essentially the fruit of the socialization carried out by religious confessions through their educational and legitimating structures, which perpetuate forms and contents of praying, leaving room also for innovation. Far from eroding the existing patrimony, they remotivate 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 of the young against the 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 preserve a habit which refuses to die because it is related to death itself, with which it continuously has to measure itself, through the screen/shield of the sacred figure that serves as a helpful interlocutor, even though it is considered artificial.

To what extent all this may be confirmed in the future too, 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 had already been solved, and that the path towards a never-ending life had already been found.

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