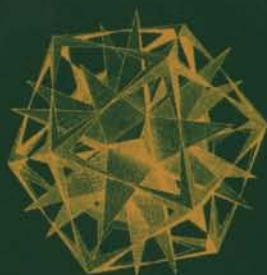


Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World

EDITED BY

Giuseppe Giordan and Enzo Pace



RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER 22

BRILL

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Preface: Spirituality Again

WILLIAM H. SWAYZE

Introduction: Mapping Religion and Spirituality
in a Postsecular World

Edited by

Giuseppe Giordan and Enzo Pace

1 Italian Catholicism and the Differentiation of Rituals

A Comparison of the Neocatechismal Way and Renewal
in the Spirit

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2 Religion, Spirituality and Everyday Life in Sweden

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3 Sacramental Encounters: Reflections on Spirituality, Art and

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4 Reviving Confucianism as a Living Tradition in 21st

Century China: Reciting Classics, Reviving Academic Rituals
and Restoring Rituals

LIANG CHEN



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LEIDEN BOSTON

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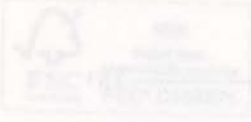
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CHAPTER TEN

DEVOTEES, A NEW ORDEAL AND A SENSE OF BELONGING:
ETHNOGRAPHY AND NETNOGRAPHY OF SAINT AGATHA

ELISABETTA DI GIOVANNI

In 2004 and in 2008, I conducted ethnographic research in Catania (Southern Italy) on one of the most important religious feasts in honor of Saint Agatha. The cult of Saint Agatha is not only a part of this region: she is also the patron saint of forty-four Italian municipalities (fourteen of which bear her name) and venerated in many other parts of the world, including Malta, San Marino, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, Greece, and Argentina. Catania offers the most important expression of spectacle and folklore of this religious cult in terms of the number of participants and relevant events. Each year, from the third to the fifth of February, everybody awaits this important religious event; young people especially live this commemorative moment as an appointment with "their" patron saint. This analysis, supported by a netnography of virtual communities of devotees, indicates that this religious feast represents not only an annual consecratory encounter with the Saint and her local community, but also a kind of contemporary ordeal for young people. Hence, this event presents a double aspect: on the one hand, every devotee feels he has to submit himself to this initiation rite at least once in his lifetime to confirm his belonging to the local community. They witness a sort of humanization of the Saint, who becomes one of them, someone whom they can ask to grant their needs, such as good health, employment, childbirth, and so on. On the other hand, they perform, in exchange, extreme forms of devotion.

Agatha's story is that of a Sicilian virgin martyr persecuted in the fourth century by a Roman proconsul (Quinziano). She was persecuted and tortured by him for her Christian faith. The most brutal torture was the cutting off of her breasts. In fact, she is often depicted iconographically carrying her breasts on a platter. Between legend and history we know that after Agatha's death a terrible earthquake devastated the country. Quinziano ran away on his horse, but he fell into the river Simeto and drowned. Certainly this episode represents the epilogue, because

Quinziano's body was never found. The name Agatha is Greek, and it means "good." Many miracles have been attributed to Saint Agatha across the centuries. Today people believe Saint Agatha protects the city of Catania from natural phenomena, showing her love for the town. For example, during the eruptions of Etna in 252, 1444 and 1669, devotees held up Saint Agatha's veil (*flammeum*) in front of the lava flow to protect themselves. Legend says that the original white color of the veil, a symbol of candor and purity, changes to red. This veil today is conserved in a reliquary, where it can be visited. Earthquakes in 1169, 693 and 1908 mark other episodes of natural phenomena. Some legends tell about epidemics in 1575 and in 1743. In all these cases, people began to pray spontaneously in procession, asking Saint Agatha to protect them. The cult of Saint Agatha has inherited some elements from the Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis, like the seafaring rite, a white linen tunic similar to the *sacco*, Isis's veil, as well as the masked women of the eighteenth century. The famous Sicilian folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè in the late nineteenth century noted that only a few saints in Sicily had a cult such as that of Saint Agatha. For example the capital of Sicily, Palermo, and Catania competed to honor her until the appearance of the cult of Saint Rosalia in Palermo in 1625, whose legend tells about an epidemic disease that vanished after her bones were carried through the city.

Belonging and Initiatory Participation

The feast of St. Agatha is celebrated every year in February and includes the involvement of a large number of young people. Is this the tangible sign of a revived religiousness? Or is it something else? During the night of February 3rd all the people—the faithful, tourists and especially young men, gather in the main square waiting for the mass at dawn. Devotees wear a white votive tunic and a black cap (*sacco*), to wait for their patron Agatha. But, there is a first frantic moment to be faced: the opening of the church doors. The keeper opens the doors from the inside and he has just a moment to dodge quickly aside, before the devotees pass pushing over the threshold to be the first to enter. Then, people start to run along the nave toward the apse, while some climb the columns. Although they are acting within what is essentially a religious event, the occasion allows them to modify the behavioral rules usually observed in a place of worship. It is like an invasion. Everything is ready on the altar. Invocations are made to the Saint, as an acclamation and a sign of devotion, but they can

seem somewhat "disrespectful" because of the familiarity that the faithful show toward their patron Saint. This is but praise and gratitude expressed through the use of glossolalia.

When the statue containing Agatha's relics is brought to the altar, the devotees become impatient. One seems to perceive the Durkheimian *mana* for which mankind is searching. According to Peter Williams (1989: 18), defining "popular religiosity" means understanding the phenomena that denote two of the three following elements: the extra-ecclesial nature of popular religiosity, the transmission of knowledge through vehicles other than seminaries and other official religious institutions, and the expression of popular religiosity with signs and symbols that transmit the presence of the supernatural in everyday life (1989: 18). At the feast of St. Agatha, all three elements indicated by Williams can be found. In fact, we witness simultaneously two different liturgical demonstrations: On the one hand there is the institutional church with its ministries; on the other hand, popular religiosity.

Glossolalia literally means to speak in other languages. More specifically, it refers to the use of what may seem an unknown language: nonsense syllables or words of an unknown mystical idiom that is sometimes part of a religious rite. After each invocation to St. Agatha, the devotee turns to his confraternity, shouting "Citizens, Citizens, Citizens" to which they answer "Long live Saint Agatha." Then they say: "We are all devotees. Yes, we are." The formula "*Cittadini, viva sant'Aita*" is repeated three times.

In anthropology, the "need of the holy" concerns experiences and behaviors derived from religion. Their function is to calm anxieties or frustrations related to human life, to give support to society and the moral order, to satisfy intellectual curiosity, and to meet the need of belonging. The participation of the faithful in very intense group experiences is a salient feature of many feasts of patron saints. Furthermore, these events are characterized by the sharing of experiences from daily life that can be translated into states of consciousness, which are intensely felt, that may be associated with magical thought. As Godin observed, there must be real experience: a dynamic and emotional way of knowledge, richer than a notional way of knowledge, more lasting than a vibration (1993: 65).

As part of magical-religious studies, many authors have stressed the importance of a formula in the conduct of the magical ritual, because it constitutes the core of every rite. Highly emotional experience ends in a stream of images, words and acts that are purely subjective, leaving a deep conviction of its reality, if it leads to some practical and positive implementation, as if it was something produced by a power revealed to man.

Religiosity, Youtube and Passion for Risk

George Simmel (1906) introduced the distinction between religion and religiosity. According to him, the understanding of reality reveals to mankind the existence of a plurality of worlds that coexist in parallel; in fact, next to the world of everyday life that surrounds the individual, there are other worlds (art, science, philosophy, religion). Thus, life can be seen as an ongoing conflict between spirit and forms. Spirit is the principle of individualization in contrast to the objectification of social forms. Moving from this theoretical framework, Simmel distinguishes between *religiosity*—intended as a vital force—and *religion*, intended as a social form that tries to control religiosity. As a result, people are attracted by the religious sphere and its various symbolic senses, searching for a place where they can protect part of their existence and identity from absorption by the social structures. As Enzo Pace writes (2007: 96): “Religion became a social practice. Society finds in religion a potent metaphor of cohesion toward which it tends but never attains, as it is torn apart by the division and competition of individual interests. ... In this way, religion is not seen as alienation, but as a place where human beings produce symbolic values that elsewhere cannot be put into practice” [my translation].

For this study, we focused on Glock and Stark's famous typology of religiosity with its five dimensions: belief, practice, knowledge, experience, membership (1964). Our research showed that religious experience is the most relevant dimension. Then we referred to the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (2004), who distinguishes between a *doctrinal* way of feeling religiosity and an *imagistic* one. The former is based on *memory* and *motivation* that take precedence over everyday matters. The latter is based on episodic memory. The practices that fall into this area, such as initiation rites, ecstatic practices and so on are less frequent but more powerful and challenging. A fundamental characteristic of the latter mode is loss of leadership. Thus, translating theory into practice, the slow and delayed return of the Saint to the cathedral during the feast in Catania is the evident result of this mechanism. The high emotional stress of a group fosters intense cohesion. In short, religious practices that are only seldom performed tend to convey a high level of excitement to the participants.

Part of the research consisted in the analysis of short films posted on *Youtube.it*. We examined thirty films concerning various moments during the feast, especially regarding the religious procession. These films can be considered as a new documentary form. The focal interrogative consists in the capability of the reader-spectator to grasp the filmmaker's point of

view. How can we read the believer's product when he becomes an extemporaneous but imperfect ethnographer? Moreover, even if the anthropologist is not physically present, he can enjoy the privileged point of view of the Web-devotee storyteller. In the Catania feast, the believers are native agents of a rite, and at the same time they are also producers of a cultural representation.

What is interesting about this survey is the parallelism between point-of-view observation and audiovisual media observation. From a methodological standpoint, in fact, the anthropologist chooses where to place himself to view or interact during the event. His field presence is critical and rich in stimuli. Audiovisual media observation, on the contrary, requires an indirect, seemingly secondary vision by the researcher. However, what emerged from the research leads us to hypothesize that the observation of media has its own strength; that is, the relevance of the here-and-now of the author who created or collected the audiovisual source. Although not present, the researcher enjoys a privileged point of view, which is the same as that of the Web narrator.

In this case, it seems natural to apply the instruments of textual analysis normally used in prose and poetry, which lend themselves to a reflection on the narrator's point of view, and being so typical of narrative instruments, they are relocated to the technical language used on the screen. The research carried out was based on the analysis of film or iconographic texts; therefore we can talk of “highlight point zero,” since the anthropologist's point of view coincides with that of the filmmaker. The narrator's view of the scene is not visible, at least not completely, so it is called the non-focusing point or highlight point zero: the point of view and the observing point are those of the Web-surfer who in that precise moment becomes the agent of the patronal rite. Francesco Marano reminds us that in the construction of the meaning of ethnographic films or photographs there are three main actors who are essential for the comprehension of a film: the author, the filmed characters and the spectator. In fact, it is appropriate to speak of a triadic relation in which the ideal audience/spectator/reader combines with the ethnographer and the informant. In this case, we refer to a “contracted document” which is the result of research interaction before the production of the video-clip. However, this interpretation is not applicable to video-clips produced on Youtube (Bitti 2001), which are better classified as cultural self-representations or self-ethnographies.

These practices of self-representation not only have a conservative function, but also become audio-visual sources that help

to create family memory, produce memorial documents regarding the history of the community to which one belongs, build a sense of belonging to the site, basing it on specific chosen aspects of the traditional culture; react to untrue representations produced by national broadcasting; re-construct an aesthetic community reliving sensorial experiences that cannot be relived in the present context; reaffirm a personal and generational identity which has changed compared to the traditional rural culture (Marano 2007: 161).

With regard to the triad of author-characters-spectator, the first two elements are blended together. In the research on Catania's rituality, both in the field and on video, the devotees were at the same time native followers of a rite and producers of a cultural representation. More specifically, they assume both the status of authors and characters and thus become referring agents. The shots reviewed were relatively short (from 40 seconds to 7 minutes). The method chosen focused on the analysis of short films that represent moments of religious attendance among young devotees during the ritual experience: first meeting around the town during the night of February 3rd, moments of prayer along the city streets, then waiting for the patron saint to come out of the church.

These three elements form the main basis for the production of these films. Often the author/agent is set within the group, and he himself sings hymns and prayers at the top of his voice. The principal instrument for filming is the mobile phone with a video camera incorporated. The lens moves from the center of the group, often observing other known components. The shots alternate between the group and other important elements, such as a large candle or a particularly showy performance during which a devotee demonstrates his physical prowess.

Another preferred setting is the cathedral: the church is so crowded that the shots are often blurred. A front row seat before the Saint's corner (*cameredda*) allows the filming of the *ex-ante*. The devotee-cameraman films the faithful behind himself and at the same time catches the whole crowded church. The religious fervor of the young people becomes particularly evident at the fountain of "Sant'Agatha alla Marina," which can be considered the first meeting place/set of the feast. Constructed in 1621 near the city walls built by Carlo V, it consists of a shell-shaped basin receiving water from three faucets, a memorial plaque commemorating the transfer of the Saint's body to Constantinople in 1040, and a bust in relief representing Saint Agatha with a crown.

On the evening of 3rd February the devotees begin to assemble around the fountain: many of them bring lighted candles weighing from ten to

fifty kilos and meet to pray and stay together and to listen to each other's prayers. The young people often sit in a circle or kneel down, placing a large votive candle beside them. A short while later the rite of the *abbaniate* begins. It consists of crying out supplications to the Saint. The evening darkness is illuminated by the light of the candles and by the brightness of the white ritual garments. In turn, each devotee, generally a young man, takes a deep breath and shouts his devotion to the *Santuzza*. The group answers, echoing his cry. After the first "warming-up" round, the voices become louder and louder. Some people get friends to encourage them so that they may shout even louder; others cup their hands round their mouths in order to make their voices clearly heard and to be able to keep up the physical effort. Others lean on their candles when they are out of breath.

The whole feast is, in a sense, a continual trial by ordeal: whoever participates has to persist until the end of the feast. A second trial consists in carrying a large candle (weighing from 20 to 100 kilos) on one's shoulders. Young people in particular respond to the symbolic needs of their group, continuously facing fascinating, almost perverse risks. In 2004, a 20-year-old was trampled to death by thousands of feet during the run up the first slope (named San Giuliano). His wife promised her children would become devotees of Saint Agatha! People born in Catania call Saint Agatha "the little saint" (*santuzza*), because Agatha is considered as one of them. It is well known that facing the extreme physical trials in honor of the saint is a sacrifice offered in exchange for an auspicious future. Moreover, the intimate pleasure of being admired by the people present during the ordeals is quite evident. The carriers of the big candles become heroes. If by chance the votive machinery were to stop, this would be interpreted as a bad omen.

Analyzing the results of the participatory-observation phase and that of *netnography* (Kozinets 2002), we can assert that in Catania the religious participation of young people is acclaimed as a vital votive ritual in honor of their patron saint and that, more specifically, the tests of endurance which they undergo form a veritable rite of initiation, or rather a genuine revival of the trial-by-ordeal in a contemporary setting.

In fact, the annual recurrence of this collective rite marks the conclusion of a cycle and the start of a new one. This threshold has to be marked symbolically. The ordeal that the young people undergo is not the medieval ritual of justice in which one appeals to God to declare a person's innocence or guilt. As David Le Breton notes (1995: 16), in the contemporary era the ordeal is an individual, often unconscious, resource: through a

dangerous action, an actor asks death to weigh the value of his life. We can consider it as a kind of existential response. Therefore, "surviving takes the value of a guarantee and arouses an intensity of temporary or permanent being." Observing young devotees, it is possible to grasp their attempt at self-abandonment to divine justice, through risky and provocative trials that bring them so close to death. Thus, the ordeal becomes a metaphor of contact with danger and/or death, while leaving a possibility of escape and cathartic salvation. In modern times, resort to the ordeal has the function of guaranteeing existence. The new ordeal is a practice, but it is not recognized as a legitimate rite. The ordeal emerges as an individual rite even though it is lived within a community.

The risk-ordeal combination presents specific attitudes: dizziness, *affrontement*, candor, and survival. Each of these attitudes has a typical profile. In the case of dizziness, the actor wants to release his feelings and therefore abandons himself to the inebriation of his senses. When experiencing dizziness, the individual assumes a playful attitude toward the world and creates temporary disorder. In contrast, *affrontement* results in an attitude of competition marked by a thirst for performance, showing off one's prowess, and by a consumption of passionate energy in which, however, seriousness is retained. The search for strength can lead to candor when the individual decides to abandon himself to death instead of flirting with it (alcohol, drugs, vagabondage). Survival thus embodies the emblem of life without "the other." This figure is based on the imaginary disappearance of the social, following a disaster that brings man to a desired state of nature. One example of this is the growing fashion for adventure trekking.

Le Breton writes that what torments modern man is a sense of his fragile identity, which carries with it a feeling of bewilderment. In this sense, the new ordeal confirms itself as a "rite of social conciliation," devoted to alleviating the tension between the subject and his group. In fact, "the ordeal provokes the group and strengthens its ties through the care given to the individual on that occasion.... Dodging death, the individual, through the sensations felt in close contact with danger, finds in himself unexpected resources that allow him to be reborn, or at least to regain control of his life" (1995: 58).

Successfully facing the trial in the name of Saint Agatha hides a yearly need. Its reward is a reassurance of the significance and value of existence. Survival is enjoyment, enshrining a new beginning and a new birth. Another test of endurance that devotees undergo is that of towing the votive machine, weighing 18 tons, with two ropes 130 meters long.

The ropes symbolize the union between the human and the divine. For this reason, climbing over the rope is taboo, because that would be considered an act of desecration of the Saint. The only action allowed is to pass under it, after permission from other devotees has been asked. The ropes, in short, represent a symbolic threshold that differentiates two classes of devotees: on one side the individual agents who are involved not only with their souls, but also with the physical exertion in staging their devotion as a physical manifestation; on the other, the onlookers, who participate with their souls and pray as they follow the procession in a more spiritual way.

Nethnography on Devotees' Cyber-community

Since 2002, the feast is on the Web, too. The initiative was designed to meet the need for the participation of thousands of devotees around the world. Indeed, it is more appropriate to call them Web-devotees, as there are so many people who, by culling physical distances, share the moment of faith and the procession. For this purpose, four Web cams that are able to follow the whole procession are installed in the city. Along the route of the procession, the Web cams follow the Saint's way in the streets. In this way, the new media allow participation from a distance as an intangible way of devotion.

Along with research in the field in the years 2004 and 2008, it was also possible to monitor the virtual communities of devotees from February 2008 to February 2009. This decision stems from the idea of conducting an analysis of the comments posted on the Website of the Saint Agatha's City Circle, from one year's feast to the next, in order to capture the evolution of interactions among devotees. From the methodological point of view, we made use of netnography, using the techniques of market research conducted online, to track the trends and tastes of consumers. The term refers to an adaptation of ethnographic investigation that is transposed from the field to the "network"—or better, to cyberspace. To do so, we referred to Robert Kozinets' work on netnography (2002). Although he works in the field of market research, the fundamentals and applications of his theoretical contribution of netnography are of great interest. A starting point, and also a contact between market research and anthropological studies, is to identify and understand the intention of tastes, desires, symbolic systems of reference, and their influences on the decision-making powers of consumer groups. For this reason, netnography

or “digital ethnography” is configured as a methodology of qualitative research, which aims to explore cultures and communities that are emerging through Internet-mediated communication, on the basis of information available in discussion forums. The following stages of the nethnographic investigation, similar to those of ethnographic research, are distinguished:

- 1) *Entry into the online community or culture*: The researcher moves from specific hypotheses to be tested. As a result, special forums that could be relevant (news, user groups, etc.) are identified. An important role, therefore, is played by search engines, by which it is possible to locate and focus the participants’ main traits. Moreover, according to the rating given by Kozinets, preference should be given to those communities that are more focused on the topics to be investigated: a) with a high traffic posting, b) a large number of users, c) detailed and rich data, d) interactions among members.
- 2) *Data collection*: The data collected are of two types, those that are copied directly from the communications provided by the community, and others that are derived from the transcript of the comments received by members, the result of their interactions and their meanings. Compared to ethnography in the field, nethnography has plentiful and easily reached data.
- 3) *Analysis and interpretation*: As it is not necessary to carry out an operation of balancing between the observer and the observed behavior or event, so peculiar in the ethnographic process, nethnography is based mainly on observation of textual discourse. Observed cyberspace mediates social representation and problematizes the question of the identity of the informant. In other words, even posting constitutes an action and, therefore, a social anthropoema that the viewer can read through hermeneutics. The crucial difference between ethnography and nethnography is embodied in the anthropologist’s awareness of analyzing the contents of the communicative acts of a community online, rather than a set of actions in a physically contextualized community;
- 4) *Ethics and member checks*: Since the nethnographer is comparable to a professional lurker, Kozinets recommends certain applicative procedures that consist in revealing to the members of the online community the researcher’s identity, his aims and objectives, seeking permission to use direct quotations, ensuring anonymity and

confidentiality, adopting a cautious stance in mediating between the private and the public sphere. A last stage is some form of presentation of the work to the community members in order to share with them the results and to gather additional feedback.

Essentially, there are two implications that emerge from Kozinets’ methodological contribution. The first point concerns the revelation of the anthropologist’s identity, this choice—in our opinion—is not unique to nethnography, because, depending on the case, the anthropologist/researcher must always consider whether or not to reveal his or her identity. The second point concerns the question of privacy; in fact, the literature also shows that it should not be taken into account during the research under proper controls. To realize this part of the research, we decided to join the chat. Our intent was to stimulate discussion, in order to conduct free interviews, without revealing our identity. The observation lasted about a year, but the chat reached its major peak in the days just before and after the religious feast, for a total of thirty days. For the rest of the year, the chat has been almost nil.

Of greater interest, however, was the observation conducted on the “devotees’ wall” of the same religious City Circle. For this phase, we decided not to interact with the participants, but merely to point out, in a lurker’s attitude, who visit or join the forum without participating to the discussion lists. To lurk literally is to be in a hiding place that nevertheless permits observation; so lurking means to be present but to avoid expressing personal opinions. In the methodology of social research, scholars have always debated about participant observation and the explicit character of the observer. On the one hand, the researcher can declare openly his identity and his purpose. On the other hand, he can fit into the physical or virtual community by pretending to join it. Anthropology always attempts to capture human beings in carrying out their actions and their representations free from any additional frills. The debate between the two positions is never ending. In practice, it mainly depends on the context and the situation (Corbetta 2003). During the research, we preferred not to reveal our identity. Another choice was to quote the text of messages faithfully, without any correction or interpolation. The text of chats is usually short and simple. We decided that giving a message here is greatly significant of the sense of belonging; unlike the others, it is characterized by its length. The author is a devotee who lives far from Catania but who annually participates in the religious festivities. The inability to attend the

upcoming celebrations led him to express his regret for not sharing the religious moment with the community.

Hi devotees!! The solemn celebrations for our Saint Agatha are approaching. My pain increases, due to the fact that this year for work reasons I cannot see our beloved patron saint. I live for almost seven years in La Spezia, and this time my employers didn't give me the opportunity to come in Sicily. I ask a small favor to you, who are lucky enough to see it; you can see how much our city loves Saint Agatha!!!!!! Please pray for those, who, like me, are in a situation like this, I would be very grateful! Are we all devotees?—Yes, we are. (*Cittadini semu tutti divoti tutti? Cettu cettu.*) By Bagus

Unlike the chat, sometimes too fast and frantic, sometimes twisted by too many participants, the forum called “Wall of Devotees” offers the opportunity to look at the posted messages clearly and neatly. One of the first identified topics is the claim of “ownership” of the Saint. During the three-day celebration, the atmosphere in Catania is pervaded by a sense of participation and heartfelt devotion. The devotees’ messages are totally imbued with the dimension of “religious experience” and belonging, drawing a sharp contrast between the priests and devotees. Contact with the patron remains one of the major aspirations. The regret of the faithful is based on a sort of claimed ownership toward the patron. To reinforce this attitude there is a sense of purity and disillusionment in their relationship with who becomes a mediator with the Divine.

First of all, Saint Agatha is not a property; she belongs to the whole Church, because she gave her life to Christ. Many people consider it to be in the second place. Then I do not understand why one must necessarily enter into the church’s chapel and am baffled. I was there that morning, and the devotees seemed to me more intolerable than the priests with their hubris and arrogance. You cannot think that we don’t need priests, because you do not consider that the Saint has given her life for us. How many people go to Mass on Sunday, hear the word of God and receive communion? Agatha did it in her days and she would be happier if we did the same, instead of fighting to enter the chapel or simply touching the relics. Think about it! P.S., sorry for my outburst, but being Christian, it makes me angry to see so much ignorance. By Valla

Apart from the dispute between devotees and priests, another major topic among the devotees is to dress up like St. Agatha during carnival. Generally, the act of dressing up like the saint appears to devotees as an offensive behavior. The patron is irreplaceable, even in jest. Searching for the embodiment with relicts is legitimate, even thinking of the bickering inside the cathedral, but concealing their human identity to take on one of

the holy (divine or in contact with the divine) is unthinkable, because it would disrupt the human phenomenology.

I’m sorry that at the carnival in Misterbianco (a city near Catania) someone dressed up as the patron saint, the most sacred for the people of Catania, and it is humiliating to observe it. The girl who was wearing it, furthermore, began to dance and have fun, but I wonder has Sant’Agatha become a carnival suit like Pulicinella and Harlequin? We should act now because it is really shocking. Other countries would have rebelled; the Mayor and the archbishop of Catania should speak up! By Simone

These messages lead us toward the conclusion that we should, in fact, dwell once again on the importance of participation, considering the whole feast. The ritual of St. Agatha, in its traditional cult system, has a complex symbolic stratification. This chapter is the result of observations, reflections and interpretations in response to the many stimuli to which an anthropologist can be subject. This great celebration emerges as a unique study of human interest toward the supernatural.

Conclusion

We suggest that declaring oneself to be religious does not necessarily entail all the elements of religion as articulated by Glock and Stark’s theory of religiosity. Youth participation in this patronal feast expresses only three of the five issues: belief, practice and experience. On the contrary, the patron’s participation in worship is configured primarily as an initiation rite, strongly aggregating, but also as a review of the ordeal in a contemporary perspective (Di Giovanni 2007). Our goal is not to make ethical judgments, but to unravel scientifically the ancient ritual apparatus that preserves and renews itself across the centuries, but whose devotional contribution to believers and nonbelievers is always very high. What is clear is that we rediscover youthful religious fervor seasonally, which is renewed in its apotropaic function due to the severe trials of faith and physicality, so finding a vitality that has probably lain dormant since the previous year. In this regard, it is possible to find a connection with the theory of *religious bricolage* (Lucà Trombetta 2004a). Even if, in the case of St. Agatha, we did not find forms of religious syncretism, it seems we captured the features of a utilitarian exchange. The devotees of Saint Agatha do not borrow from other orthodoxies and do not convert to other religious offerings. Here we should emphasize the possible emergence of forms of “personal re-working”—that is, religious consumption in the

name of the traditional devotion. Therefore, this attitude can be analyzed as an attempt by many contemporary believers to fulfill cognitive needs, restoring relationships of plausibility, and bridging the perceived distance between the real condition of life and the sacred cosmos inherited from tradition (Faeta 2000, Lucà Trombetta 2004b: 57).

In conclusion, the cult of Saint Agatha presents a complex and symbolic stratification. This case study is intended to show that declaring oneself to be religious does not necessarily involve a real sense of faith. Furthermore, although young devotees consider their participation in the religious feast as a clear expression of belief, practice and experience, we can instead argue that for them the cult becomes an initiatory rite that is strongly aggregative. We are witnesses of a religious fervor that emerges yearly and demands physical exhaustion to be able to acquire, consequently, a new vital force.

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