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Questioning the boundaries of ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ actions and meanings

Carlo Genova

Introduction

Across different contexts and different religions, people attribute to their ‘religious’ behaviour—that is, actions usually labelled as ‘religious’—meanings that extend beyond ‘authorized’ matters of belief or personal faith. They also incorporate non-religious elements. This chapter will explore the implications for understanding religions in global societies. Four phenomena will be considered—personal prayer, collective rituals, pilgrimage and religious tourism. Examples will be drawn from different religious traditions on the basis of the availability of recent empirical research. But it must be recognized that no standard definitions of the four concepts exist among researchers. And many of the individuals involved in these practices use different labels to approach them, often with different meanings.

Beyond religious meanings

Since the 1960s there has been a growing consensus that religiosity should be studied with respect to its different dimensions (Fukuyama 1961; Lenski 1961; Glock and Stark 1965; Faulkner and de Jong 1966; Allport and Ross 1967). In the subsequent decades extensive debate arose about the definition of these dimensions, their measurement and their correlations (Holdcroft 2006). Nevertheless, overall, three main dimensions have been widely accepted: believing, behaving and belonging. In the 1960s, and especially in the Western Christian context, scholars began to highlight the emergence in the religious field of new, more individualized forms of believing and behaviour, and at the same time a progressive weakening of collective identifications and belonging. However, in the analysis of both traditional and innovative religious rituals and practices, scholars continued to consider religious believing—more or less connected to structured religious doctrines—as the main, or even the sole, interpretative element of religion. Using concepts such as ‘civil religion’ (Bellah 1967), ‘invisible religion’ (Luckmann 1967), ‘common religion’ (Towler 1974), ‘folk religion’ (Yoder 1974), ‘implicit religion’ (Bailey 1983) and ‘diffused religion’ (Cipriani 1984), studies have tried to analyse non-religious behaviour through the
lens of ‘religion,’ but few have looked at religious behaviour through a wider non-religious lens.

In much survey-based research only a narrow range of practices and beliefs are taken into account. The meanings which individuals attribute to specific ‘religious’ activities are essentially identified with this small set of beliefs and doctrinal prescriptions. Other possible meanings attributed by the individuals to these activities are ignored. In qualitative research the situation is a little different: the data collected are much more useful not only to detect emergent and less widespread ‘religious’ activities but also to explore more freely and thoroughly the meanings that people attribute to different practices.

During the past forty years a huge amount of literature has been published on the contemporary features and tendencies of religion and religiosity, paying special attention to global processes and emergent features. By renouncing a generalized diachronic perspective and focusing on the present, here it is suggested that instead of looking mainly for quantitative datasets allowing statistical comparative analysis, it is possible to highlight recurrent features identified in different case studies and contexts.

Prayers

Following the most consolidated and general definitions, prayer should be understood as a religious form of communication, and more precisely as a communicative act between human beings and divine or spiritual entities (Rothgery 2004; Gill 2005; Oberlies 2006; Cole 2010). The medium of this communication can be represented by a silent mental recitation, or an auditory emission using the voice, or corporal gestures and movements, with or without producing sound.

Prayer can be developed individually or collectively; it may or may not follow collectively shared habits or even normatively prescribed models; and these models can be transmitted orally or through written prescriptions (Zaleski and Zaleski 2005; Levine 2008). Prayer can thus be performed individually, in a group, or collectively in a ritual event (Krause 2011). Even the most individualized forms of prayer are influenced by the context of habits, beliefs and institutions into which the individual has been socialized. But even individuals socialized in the same context can have different personal experiences and interpretations of prayer (McInnes Miller and Chavier 2013). Prayer as a communicative act can have three different modalities of cognitive connection: inward, with the self; outward, with other human beings; and upward, with the divine (Ladd and Spilka 2002, 2006).

Study of a prayer act must then consider a wide set of dimensions: the actors involved, their words and their bodily actions, the addresses, the places and times of its performance, the habits and the rules followed, as well as the aims and the meanings that individuals attribute to this action (Bänziger, Janssen, and Scheepers 2008). The literature highlights a wide range of possible, not only communicative, meanings: ritual, ceremonial, as the accomplishment of a doctrinaire prescription; requestive, to obtain results for oneself; intercessional, to obtain results for others; conversational, as a form of intimacy with the divine; meditational, as a form of intimacy with the self; relational, to develop connections with other human beings; and also thanksgiving, praise and adoration (Poloma and Pendleton 1989; Poloma and Gallup 1991; Argyle 2000; Spilka 2005; Ladd and Spilka 2006). Several of these meanings can coexist in a concrete act of prayer.

Recent research on prayer in different contexts shows that the set of functions which people attribute to prayer and the array of its possible meanings, are highly varied (Poloma 2009; Elisha 2013; Giordan and Woodhead 2013, 2015; Haeri 2013; Spilka and Ladd 2013;
Many meanings are detached from the conventionally ‘religious’ dimension: prayer is used to obtain psychological and physical wellbeing; as an element of collective identification, recognition and distinction; as a medium to assert territorial identities; as an individual coping device; as an instrument of public legitimation; and as a form of public protest. Different meanings of prayer—which are often both religious and non-religious and which can coexist in personal and collective practice—can then be expressed by the individuals concerned, by prayer groups, by the religious organizations and institutions to which individuals refer, and by ‘sacred’ texts. And a sort of growing complexity and stratification of meanings can be observed on moving from the last to the first.

Collective rituals

If the concept of ‘ritual’ has a long history in the social sciences (Bell 1992, 1997; Collins 2004), the situation is different for the concept of ‘religious ritual,’ which still lacks a substantially shared definition. In religious studies, a ritual should be understood as an ordered system of symbolic activities performed individually or, more frequently, collectively, which expresses a tradition while connecting it to the future. A ritual can be verbal or non-verbal, and usually combines recitation of specific words and expressions and the performance of specific gestures and actions. Some scholars maintain that the words of the ritual—as well as body movements, the performance in space, the use of objects—‘usually contain rich textual significance’ and refer ‘to thoughts and ideas understood completely only by others who share in the performance.’ They thus describe ritual as ‘a conscious activity, planned and orchestrated to communicate a desired message to gain a desired response’ (Frobish 2004, p. 361). Also outside religious studies, not only is a ritual often considered as a ‘rule-governed behaviour’ which ‘follows a pattern established . . . by tradition,’ but it is also often stated that for these reasons it would ‘distance participants from their spontaneous selves and their private motives’ (Terrin 2010, p. 3942). A ritual that lacks these elements, ‘performed only because it is tradition,’ is thus described as ‘ritual at its worst’ (Frobish 2004, p. 361).

A different approach defines a ritual as a set of ‘conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centred on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences’ (Zuesse 2005, p. 7834), or more generally a scripted set of actions whose effectiveness depends on their being ‘properly formed and performed’ (Faubion 2006, p. 525). The formal and the symbolic thus emerge as the key aspects (Flanagan 1998, pp. 423–427; Terrin 2010, pp. 3941–3944), but—as underlined—also the ‘consciousness’ dimension is often maintained. For some years, however, various scholars have challenged this premise (Boudewijnse 2006, pp. 1635–1640). Therefore, it is not surprising that numerous studies on religious rituals mainly (if not exclusively) focus on their rules and doctrinal elements, whereas very few pay attention to the personal meanings and experiences of the individuals involved.

The most recent of these few studies offer some insights (Turcotte 2001; Spickard 2005; Chan 2008; Jacobsen 2009; Soomekh 2009; Frantz 2010; van Beek 2010; Frazier 2012; Casson 2013; Talukdar 2014; Dulin 2015). Firstly, in a ritual the acts in themselves, that is the gestures that constitute the ritual, have usually been emptied of their ‘normal’ everyday meanings. At the same time, however, the ritual has no intrinsic message for its participants or viewers, because its meaning does not stem directly from the acts. The participants are then the effective producers of the meaning. More precisely, the distinctiveness of the acts
signals that a ritual is occurring, but since the acts that constitute it have lost their normal meaning, the emergent ‘semantic void’ is an invitation to signification. If on the one hand the ritual gives clues for interpretation, on the other, the individuals involved in the ritual are free to elaborate their personal interpretations, the ‘new’ meanings of the acts, on the basis of personal cognitions, emotions and memories. Research shows that different participants have different levels of knowledge and acceptance of the official, doctrinal interpretation of the ritual; participants with little doctrinal knowledge can give meanings to the ritual markedly different from those of the most ‘expert’ participants; and that consequently, they can be involved in the ritual for very different reasons. The processes of collective identification and recognition connected with the rituals are thus not necessarily rooted in religious commitment. They may also be grounded in other wider social and cultural features often connected with the different meanings attributed to the concrete practices, places and objects involved in the ritual.

Several case studies show that individual participation in ritual can be connected with—among other things—doctrinal, spiritual, affective, therapeutic, cultural and political motives. Some participants are more interested in the personal effects of the ritual; others are more concerned with its effects on the collective; some aim at confirmation of social models; others at social change. Some are indifferent to and unaware of the doctrinal meaning of the ritual, others are essentially performing a specific traditional script. Some are attending mainly because of a sense of religious duty, while some attribute only a social or cultural meaning to the ritual. Finally, some participate simply because they appreciate the characteristics of the ceremony in itself. Different meanings can be interconnected and reciprocally supportive, but they can also be in conflict. Resistance to and acceptance of the authorized and prescribed meanings may be combined.

**Pilgrimages**

Pilgrimage is usually defined as a journey to a sacred place or person (Turner 2005; Hassauer 2006; Melton 2008; Leeming 2010). In several previous definitions it was also specified that pilgrimage is connected with a sacred goal and with religious or spiritual motivations, but more recently scholars tend to disregard this aspect (Barber 1993; Vukonić 1996; Coleman 2001). What is instead often underscored is that both the destination and the route are important, although with different emphasis on one or the other depending on the case. But who defines the place or the person as sacred? Different individuals can attribute different meanings to the journey, including route and destination. Every individual can attribute several meanings to this journey.

Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006) and Collins-Kreiner (2010a, 2010b) distinguish three main approaches to pilgrimage: existential (an exceptional experience occurring once in a lifetime); recreational (repeatable experience more connected with entertainment and rest); and experiential (experience distinct from everyday life). This perspective can be developed by paying attention to the actual personal motivations of participation.

It is possible to identify four main categories of meanings attributed to pilgrimage by the participants themselves (Norman and Cusack 2014; Albera and Eade 2015, 2016). Global case studies echo these meanings (Shuo, Ryan, and Liu 2009; Chang, Wang and Shen 2012; Schnell and Pali 2013; Buzinde and Kalavar 2014; Scriven 2014; Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015). The first concerns the cultivation of personal inwardness. It is an encounter with path, places and other individuals. In a spiritual sense, the pilgrimage is a step to personal discovery. The second category involves an interest in the history and the cultural meanings of the place and the
events and personalities connected with the pilgrimage. For some participants this means the opportunity of having a direct experience of places and rituals previously encountered only through books, movies and websites. The third category of meanings see the pilgrimage as a moment of suspension of everyday life, a ‘festive’ situation that involves estrangement or even escape from the repetitiveness and ‘banality’ of routine and the experience of ‘other’ places, times and beings. The fourth category finally refers to the relational dimension of the pilgrimage as an activity that, even if mainly developed in a brief lapse of time, facilitates the emergence of thick interactions and significant social relations among participants. This is due to the shared character of the journey, which involves relevant places, stories and intimacy during meals and moments of rest. Again, different motivations can co-exist.

**Religious tourism**

The fourth and last practice is religious tourism. This concept presents at least two problems of definition because it is still a relatively recent category. The first occurrences date back to the early 1990s and it is still only partially recognized in the scientific literature, being significantly absent as an entry in most of the dictionaries and encyclopaedias devoted to religious studies or social sciences. As a consequence, the concept is still fuzzy in its meaning, and its semantic boundaries with other similar concepts, like pilgrimage, are still blurred (several books and an entire book series devoted to both phenomena have been published in recent years (see Swatos 2006; Norman and Cusack 2014; Raj and Griffin 2015; El-Gohary, Edwards, and Eid 2017).

The distinction between religious tourism and pilgrimage is normally presented in two ways. The first is in terms of the different activities undertaken by participants and their different modes of presence and participation. The second is in terms of motivations and the meanings of their involvement. Several scholars point in particular to a predominance of religious motivations among pilgrims and of cultural and leisure motivations among tourists, even though they travel to the same places and events (Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell 2006; Collins-Kreiner 2010a; Norman 2011). This distinction, however, is challenged by other scholars who highlight the presence of hybrid motivational sets among participants (Turner and Turner 1978; Cohen 1979; Rinschede 1992; Smith 1992; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Loveland 2008; della Dora 2012; Schnell and Pali 2013; Buzinde and Kalavar 2014).

Recent research in different contexts sheds new light (Chand 2010; Vidal-Casellas, Aulet Serralonga, and Crous-Costa 2013; Wong, Rayn, and McIntosh 2013; Rodrigues and McIntosh 2014; Wang, Chen, and Huang 2015). By focusing on the personal motivations and meanings of the participants, a wide complex of sensibilities emerge. Overall, five main types can be identified: religious, considering the journey as a form of worship; spiritual, considering the personal meaning it can have for the inner path of the individual; relational, focusing on the encounter and the interaction with the travel companions, with the individuals met in the visited place and with those who eventually manage and animate it; historical and artistic, considering the relevance and the interest of the place, its architectures and works from this point of view; and naturalistic, both when the natural elements are the distinctive trait of the place as a ‘religious’ destination and when they simply represent a particularly remarkable place.

**Conclusion**

So far we have seen that the meanings ascribed by participants are heterogeneous, and only some of them—and not necessarily most of them—have direct religious
connotations. Moreover, recognizing the ‘religious’ meanings of involvement, we find that only some of them are directly connected with a specific religious doctrine. A large number can be defined as ‘spiritual,’ involving a more individualized relation to the transcendent. As a consequence, both in individual and collective interpretative frames a problem seems to emerge: how can the different meanings attributed to each practice co-exist?

One answer is that individuals are able to hold together different meanings of a practice in a complex frame by way of two different strategies (Goffman 1974). The first is that when different components are more compatible, a combinatory approach is adopted in which each component is understood as complementary with the others. When the components are less compatible, a more differentiated approach is adopted in which each element is understood as more autonomous and essentially connected with the satisfaction of a different need. In this case different aspects or different moments of the practice tend to be cognitively separated and then carried on with different personal functions. In both cases the core point is that the possibility of coexistence and interaction among the different elements, their compatibility, cannot be evaluated with respect only to objective, external criteria, but must be considered through the analysis of the wider individual interpretative frames.

These processes appear even more complicated when considering collective frames. The chapter has not explicitly focused on this issue, but here not only is personal composition of meanings necessary but also alignment of interpersonal frames (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). From this point of view, several ‘voices’ interact more explicitly: the ‘sacred texts,’ the religious institution, and the formal and informal religious groups. Individuals can develop and express different frames. Only when individuals share sufficiently matching personal frames can an effective alignment occur (further reflections about the meanings of religious practices and the processes of collective alignment of meanings are proposed in Genova 2012, 2014, 2015).

All these processes seem to be rooted in two features which the literature describes as distinctive of contemporary religiosity: de-institutionalization and personalization (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008; Beck 2010; Day 2011; Turner 2011; Gorski, Kim, Torpey, and VanAntwerpen 2012; MacKian 2012; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Giordan and Pace 2014). Only in a situation of relative weakness of vertical transmission and organization of religiosity, and of relative strength of the possibilities of personalization, can this sort of complexity in fact emerge. The point is interesting but is based on the analysis of Western, and mainly Christian, contexts, whereas, as this chapter has shown, a wider range of geographical, social, cultural and religious contexts could be explored.

A great deal of research on religion is only beginning to recognize the complexity of individual and collective processes when it comes to different religious practices and meaning-making. This is especially the case as they go beyond doctrinal prescriptions. As a consequence, it is still very difficult to evaluate if these features of religiosity are present across the globe and whether they can contribute to a more global explanation of the processes of complex signification of religious practices explored in this chapter. Further research is needed to explore the presence and importance of these features in a more systematically transnational comparative perspective, and to consider their development over time, in order to decide whether we are witnessing a global change in the forms of involvement in ‘religious’ forms of participation, or something that is by no means unique to the modern context. In any case, studying so-called non-religious as well as religious significations helps avoid importing implicitly (only) doctrinal approaches.

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References


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