

# PRAYER, CONCENTRATION, AND THE SEMIOTICS OF SPACE IN THREE CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN NOVELS (DONI, RADI, RAIMO)

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the re-mediation of a specific practice of prayer in Italian literary culture. This practice entails a particular bodily posture and way of building the discursive relationship between the praying person and the deity, according to a specific valorization of space. The first part of the article proposes an analysis based on a sample of passages taken from contemporary novels by Rodolfo Doni, Luciano Radi, and Christian Raimo. The second part contextualizes the practice of prayer emerging from literary texts in the Christian-Catholic tradition. The conclusions present some hypotheses to explain why this way of praying is so relevant and present in today's culture that literary works represent and re-mediate it. The methodology underpinning the analysis derives from semiotics, with particular attention to theories concerning discourse and the semiotization of space.

## KEY WORDS

prayer, space, concentration, semiotechnique, genuflection, Catholicism, semiotics

## Introduction

This study focuses on the re-mediation of a specific practice of prayer in Italian literary culture.<sup>1</sup> The practice in question entails a particular bodily posture and way of building the discursive relationship between the praying person and the deity, according to a specific valorization of space. Setting off from the analysis of a sample of passages drawn from contemporary novels, I will contextualize this practice of prayer in the Christian-Catholic tradition and then present some hypotheses to explain why this way of praying continues to be so relevant in today's culture that literary works represent and re-mediate it.

The methodology underpinning the analysis derives from the semiotic study of space. Indeed, not only has the analysis of literary works served as the driving force for the development of key concepts in semiotic theory, but semiotics also provides useful tools for analyzing the semiotization of space and bodily practices across cultures and textual genres. In particular, the research presented herein is part of a wider semiotic

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reflection that takes into consideration the representation of religious themes in Italian fiction (cf. Ponzo 2019) and, at the same time, examines how religious cultures—and Christian-Catholic culture in particular – codify and represent the relationship between the sacred and the body in a plurality of texts, including literary works (cf. Ponzo and Chiais 2022).

### **Prayer in Three Contemporary Italian Novels**

The starting point of my reflection is therefore the analysis of the representation of prayer in three contemporary Italian novels: *La doppia vita* (“The double life”) by Rodolfo Doni (1980), *Non sono solo* (“I am not alone”) by Luciano Radi (1984), and *Il peso della grazia* (“The weight of grace”) by Christian Raimo (2012). These novels have in common an emphasis on the religious theme—and more precisely the explicit reference to Catholic tradition—, first person narrations of protagonists living in between the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the new millennium, and the description of practices of prayers.

#### ***La doppia vita***

The entirety of Rodolfo Doni’s work is characterized by religious inspiration<sup>2</sup> and can be divided into two categories, one composed of texts developing familiar and spiritual themes and the other composed of texts developing political and historical themes (Doni, *Autodizionario* 143-44). The author himself positions *La doppia vita* (1980) in this second category (*Autodizionario* 143). Indeed, this novel draws a monumental portrait of an époque, the Italian 20<sup>th</sup> century, complete with its historical and spiritual tensions. In a passage set in 1942 in the military hospital where he is facing a spiritual crisis while recovering from a wound to his leg, the protagonist takes part in the mass celebrated in the hospital chapel. He narrates:

There, at the end of the ground-floor corridor [of the hospital] paved in black and white tiles, a sliver of electric light shines through: from underneath a door darker than the others: it is the chapel, where mass is about to begin. Black and white nuns [...] stand kneeling inside, on the pews, to the left and right, bowed like votive offerings ready for sacrifice. Towards the altar, lit and adorned, is ascending – at the moment I enter – the old Capuchin with the sacred vestments. So, trying to make as little noise as possible with my limping gait, I go and stand on one of those brown pews, smelling of disinfectant, that the nuns have polished: the whole chapel has been touched by their woman’s hands, performing this too as a ritual. And they now stand with their heads held low, four on each side, and

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding this subject, cf. Zangrilli. All translations of quoted texts are mine.

they look like souls thrown – so I think – to the beasts outside, to atone for the sins of our unhinged world...<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, prayer is connected to two spatial orientations that are distinct but each of which complements the other. One represents an ascending axis: the priest *ascends* to the altar. In this spatial configuration, the body mainly exhibits an erect posture. The other spatial orientation delineates a pattern that is curved, almost circular, in keeping with a centripetal organization. This second orientation appears first in the description of the nuns whose bodies are kneeling and bending forward, their backs curved. Second, we find it in the ambience of the chapel, which is snug and quiet (indeed, the protagonist tries not to disturb this atmosphere by making noise as he walks), feminine and spiritual thanks to the work and presence of the nuns (and in fact the nuns and surrounding space are also depicted as chromatically corresponding: the nuns' habits and floor tiles involve the same colors).

While the first spatial orientation is based on a semi-symbolic system<sup>4</sup> setting up an opposition between the categories of “high” and “low” (associated respectively to earthly life and to heaven), the second is based on the opposition “inside-outside” (associated respectively to an intimate spiritual space in which to meet the divine and to the external and material world). In fact, the movement that characterizes this second semiotization of space is not *ascending* but *entering*. The act of entering is connected to the idea of offering oneself, an idea that is found in Radi's work as well.

### ***Non sono solo***

A preface to the novel, signed by the author, presents the text as an edited version of the personal journal of an old priest who narrates the spiritual journey characterizing the last years of his life.<sup>5</sup> In a particularly relevant passage, the protagonist reflects on his relationship with the deity and the way in which he conceptualizes “real prayer”:

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<sup>3</sup> “Ecco, in fondo al corridoio del pianterreno [dell'ospedale] pavimentato di mattonelle bianche e nere, traspare un filo di luce elettrica: da sotto una porta più scura delle altre: è la cappella, dove fra un momento comincerà la messa. Bianche e nere suore [...] stanno inginocchiate all'interno sulle panche, a destra e a sinistra, prostrate come offerte votive già pronte per il sacrificio. All'altare, acceso e adornato, sta salendo – nel momento in cui entro – il vecchio cappuccino coi paramenti sacri. Allora, cercando di fare il meno rumore possibile col mio passo zoppicante, vado a mettermi su una di quelle panche marroni odoranti di spirito che le suore hanno lucidato: tutta la cappella è stata toccata dalle loro mani di donne che compiono anche in questo un rito. E stanno a capo giù ora, quattro per parte, e sembrano anime gettate – così penso – in pasto alle belve fuori, ad espiare i peccati del nostro mondo scatenato...” (Doni, *La doppia vita* 105-106).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the notion of semi-symbolic system, as well as the opposition of topological categories, see Greimas.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the novel as well as a critical—albeit religiously oriented—reflection on this work, see Castelli.

I feel the need to pray, but I am no longer satisfied with recited invocations or truths defined by man's words. To be honest, even the meditation and examination of conscience that I have been doing every day since I was a child no longer meet my current spiritual needs. I am convinced I remain on the outside, not dialoguing with Him and only talking to myself. Instead, I would like to cross the border, to enter the Kingdom. It seems so incredible to me that, after so many years of priesthood, I have yet to learn true prayer. But it is really true, it is!

Today I feel that I have to pray with all my soul and all my body. The soul pervades my whole being, and so I want my hands, my legs, my eyes, my mouth, my brain, and all my limbs to take part in worship as well.

If I pray only with my heart, I offer only a part of myself to the Lord. That is why I bend over so deeply in my pew, I curl up.

But the exploration of the self, the act of bringing ourselves back to unity to make every one of our cells participate, requires a difficult pathway of mortification and engaging with Him.

[...] True prayer is a total offering, and it comes about in the joy of the communion of our soul and body with the soul and body of the Son of Man.<sup>6</sup>

In the old priest's description, the position of double genuflection (kneeling on both knees) is accentuated, thus causing the body to take on a curved shape, to curl up on itself. This position is analogous to that of the nuns described in *Doni* (105-106), and in both narratives this kind of prayer is connected to the concept of offering oneself wholly ("That is why I bend over so deeply in my pew, I curl up." Radi 91).

This offering can take place only after achieving the unity of the self, composed of body and soul, and derives from a conscious (and therefore active) will to explore oneself. Self-knowledge and the unity of the self are necessary for communion with the divine Other, but this pathway, according to the narrator, entails a difficult process of mortification that introduces a sacrificial component into the idea of offering oneself totally.

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<sup>6</sup> "Sento il bisogno di pregare, ma non mi soddisfano più le invocazioni recitate, né le verità definite dalle parole dell'uomo. A dire il vero anche la meditazione e l'esame di coscienza che faccio tutti i giorni, sin da quando ero bambino, non rispondono più ai miei attuali bisogni spirituali. Ho la convinzione di rimanere all'esterno, di non dialogare con Lui, ma di parlare con me stesso. Vorrei invece varcare il confine, entrare nel Regno. Mi sembra davvero impossibile che, dopo tanti anni di sacerdozio, io debba ancora imparare la vera preghiera. Ma è proprio vero, è così!

Oggi sento di dover pregare con tutta l'anima e tutto il corpo. L'anima è in tutto il mio essere e quindi voglio che anche le mie mani, le mie gambe, i miei occhi, la mia bocca, il mio cervello, tutte le mie membra partecipino all'adorazione.

Se prego soltanto con il cuore, offro solo una parte di me al Signore. Ecco perché mi piego profondamente sul mio banco, mi raggomitolo.

Ma l'esplorazione di se stessi, il ricondursi ad unità, per far partecipare ogni nostra cellula, richiede un difficile itinerario di mortificazioni e di incontro con Lui.

[...] La vera preghiera è una offerta totale e la si realizza nella gioia della comunione della nostra anima e del nostro corpo con l'anima e con il corpo del Figlio dell'Uomo." (Radi 91-92).

As a consequence, in the passage analyzed here, the semiotization of space is characterized by a centripetal orientation in which the opposition “inside-outside” and the related action of entering (“I am convinced I remain on the outside ...” Radi 91) are central.

### *Il peso della grazia*

*Il peso della grazia* narrates the spiritual evolution of a young man struggling against the precariousness, uncertainty, senselessness and chaos of the contemporary world. As I argue in Ponzo (*Religious Narratives* 66-67; 76-77),<sup>7</sup> the protagonist’s experience of prayer is disturbed by his inability to concentrate. For instance, when he tries to pray at home in the morning in keeping with the traditional Catholic liturgy, his attention soon strays from prayer: “After the hymn I kneel and look just outside—and these days when the dawn of June brings out the contours of things, I find it even more difficult to concentrate so I can pray. This morning there was also a dog barking somewhere and the television of the woman who lives downstairs...”<sup>8</sup>

In this passage, there is a kneeling body that does not, however, assume the “curled up” position described in Doni and Radi: the protagonist does not bow his head, and his gaze begins to wander followed by the other senses that, instead of concentrating on the activity before him, lose themselves in a centrifugal movement. Authentic and effective prayer, in contrast, takes place in the moments in which the protagonist actually achieves concentration: “In the church, in the half-light [...] I knelt down and rubbed my hands over my face, as if I were washing it without water. Well, Jesus, what is going on? Would you tell me, please, in as few words as possible?”<sup>9</sup>

In this second passage, the protagonist’s position is again kneeling, but in this case there are several bodily signs indicating concentration. These signs include his closed eyes, his joined hands, and his face covered with his hands. The same indicators also appear in the following passage, set in a church where the protagonist shares an intense spiritual experience with an unknown young girl:

I turn to the young girl, who only responds with a nod. She is completely focused. She kneels down, closes her eyes and puts her hands together. Praying with this little girl makes me feel a kind of performance anxiety.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2 of Ponzo (*Religious Narratives*) contains a more detailed analysis of the novel in question.

<sup>8</sup> “Dopo l’inno mi inginocchio e guardo subito fuori – e in questi giorni in cui l’alba di giugno fa risaltare i contorni delle cose, mi viene ancora più difficile riuscire a concentrarmi per pregare. Stamattina c’era anche un cane che abbaiva da qualche parte e la televisione di quella che abita di sotto...” (Raimo 29).

<sup>9</sup> “Nella chiesa, nella penombra [...] Mi sono inginocchiato e mi sono stropicciato le mani sulla faccia, come la dovessi lavare senz’acqua.

Be’, Gesù, che cosa sta succedendo? Me lo dici, *per piacere*, in due parole? (Raimo 278).

I, the adult, can't stop thinking about Fiora [...] and this little girl instead looks like a little mystic. She doesn't offer me any supporting solidarity, and it forces me to withdraw into my own thoughts. Prayers, questions, inferences, after a while I start competing with her as she prays. I too kneel, hands together, and concentrate.

And from somewhere there appear trees and the stairs leading up to the house in Via Livata, crucifixes, Fiora, a deserted road, a coffee-maker [...] until I seem to be truly praying...<sup>10</sup>

Whereas both the second passage and this third one portray examples of successful concentration, taking place in a kneeling and curled up position, the latter represents a more advanced level of intensity of prayer. Indeed, both the protagonist and the young girl, at the apex of concentration, receive a supernatural vision: they look up at the altar and see the monstrance oscillate as if in an earthquake, leaving them profoundly upset. Once more, the movement towards the inside precedes the vertically-oriented movement: the assumption of an inward bodily attitude—connected to the capacity to achieve inner concentration—precedes the vertically-oriented movement: in the third passage, the protagonist's eyes first close to foster inner concentration, then open and look up to the altar and the monstrance.

### Concentration and Communion

It is evident by now that “concentration” is a key term for defining the spatial semiotization in relation to prayer found in the literary works under consideration. This word, which is connected to the semantic fields of collection, centrality, and depth, also plays a role in Catholic doctrinal and theological discourse where it is generally defined as a state of the mind and soul. Theologian Giovanna Della Croce (2117), for instance, defines “il raccoglimento” (concentration/focus) as an effort to overcome “le dissipazioni dell'anima” (the scattering of the soul). What is particularly interesting from the perspective adopted here, however, is that this state of the mind and soul appears to be connected to a specific state of the body. In the passages analyzed, therefore, the spiritual state of concentration is paralleled by a specific bodily posture, that of the body kneeling and curled up on itself.

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<sup>10</sup> “... mi volto verso la ragazzina, che non ricambia se non con un cenno. È tutta concentrata. S'inginocchia, chiude gli occhi e mette le mani giunte.

Io adulto che non riesco a non pensare a Fiora [...] e questa ragazzina che invece sembra una piccola mistica. Non mi dà nessuna sponda di complicità. Mi costringe a ritirarmi verso i miei pensieri. Preghiere, domande, illazioni, dopo un po' mi metto in competizione con lei che prega. M'inginocchio anch'io, mani giunte, e mi concentro.

E da qualche parte appaiono alberi, e le scale da salire nella casa di via Livata, crocifissi, Fiora, una strada deserta, una macchina per il caffè [...] finché mi sembra di stare *veramente* pregando...” (Raimo 220-21).

In order to understand this connection, it may be useful to mention the concept of “semiotecnicque”: as Francesco Galofaro (“Come prestare attenzione”) explains, in a society there are practices that *produce* the meaning that is the goal of the performer. In other words, thanks to the performance of such practices, the performer is able to obtain the meaning to which they aspire and constitute themselves as a subject. In the case of prayer, Galofaro observes, the bodily practices themselves—especially in terms of proprioception and posture—produce the spiritual meanings to which the praying person aspires. This theory seems to be confirmed by the cases considered here, as the spiritual effectiveness of prayer is intrinsically linked to a specific practice of the body entailing a specific posture.

The ultimate goal of this semiotecnicque and associated state of concentration is to achieve communion with the deity. The concept of communion is related to the idea of the offering or “spiritual sacrifice.” In the Old Testament, sacrifice is associated with the original meaning of communion between human beings and God in which the former make of themselves a gift to God (Sodi 172). Starting from the period of exile and subsequently with the consolidation of Christianity, a new idea of sacrifice gained importance. This new conceptualization entails shifting from material sacrifice to inner, spiritual sacrifice (174), understood as the bloodless offering of one’s life by living in obedience to the divine word. Obedience, in turn, depends on the person’s ability to listen and accept the divine word: these are the constitutive elements of prayer. As a consequence, spiritual sacrifice is the result of prayer itself, and prayer in turn expresses this will to offer oneself (176).

Listening is therefore a fundamental aspect of prayer, and it involves a process of introjection and concentration that requires solitude and silence (Croce). The parallel of such a process is found in the Eucharistic sacrament when the divine makes its way inside the believer through the ingestion of the host. This parallel between listening and ingesting the divine and his word is expressed in a topos that appears quite frequently in doctrinal and theological literature consisting of using metaphors belonging to the semantic fields of chewing and ruminating on the divine word.<sup>11</sup> These metaphors are likewise clearly based on a spatial orientation involving inward movement. The literary representation of praying bodies curled up like sacrificial victims should therefore be read in relation to this imagery that forms part of the “encyclopedic”<sup>12</sup> portion of Catholic culture.

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<sup>11</sup> See Leone for a general overview of this topos and Marin (315) for a discussion of its use in the writings of Augustine of Hippo.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the notion of encyclopedia as the set of shared knowledge and beliefs characterizing a culture, see Eco (55-140).

## Spatial Orientations and Bodily Techniques

The semiotician Francesco Marsciani proposes that prayer be studied as a *discourse*, based on a method consisting of the textual analysis of prayers to define the actorial system and values set and displayed in each text. In his analysis of the “Our Father,” Marsciani shows that the articulation of a discursive relationship between the community of the faithful and God the Father is established according to a frontal positioning that is typical of the discursive situation of interlocution. In this positioning, however, the two interlocutors are placed at a distance and this distance is in turn organized according to a vertical pattern (309). The discursive configuration characterizing the text that, in many respects, represents Christian culture’s most fundamental prayer, also appears in other texts and semiotic systems of this culture:<sup>13</sup>

It is the frontality from below of the Gothic church, that frontality directed at a crucifix hanging at a commanding height within the apsidal simulacrum of the heavenly vaults, that same frontality which, from a [position of] genuflected lowering, timidly lifts its gaze upwards to the ostension of the holy body, or towards the little lamp testifying to God’s presence on the altar. In short, the Lord’s Prayer as a prayer establishes a space, its sacred space, that takes on traits of the “thou” in the highest heaven and is organized along the dominant [element] of the vertical: it is a space in which there is an ascent [...] faced by the orant and traversed by the prayer, with the voice ascending to God and asking that God, in principle always positioned facing us, [...] come down to earth, along the same path of ascent which, from his point of view, will then be an advent of his kingdom according to his will.<sup>14</sup>

This front-facing positioning combined with the vertical orientation is undoubtedly a fundamental component of the Catholic culture of prayer;<sup>15</sup> as the literary passages

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<sup>13</sup> The same discursive configuration can also be found, for instance, in another fundamental prayer, the Holy Mary (Marsciani 311).

<sup>14</sup> “È la frontalità dal basso della chiesa gotica, quella frontalità che si rivolge a un crocifisso appeso a un’altezza notevole dentro al simulacro absidiale delle volte celesti, quella stessa che, da un abbassamento genuflesso, leva timidamente lo sguardo verso l’ostensione del corpo santo, o verso il lumicino che testimonia della presenza di Dio sull’altare. Il Padre Nostro come preghiera, insomma, istituisce uno spazio, il suo spazio sacro, che riprende tratti del tu nell’alto dei cieli e che si organizza sulla dominante della verticale: si tratta di uno spazio dove c’è una salita [...] che l’orante si trova di fronte e che viene percorsa dalla preghiera con la voce che sale a Dio e che chiede a quel Dio, per principio e sempre voltato con la faccia verso di noi [...] di scendere sulla terra, lungo la stessa salita che dal suo punto di vista sarà allora una venuta del suo regno secondo la sua volontà” (Marsciani 310).

<sup>15</sup> Further semiotic studies looking into this spatial orientation include Lotman and Ponzo and Galofaro. The first proposes an analysis of the meanings of the opposition “high-low” in Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*, recognizing that this opposition is pivotal in the configuration of the narrative world, Dante’s movement and also the definition of the moral and transcendent values informing the narration; the second presents an analysis of the semiotization of space in a local Italian community living at the feet of Europe’s highest Marian sanctuary, situated on the top of Mount Roccamelone: an analysis of texts representing



analyzed here show, however, this discursive situation is not the only one. Indeed, the centripetal orientation characterizing the effort of concentration also appears highly relevant. This orientation directed toward the person's inner space is connected to the idea that they are wholly involved in the practice of prayer, thereby overcoming the traditional dualistic distinction between body and soul. On the contrary, this dualistic distinction tends to be based on the semi-symbolic system opposing "high" and "low". As the theologian Laudazi explains, "... the activity of praying is not an act performed by a single human faculty or function, but by the whole person [...]. This activity requires, to a certain extent, entering into oneself and detaching oneself from ordinary, everyday things and, at the same time, it induces a movement and openness toward the Other, which tends toward dialogical explicitness."<sup>16</sup>

The inward orientation can be either independent of or complementary to the ascensional orientation. The two can exist simultaneously and interweave; for instance: "In solitude, life is concentrated and, for that very reason, increased; it is universalized, spreading out in height and depth."<sup>17</sup> In other cases, the two orientations are conceived as phases occurring one after the other in time: in both the literary texts and theological literature analyzed, the acts of kneeling and "curling up" are described as preceding the beginning of what is perceived to be "real" prayer, just as concentration is seen as a specific preparatory phase setting the stage for prayer (cf. Laudazi 2005). While the connotations of this inward orientation are generally perceived to be positive, the orientation towards a vertical ascent can assume dysphoric connotations if it is dissociated from that of concentration, namely inward retiring, as clearly depicted in the novel by Raimo. This vertical-only orientation seems to be connected to the idea of rigid ritual, an empty formula deprived of meaning and genuine involvement.

It is possible, moreover, to identify a third spatial orientation based on horizontality. This orientation tends to have quite distinct dysphoric connotations. The trajectory of horizontality characterizes human incidents and accidents (Marsciani) and is connected to the concept of distraction. When senses are limited to the horizontal dimension they tend to wander, distracted and diverted by external stimuli, as Raimo's novel perfectly represents. More precisely, the horizontal orientation tends to bear a dysphoric valorization especially when it characterizes the perspective of the praying person. On the contrary, it has a positive value when it is connected to issues of exemplarity as an

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different genres, from pastoral letters to hymns and poems, shows that the opposition "high-low" is central in this local culture as well and is related to a set of repeatedly occurring meanings.

<sup>16</sup> "... l'attività di pregare non è un atto di una sola facoltà o funzione umana, ma di tutta la persona [...]. Questa attività richiede, in una certa misura, di entrare in se stesso e di distaccarsi dalle cose ordinarie e quotidiane, e, nello stesso tempo, provoca un movimento e un'apertura verso l'Altro, che tende a un'esplicitazione dialogica" (Laudazi 1992).

<sup>17</sup> "Nella solitudine la vita si concentra e, per ciò stesso, si accresce; si universalizza, si distende in altezza e profondità." (A. Sertillanges, "Meditazioni" 30, cit. in Croce 2343).

instrument of spiritual elevation, another central feature of the culture under consideration. Just like imitating the young girl leads the protagonist of Raimo's novel to achieve concentration and thus authentic prayer, in the same way some great saints, considered examples for teaching the faithful how to concentrate, are described as the communicators of a message that is diffused "horizontally," reaching all the people who meet them or read their writings or hagiographies. For instance, "It was said of the holy curate of Ars and St. John of the Cross that one need only look at them to feel the call to concentration and find oneself in the presence of God. The concentrating man [...] is never rigid or closed off in relation to others; rather, he becomes highly communicative. With his very person, transparent as a mirror, he reflects the inaccessible light of God..."<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, in the novels considered here as well as the wider Catholic culture in which they are located and from which they derive, the discourse about prayer is based on a spatial imagery that rejects two-dimensionality and instead valorizes tri-dimensionality. While the purely vertical orientation evokes the emptiness of excessive ritual formalism, the purely horizontal dimension instead points to distraction, the senses prevailing over spiritual concentration, the dissipation of the self and the inability to communicate with the deity. In the positive spatial model, in contrast, the vertical orientation—just like the horizontal one—are necessarily integrated by the centripetal orientation, which entails achieving the union of the self, the total offering, and the silence that allows the soul to listen to the deity, and which therefore constitutes the necessary condition for prayer.

### **Conclusion: The Topicality of the Tri-Dimensional Spatial Model of Prayer**

During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Church sought to adapt its tradition to the new needs of modern times. In many respects, these innovations can be interpreted as representing greater horizontality: for instance, the exceptional, marvelous model of sanctity was put aside in favor of an ideal of sanctity for everyone to be pursued in everyday life, and the liturgy itself—through the vulgarization of mass and repositioning of the priest facing the audience, for instance—shifted to grant unprecedented importance to the horizontal dimension. The traditional ritual, conducted in Latin with the priest facing the altar, together with the traditional architecture of the church, favored an ascensional orientation (the assembly positioned in the church's nave with the priest at the altar, generally placed above the nave, and the deity often represented through crucifixes or icons located above the altar). In contrast, the new

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<sup>18</sup> "Del santo curato d'Ars e di San Giovanni della Croce si diceva che bastava solo guardarli per sentire il richiamo al raccoglimento e per trovarsi alla presenza di Dio. L'uomo raccolto [...] Non è mai rigido o chiuso con gli altri, ma diventa altamente comunicativo. Con la sua stessa persona, trasparente come lo specchio, riflette la luce inaccessibile di Dio..." (Croce 2117).

liturgy seems to privilege the horizontal and dialogical dimension, with the priest facing the audience (cf. Ponzio “*Vetus Ordo Missae*”).

At the same time, however, scholars generally agree that the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the flourishing of a new trend of mysticism (cf. Billanovich, Mongini, and Stoppa; Galofaro “*Mistica e linguaggio*”) involving a mentality in which the centripetal orientation is fundamental, as is the goal of achieving a union with the divine. This mystical afflatus can be seen as related to a wider phenomenon, found across cultures and religions, in which people display a growing thirst for interiority and spirituality. This spiritual quest has led individuals and communities to explore new paths, going beyond the traditional borders imposed by institutional religions to instead assemble personalized sets of beliefs and practices, often based on the principle of syncretism, in order to meet their specific spiritual needs.<sup>19</sup> The concept of mindfulness and related practices, most of which combine Buddhist concepts with psychoanalysis, is a good example of this phenomenon. The growing interest surrounding the semiotiques of prayer, as well as concentration and meditation more generally, is quite easy to explain in light of the emergence of our contemporary world: a world in which people are exposed to exponentially more and more media, information, and noise, the average lifestyle is characterized by frenetic rhythms, and many observers view modern life as dominated by a materialistic mentality that downplays or denies the importance of cultivating the spirit.

Reflecting on this cultural sensibility can also serve to shed light on another recurring theme encountered in the texts under consideration, namely a concern with “authenticity”: in the literature analyzed here, there is a clear-cut opposition between a kind of prayer perceived as “true” and an empty, inauthentic kind of prayer that consists in a set of gestures and words deprived of meaning. The effort to learn how to perform “authentic” prayer seeks to combat not only distraction, therefore, but also senselessness, chaos, and empty and useless words. Complete immersion in the act and meaning of prayer is seen as the full engagement of the person, and consequently as a matter of truth, sincerity, and moral commitment: in other words, of “authenticity.”

The Catholic Church is well aware of these cultural trends and needs, as observed by the theologian Laudazi: “The modern world is characterized by man’s awareness of his own human interiority, and this has led theology to a more fully developed study of the stages and pathways of prayer in the innermost space of the human being.”<sup>20</sup> In view

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<sup>19</sup> This is the base of a philosophy espoused by the growing number of people who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” cf. Fuller, Palmisano, and Pannofino.

<sup>20</sup> “Il mondo moderno è caratterizzato da una presa di coscienza da parte dell’uomo della propria interiorità umana e ciò ha condotto la teologia a uno studio più sviluppato delle tappe e delle vie della preghiera nell’intimo dell’essere umano” (Laudazi 1996).

of this awareness, the Church, and the Catholic community more generally, have responded to this need in two different ways.

On one hand, Catholic culture has likewise introduced and “translated” into its own “semiosphere”<sup>21</sup> ideas and practices drawn from different religions and cultures. This is the case, for instance, of the well-known and controversial method called “deep meditation” proposed by Indian Jesuit Antony De Mello, a practice that draws inspiration from Buddhism and psychology combined with Catholic—and especially Jesuit—culture.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, Catholic culture has re-discovered and reinterpreted its own tradition, in particular mystical literature. John of the Cross (1542-1591) and Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), for instance, are among the saints that contributed most significantly to the development of this idea and practice of prayer: their spiritual legacy is still a cornerstone of contemporary Catholic culture, as proven by the fact that they were both proclaimed Doctors of the Church, in 1926 and 1970 respectively. In both cases, granting the saints this honorific title underlines their key role as “Doctors of prayer”.<sup>23</sup> This rediscovery and re-evaluation on the part of the Church and religious community is paralleled by a growing interest on the part of scholars from a number of disciplines in mystics, inward-oriented practices of prayer, spiritual exercises, mystical literature, etc.

In her autobiography, Theresa of Avila narrates that she struggled for many years with an inability to concentrate, with interference from both interior and exterior noise impeding the soul in its pursuit of unity and communion with the divine.<sup>24</sup> To overcome this challenge, she finally formulated the metaphor of the interior castle (which is, not coincidentally, organized according to a centripetal spatial orientation). The same problem of concentration reappears in literature across different historical moments and Christian communities. In the Late Middle Ages, for instance, the Hesychast monks of the Eastern Orthodox Church, inspired by the verse “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:6), developed a technique of prayer (or semiotechnique) aimed at fostering the centripetal movement that enables the soul to achieve concentration and communion with the divine.<sup>25</sup> This technique was based on a specific posture, with the body curled inward, the chin bent over the chest, and the hands or arms resting on the knees. Although the problem of achieving concentration occurs

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<sup>21</sup> Regarding the notion of semiosphere, see Lotman and Clark.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the concept of deep meditation and prayer, as well as for bibliographic references on the subject, see Regazzoni.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Laudazi (1996-97).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Croce (2311).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Galofaro.

repeatedly throughout the history of religion and literature, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that it is felt with particular intensity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today. Simone Weil, for instance, recounts in a letter written in 1942 that she used to recite the “Our Father” in Greek, and each time she became distracted she stopped and began again until she was able to say the whole prayer while maintaining a state of complete and constant concentration.<sup>26</sup> There are countless examples, and the literary texts analyzed here are of specific interest precisely because they relate the need to concentrate and difficulty in achieving this state to a specific bodily practice and spatial imagery informing both the discursive structure of prayer and the positioning of the body.

From a semiotic point of view, the narratives considered in this study can be ascribed to a specific semiotic ideology,<sup>27</sup> in which the topological category – understood as spatial imagery and the valorization or semiotization of space—is of primary importance in imagining the relationship between the praying self and the deity. As the analysis has highlighted, this semiotic ideology finds expression not only in this discursive organization of prayer but also in posture, in which withdrawing inward at the spiritual level coincides with assuming a position in which double genuflection is accentuated by a curled-up bodily position. This posture is deemed to foster the inward attitude that leads to self-knowledge and the unity of the self, both of which represent the precondition for communicating with, offering oneself to, and communing with the deity.

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<sup>26</sup> For further reflections on Weil’s practice and spiritual experience surrounding the recitation of the prayer, see Ponzio (“Religious-artistic Epiphanes” 153-55).

<sup>27</sup> Concerning the notion of semiotic ideology as the set of knowledge and beliefs shared by a certain cultural group in relation to signs, their functions, and their powers, see Keane.

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