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Religion Italian Style. Continuities and Changes in a Catholic Country, written by Franco Garelli

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Franco Garelli

Religion Italian Style. Continuities and Changes in a Catholic Country Ashgate
AHRC/ESRC – Religion and Society Series (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 244 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1-4724-3644-3, € 72.47.

Religion Italian Style presents research on Italian contemporary religiosity carried out with a quantitative method. The main author, Franco Garelli, is a renowned professor of sociology of religion at Università di Torino (Italy), and the book also includes contributions by Simone C. Martino (chapter 4 and sections of chapter 8), Stefania Palmisano (chapter 5), Roberto F. Scalon (sections of chapters 6 and 7) and Roberta Ricucci (sections of chapter 8).

The study is based on a survey performed in 2007 involving a sample of 3160 people aged between 16 and 74, resident in the different Italian regions, 5% of whom were stable immigrants, chosen to account for some important religious minorities in the country. The analysis addresses some classical issues in sociology of religion, whilst always keeping an eye on the most recent academic theories and on developments in the national and international religious discourse. It focuses on the beliefs (e.g. the ideas and beliefs concerning God, their intensity) and on the experiences and practices (e.g. attendance at rituals, sense of the sacred in one's own life, prayer). Each issue is analyzed crossing several variables, in the first place the belonging (or not, or just in part) to a given religion professed by the respondents, and then age, sex, education and geographical area.

Let us consider some of the main points of interest in Garelli's book. Firstly, the research highlights the peculiarity of the Italian situation, characterized by an apparently slower secularization with reference to the European average, a still widespread religious feeling and a quite strong position held by the Catholic Church. Confronted with contemporary problems (such as those caused by biogenetics) calling into question its own fundamental principles, the Church has in the last years reacquired a stable public role. It is significant to observe that the majority of Italians think that the Church has the right (and for many also the duty) to raise its voice and to take a position in the public arena, and that her most convinced opponents are those professing 'no religion', while most members of the minority belonging to other religions express positive opinions concerning the Catholic Church. The reciprocal influence between religious beliefs and values and socio-political ideas and behavior is an index of the importance of religion in the construction of Italian national identity.

Secondly, the book presents useful data for further reflection on the theories of secularization and disenchantment, today at the center of a lively debate.¹

1 Patridge (2004), Landy and Saler (2009), Yelle (2013).

The research shows that in Italian contemporary religious culture there are many levels of secularization. On the one hand, most Italians, including many Catholics, do not adhere to some of the Church's fundamental truths and precepts (e.g. the sexual morality prohibiting pre-marital intercourses) considering them anachronistic, and so showing a quite secularized mentality. But on the other hand, if we take into account that most Italians believe in the existence of a superior being guiding our existence and in some kind of afterlife, and that a significant percentage believes in miracles, we can say that noteworthy traces of 'enchantment' are still part of today's Italian culture.

Thirdly, the book offers a good picture of what 'ordinary' people think, thus highlighting the difference between the most popular and widespread opinions and the ideas predominating in media discourse. This is evident for example in the comparison of people's and the media's positions regarding recent pressing issues such as the legitimacy of exposing the cross in public places or of religious teaching in schools. What emerges is that the minority formed by the opinion makers shaping the media discourse has a much more 'secular' mentality than the majority of Italians. Another interesting comparison is between religious ideas and practices, an index of the different levels of adhesion to a given religion: even if a significant percentage professes to pray more or less regularly, only a minority of Italians regularly attends the Mass. Moreover, Italians generally profess pluralistic and open ideas towards religious minorities, but in concrete situations they tend to act with caution and suspicion.

Fourthly, the book sheds light on some new forms of spirituality and their relationship with traditional religions. It shows the increasing popularity of such activities as yoga, meditation and numerous fitness or wellbeing programs based on holistic philosophies. Spirituality is perceived by a growing minority of Italians as an alternative way to cultivate one's own spirit outside the framework of institutionalized churches. Nevertheless, such new paths towards a better inner knowledge and harmony are not always in open contrast with religion: on the contrary, syncretic views are possible, as well as a renowned exquisitely religious conception of spirituality.

Furthermore, Garelli's study opens promising perspectives for further research integrating the quantitative with the qualitative approach. For example, a fundamentally semiotic issue emerges many times in the study, in connection with problems of interpretation and of meaning. If on the one side the data demonstrate that religion is still perceived by many Italians as a necessary provider of meaning to life, on the other side it is difficult to define exactly how people interpret such words as 'spiritual' as opposed to 'religious', or the plurality of meanings and representations they refer to when speaking of 'God'.

Garelli's book could therefore provide the basis for a wider semiotic study on the Italian religious '*immaginario*'.

In conclusion, this book contains an excellent overview of the numerous facets of Italian contemporary religiosity, ranging from the internal complexity and variety of the Catholic world to the new forms of spirituality, from the educational system to the *rites de passage*, from the churches to the SPA. *Religion Italian Style* offers a synthetic and efficacious statistical cross section of the Italian context, providing many data and stimulus for further research.

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