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Challenging Catholicism: The Significance of Spirituality in Italy

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/123772> since 2016-09-13T12:12:56Z

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This is an author version of the contribution published on:
Palmisano S.
Challenging Catholicism. The Significance of Spirituality in Italy
Journal for the Study of Spirituality (2013) No.3
DOI: [10.1179/2044024313Z.0000000002](https://doi.org/10.1179/2044024313Z.0000000002)

Challenging Catholicism. The Significance of Spirituality in Italy.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s sociological literature has paid increasing attention to the “revolution of the subject” (Taylor 1991). The subjectivist shift in modern culture, Charles Taylor writes, has profoundly transformed contemporary society. Western man is ever less willing to live his life in terms of objective roles, obligations or heteronymous principles, expecting more and more to decide freely the aims of his own existence. The consequences of this swing can be found in the most disparate fields of associative life, such as at school (more emphasis on learning than on teaching), in the market (where customer satisfaction is the main yardstick), health and body care (“wellness” practices), work (the arrival of diverse forms of flexibility), affectivity and sexuality (recognition of new forms of family life).

The removal of the barycentre from institutions to the subject has also collided with the sacred sphere. According to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), if the West is taking its first steps towards a “spiritual revolution”, it is because the idea has gained ground that the main source of meaning is the uniqueness of one’s own subjectivity, attributing a secondary role to belonging to institutions which impose from without an order already given and established. If religion sacralizes the cultural model based on conformity to external authority, spirituality sacralizes experience of the inner self perceived as unique and unrepeatable. In Great Britain, according to the authors, the subjectivist turning point presages a slow decline of forms connected with traditional religions and a rapid growth of – subjective – spiritual modalities of relationship with the sacred.

Yet the distinction between religion and spirituality upon which Heelas and Woodhead base their analysis cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, it is at the centre of a lively debate between those who claim that spirituality is merely a dimension of religion and those who maintain that it is something completely different (for a detailed discussion, see Wood 2010). For those who insist on separating the two concepts, contemporary spirituality – whether defined as “alternative”, “non-institutional”, “non-church” or “feminine” – seems to have broken free from the moorings of religious traditions. It does not take shape as a dimension of religion but as a new kind of religion aimed at cultivating the deepest self (Furseth 2005; Possamai 2005; Lynch 2007; Heelas 2008). Those who relate to the sacred according to these modalities attribute value to personal experience, approaching practices inspired by Oriental and New Age traditions which promise to facilitate contact with one’s deepest self through harmonization of body, mind and spirit – rather than assigning importance to the beliefs, doctrines and ethical precepts of a particular religious tradition.

The British situation described by Heelas and Woodhead, although very different from the Italian, throws light on a tendency which is gradually

gaining ground in our country too. The language of spirituality immigrated into Italy at least twenty years ago. Courses, seminars, lectures and sessions of yoga, meditation, reiki, shiatsu, Ayurveda and aromatherapy, to give some of the best-known examples, are widely available. Consumption and advertising join forces with the imperatives of the new “wellness” lifestyle, proposing multiple contamination (Nardella 2012).

Although this split reflects some exposure to “mind-body-spirit” spirituality, it does not demonstrate proof of Italians’ serious involvement in it. Even less so since the few studies on yoga in Italy (Squarcini and Mori 2008) show that not everybody who is attracted by the charms of the *holistic milieu* considers it as having any spiritual relevance. There is a temptation to see the spirituality phenomenon as yet another manifestation of the religion of consumption but that would mean underestimating a complex framework which rather marks the urgency of pitting oneself against it. The time has come for Italian sociology of religion to include the “spirituality” category in its work diary and to ask itself whether it can be useful in understanding recent transformations in our country which, as is well known, is characterized by the presence of a still prevalently monopolistic religious market.¹

The above thinking inspired the research objectives of *The Italian Religion and Spirituality Project* carried out in 2007 to examine the relationship between society and religion.² In this article I shall analyse the main findings of the research in the light of how spirituality is conceived in Italy; or what meanings the term spirituality assumes in a prevalently Catholic country. In what social circles does alternative spirituality show itself? What is the relationship between spirituality and Catholicism? What inferences may we draw with regard to the future of Catholicism? In order to answer these questions I shall try to make a contribution to that spirituality which – although in Italy it is just being born – on the international level is now walking and talking (Flanagan and Jupp 2007; Dawson 2011; King 2011).

2. The Significance of Spirituality in Italian Catholicism

Only recently has spirituality entered the Italian debate. Although many elements which today are considered as thematically “spirituality” had already been about from the mid-1980s in terms of “personal religiosity”, it is with

¹ Italian researchers (Garelli et al. 2003) – in showing that Catholicism is still the prevailing religion – have coined the expression “peculiar pluralism” to claim that although Italian society continues to portray itself as a relatively homogenous society in religious terms, Italian Catholics have a variety of ways of interpreting their practical involvement with the Catholic Church.

² The project, led by Franco Garelli, was financed by the Fondazione CRT of Turin. The survey – which was carried out by the Eurisko public opinion institute in Milan – was conducted using a random sample of 3,160 people between 16 and 74 years old, resident in Italy, divided according to region of residence, the population of the commune, sex, ten-year-long age group and academic qualifications.

Garelli (Garelli *et al.* 2003) and Giordan (2006) that the category appears explicitly in Italian sociology. The first empirical datum is supplied by Garelli (Garelli *et al.* 2003: 89) when, in the light of the survey findings in *Pluralismo Morale e Religioso degli Italiani* (Italians' Moral and Religious Pluralism 1998) he observes “there is a widespread tendency among Italians to consider themselves as religiously-oriented people rather than to interpret their lives in spiritual terms”. What has happened in the fifteen years since that revelation? To answer, it would help us to sketch an outline of the general relationship between Italians and spirituality, starting from their tendency to interpret existence in spiritual terms. In both the 1998 and 2007 surveys we began by asking interviewees to place themselves on a seven-stage scale as a “religious person” and a “spiritual person”, replying to the following two questions: 1. “Independently of whether or not you go to church or any other place of worship, to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?” 2. “Do you think of yourself as having spiritual life, understood as something more than a simple interest or feeling?” In Table 1 the answers are compared with those from 1998.

Table 1. Self-definition as a religious person and a spiritual person. Comparison between 1998 and 2007 (percentages)

	<i>Religious person</i>			<i>Spiritual Person</i>			
	% 2007	% 1998	P %	% 2007	% 1998	P %	
None	–	25	21	+4	23	28	-5
Low							
Medium	–	73	78	-5	74	68	+6
High							
Don't understand the question		2	1	+1	3	4	-1
Total	100	100		100	100		
(N2007=3160; N1998=2149)							

If at the end of the 1990s the number of people who described themselves as “very” or “fairly religious” far outstripped those who considered themselves “very” or “fairly spiritual” (78% vs 68%), in 2007 the gap had narrowed (73% vs 74%): compared to 1998 the “very” or “fairly religious” dropped 5 percentage points while the “very” or “fairly spiritual” rose 6 points. At the same time the “non-religious” or “little-religion” category rose (from 21% to 25%) and the “non-spiritual” dropped (from 28% to 23%). Longitudinal comparison shows that values of the spirit inspire Italians' existence more than in the past; but what are the contexts chosen for cultivating values of the spirit?

Among the interviewees the idea prevails that spiritual life can develop irrespective of official institutions. Eight out of ten say they agree with the statement that “Everybody can have a spiritual life independently of one's

relationship with an organized religion”. Seemingly contradicting a previous datum, two-thirds of Italians believe that a church or community of believers of reference is important for spiritual growth. This discrepancy reveals that although attachment to organized religion continues to be a strongly-felt and recognized need in a Catholic country – especially for those who identify spirituality with Catholicism – an increasing number hold that church religion does not possess a monopoly of spirituality, which may leave the church to enter people’s daily lives.

Spirituality is becoming detached not only from official institutions. Half of the sample believe it is possible to have a spiritual life without believing in God. This opinion is shared even by those who go to church or consider it essential for spiritual formation, and by exactly 26% of those who go to Mass. This confirms that many Italians – whether or not attached to the Catholic Church – recognize the plausibility of spiritual paths undertaken outside the fortress of Catholicism and even apart from the transcendent God of their own Christian tradition. Individualistic faith traits emerge both in selective acceptance of the basic tenets of their own religious faith and in religious practice replacing the observance criterion with optional presence, as well as a totally subjective way of relating to churches’ directions in the ethical field.

The data we have seen so far allow us to define two kinds of spirituality: the first I call “intrareligious” or Catholic and the second “extrareligious” or alternative spirituality. Intrareligious spirituality – in the case of Italy, Catholic spirituality – presumes that religious experience is linked with the sacred which remains “external/higher/out there” (typically the Christian God). More specifically, we can point out three logical possibilities: spiritual life reliant on God; spiritual life reliant on the Church; spiritual life reliant on both. Extrareligious spirituality here means a form of spirituality associated neither with the Church nor with God as represented by theistic Christianity (for a detailed discussion, see Palmisano 2010). Now I shall examine both forms of spirituality.

3. Extrareligious Sprituality

Changes on the public scene show a certain fascination on the part of Italian society with extrareligious spirituality. In order to explore these changes – in the workplace, in the health and education systems, in “fitness” and in religious spaces – we have used not only the questionnaire but also document analysis and secondary data-gathering. Here are some examples.

Above all, the workplace. In the mid-1990s Italian companies began to get interested in spirituality. High-tech and e-companies, old-economy firms and public bodies introduced yoga sessions, meditation and autogenes traning for their employees. For example, E-Tree Internet Soul in Treviso organized a Zen room, the first to do so in Italy, conceived as a “chill-out zone” where employees could relax, meditate or just remain in silence seeking inspiration

or concentration. There is also a rapid expansion of companies offering spiritual courses and training. What they offer to management is increased prosperity of the enterprise as a result of healthier personnel, reduced absenteeism and an enhanced company image. Yoga Corporate is one of the first Italian-born organizations with the aim of “fostering a relaxing and harmonious lifestyle in workplaces through the practice of yoga and meditation”; but many others have the same specialization and the National Association of Yoga Teachers itself has developed wellbeing programmes directed at companies.

Moving from the nerve centre of capitalism to the health sphere, we find here too a flowering of spiritual paths crisscrossing the medical ones in various ways. Since the 1980s there has been a widespread diffusion of non-conventional medicine (Giarelli *et al.* 2007), leaving aside magical-charismatic therapeutic practices which presupposes the intervention of healers, shamans, astrologers and/or spiritual leaders. According to the Multiscopo survey carried out in 2000 by the National Statistical Institute on a sample of 52,332 families (140,011 people), about 9 million Italians (15.6% of the population) had availed themselves of non-conventional medicine in the 3 years preceding the interview. Giarelli points out that the cultural and commercial success of non-conventional medicine cannot be explained only in terms of patients’ dissatisfaction with the technical and professional competence of medical science; in perfect harmony with the subjectivist shift, the alternative medicines’ strong point is their capacity to transform the healing and recovery process beginning from the patient’s personal experience.

The world of fitness too is being restructured under the influence of spirituality. The modern gymnasium has enriched its offer as a “wellness hypermarket” (Ferrero Camoletto 2005). In addition to body-building, dance, spinning, acqua-gym and martial arts can be found slow-fitness proposals like pilates, t’ai chi ch’uan, power yoga and walking meditation which, diametrically opposite aerobic physical activities, stress the concept of slowness and respecting limits, turning the attention of practicants towards their interior. The holistic ideal of body/spirit fusion is further made attractive to gym managers by the creation of charming interiors created by bio-architects in accordance with the teachings of sense-therapies such as chromotherapy, aromatherapy, musicotherapy and feng shui. Further confirmation of attention paid to the sensory faculty is supplied by the recent appearance, in addition to exercise rooms, of places set aside for relaxation and “chilling out”, such as massage, sauna, Turkish baths and hydromassage.

And the current success of thermal cures and *remise en forme* leaves little doubt about the fact that demand for psychophysical-wellbeing-connected services is increasing rapidly. According to the latest report on the thermal system in Italy (2002), in response to the demand for “global wellbeing”, resorts themselves have renovated, introducing every kind of holistic treatment and gentle therapeutic practices.

The picture we've seen helps to demonstrate that, albeit the influence of extrareligious spirituality can be traced back to various social institutions, it is realized in a generalized growth of the culture of personal wellbeing.

Yet to study the practices which sociologists more properly associate with extrareligious spirituality, we need to look into the *holistic milieu*, the *locus* where practices for exercising interior listening and facilitating individual's contact with his or her inner self (Possamai 2005; Heelas and Woodhead 2005) are concentrated. To gain understanding of the Italian *holistic milieu*, interviewees were asked if in the years immediately preceding the interview they had taken part in the activities of any New Age or Eastern-inspired groups. 4% said they had attended seminars concerning New Age or new religious movements, 6% had taken part in meditation, yoga or Zen groups and 9% in meetings dedicated to Oriental spirituality. Limiting the analysis to the hard core, the Italians who claimed to have participated in all the activities mentioned in the questionnaire, it turns out that the "completely involved" are almost 2%. This does not seem to indicate a vast *holistic milieu* but the vitality which marks its growth leaves no doubts if we examine the design process of the organizational field which has grown up around the request for holistic wellbeing. Nevertheless, since this vitality does not prove an attitude of *spiritual seekers*, in order to distinguish between practicants who are motivated to grow spiritually and those who are not, we asked the interviewees to specify their reasons for participating in the above activities. Although cultural interest (49%) predominated, seeking a spiritual path (30%) was not at all negligible, considering that we are dealing with subjects who attend the holistic milieu for spiritual fulfillment, developing knowledge, sensibility and abilities described in the sacred texts of the religious traditions which inspire their masters. Other reasons for practising are: curiosity and the desire to try something new (27%); the desire to meet people with common interests (12%); psycho-physical wellbeing (10%); seeking help in a period of crisis (9%) and amusement (8%).

In socio-demographic terms, more women than men practise and they are aged between 30 and 40. There are fewer practicants in the south and islands than in the rest of Italy. They are usually well educated (secondary school or university graduates). Attempting a definition of what kind of spirituality they are looking for, the main complication is that there is no clear dividing line between those who go to church and those who are part of the *holistic milieu*. A fifth of those in the *holistic milieu* go to church at least once a week. Nevertheless, as a general rule we can state that the *holistic milieu* answers the needs of those looking for spiritual teaching different from that of Catholic institutions: about two-thirds never to go Mass (or go only once a year); almost half are non-believers, indifferent or believe in a Superior Being different from God; more than two-thirds maintain that it is possible to have a spiritual life without God.

Thus, compared with the past, Italians are more interested in extrareligious spirituality. But the difference is barely perceptible and is not the prelude to a

spiritual revolution. On the contrary, as we shall see in the next section, Italians' spirituality is closely correlative with their religiosity.

4. Italians: Religious and Spiritual. A typology

The statistical analysis presented here takes its cue from the questions inspiring some pioneering quantitative research on the relationship between religion and spirituality (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1997; Gallup and Jones 2000; Marler and Hadaway 2002). In this case too the aim is to examine the connotations of the spirituality concept in the light of how Italians define themselves as "religious and spiritual", "neither religious nor spiritual", "only spiritual" or "only religious". With this end in view, we have constructed the following typology on the basis of the answers given by the sample to questions regarding self-definition as a "religious person" or a "spiritual person":

Table 2. Religiosity and Spirituality typologies (percentages)

		<i>Have you got a spiritual life?</i>		Total
		Not spiritual	Spiritual	
<i>Do you consider yourself a religious person?</i>	Not religious	32.6	10.2	42.7
	Religious	11	46.2	57.3
	Total	43.6	56.4	100
N=3032				

1. "Religious and spiritual". As could be foreseen, this type is a relative majority of the sample and consists of those who declare themselves religious with an intense spiritual life. To the people in this category the two dimensions go hand in hand, which means that spiritual seeking tends to be expressed in how one lives one's traditional religion.

2. "Neither religious nor spiritual". Numerically the second-biggest group (32.6%), made up of people who say they are not religious and do not have a spiritual life, nor have they any great interest in either dimension. It includes not only those who believe in no God but also those who doubt the existence of God.

3. "Spiritual but not religious". Although this orientation does not seem widespread in the population (10.2%), it deserves to be studied with attention because it includes not only those who express an extrareligious spiritual quest but also those who declare themselves Catholics, identifying themselves as "only spiritual".

4. “Religious but not spiritual”. Again, a small percentage (11). Various indicators lead us to believe that the great majority of this group lives a life of ethnic religiosity. This means they re-evaluate religion more for social and cultural reasons than from spiritual motives, and that their adherence to their traditional faith assumes the form of identification with the cultural and historical roots of the people to whom they belong. This does not, however, exclude people who, although they live the spiritual dimension of their faith, do not use the language of spirituality, either because they do not know it or because, associating it with New Age, they are afraid of being mistaken for the “spiritual tourists” so disliked by the Catholic hierarchy.

In order to understand these four types more profoundly, it would be necessary to examine their socio-personal, cultural and environmental data. Table 3 gives a synthesis of this analysis:

Table 3. Typology according to sex, age-group and geographical area (percentages)

Percentages		Sex		Ten-year-long age groups						Geographical area			
		<i>m</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>16-25</i>	<i>26-35</i>	<i>36-45</i>	<i>46-55</i>	<i>56-65</i>	<i>66-74</i>	<i>North-West</i>	<i>North-East</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>South and islands</i>
Spirituality typology	<i>Neither religious nor spiritual</i>	41.8	23.6	39.7	38.1	34.8	32.6	24.8	20.7	39.4	34.1	34.1	25.8
	<i>Religious but not spiritual</i>	11.3	10.8	12.3	8.3	11	11.2	12.1	12.4	10.5	9.7	8.7	13.5
	<i>Spiritual but not religious</i>	10.3	10	12.9	12.1	9.5	11	8.6	5.2	10.1	13.6	14.8	6.0
	<i>Religious and spiritual</i>	36.6	55.6	35.1	41.46	44.8	45.1	54.4	61.7	40	42.72	42.4	54.7
TOTAL		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Clear *gender differences* emerge in the tendency to define oneself a religious person (66% f. vs 47.2% m.) or spiritual (65.6% f. vs 46.8% m.), but not in the “only religious” or “only spiritual” groups.

The tendency to conjugate religiosity with spirituality grows with *age*. “Religious and spiritual” increases from 35.1% of 16-25-year-olds to 61.7% of 66-74-year-olds. In this group spirituality is understood as “intraCatholic” because it flows into the prevalent forms of religious sentiment. “Only spiritual”, however, is a typically youthful attitude, interesting more than twice as many 16-25-year-olds (12.9%) as older people (5.2%). Therefore the lower the age the greater the number of people who tend to recognize the existence of spiritual strain in their lives without identifying themselves in official models of expression of religious feeling. Nevertheless, the “only spiritual” category does not translate among young Italians into “nomads of spirituality” who join up beliefs and practices from different religions. Many indicators lead us to claim that spirituality is understood as a horizon of possibilities rather than as a practical option. The “only spiritual” outline is attributable principally to young generations’ lower level of traditionalism. With regard to this point, compare Smith and Lundquist Denton’s assertion (2005) that many American “spiritual but not religious” adolescents may be using the category not so much to distance themselves from organized religion as to emphasize the importance of a faith rich in meaning on the personal level which, however, continues to be practised in the context of an organized religion. Finally, a minor parallel can be found in the “neither religious nor spiritual” group. Here too the younger groups are more in evidence than the older (39.7% of the 16-25-year-olds as against 20.7% of the 66-74-year-olds). But age does not have the same impact in the “only religious” category.

The most interesting datum in “geographical area” relates to Southern Italy. The predominant religiosity here is close to the tradition of the Church: not only do we find the highest percentage of “religious and spiritual” (54.7% compared to a national average of 46.2%), but the quota of those who express extrareligious spirituality practically halves (from 10.1% in the North and Centre to 6% in the South). As a corollary “neither religious nor spiritual” rises from 25.8% in the South to a national average of 32.6%.

Studying *educational level* helps us to understand better the “spiritual but not religious” type, among whom it is a particularly discriminating variable. The number of people defining themselves as “only spiritual” rises from 4.8% of those who have completed primary school to 19.9% of those who have completed secondary school or university. Furthermore – in the same age-group – more-educated people have a greater tendency than the less-educated to consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”. This datum induces us to suppose that the best-educated are also the most exposed to the extra-religious spirituality field because they are motivated by interest in other religious traditions, because they are more syntonetic with alternative spiritualities’ forms, concepts and language or simply because they are more attracted to experimenting with new ideas. The second datum of interest concerns the

“only religious”. Those with a grammar school diploma or university degree tend less to define themselves “religious but not spiritual” than those with a lower educational level. We can hypothesize that a higher cultural capital discourages the expression of ethnic-cultural religiosity, typical of those who consider it plausible to be able to develop a sense of belonging to a religious group even without sharing deeply the faith’s inspirational motivations.

5. Intrareligious or Catholic Spirituality

If, as the above analysis shows, most Italians combine religion and spirituality, it would be opportune to look into the forms within which spirituality associated with the traditional religion – intrareligious or Catholic spirituality – is expressed, that is to say, the dimension of religion which, although still anchored to the doctrine and precepts of the Catholic Church, pertains to the believer’s personal experience of God.

With this end in view we should remember that, since the Catholic world is internally very heterogeneous, even believers’ relationship with spirituality varies according to their degree of involvement in religion. In order to simplify the diversity of Catholic identity, we have availed ourselves of four types already tried and proven in previous studies (Garelli *et al.* 2003): active and convinced; convinced but not always active; Catholics by tradition and/or education; “do-it-yourself” Catholics, “in my own way”, who share only some of the religion’s ideas.

As Table 4 makes clear, most “convinced and active” Catholics conjugate Catholicism and spirituality whereas more than half (53.8%) of “traditional” Catholics reject both dimensions, confirming the fact that such religious belonging possesses an essentially ethnic-cultural significance. Adherence to de-institutionalized Catholicism renders both “traditional” and “selective” Catholics more likely than the other groups to define themselves as “only spiritual”. Finally, most “convinced but not always active” Catholics combine religion and spirituality, even if a relevant 16.8% is forced to identify itself as “only religious” because of its infrequent attendance at Mass.

Table 4. Types of spirituality according to denominational belonging

	Total population	Catholics				All	Other religions	Non-confessional
		Convinced and active	Convinced but not always active	By tradition and/or education	In my own way			
Neither religious nor spiritual	32.5	2.5	21.8	53.8	37	30.1	15.2	70
Only religious	11.1	8.7	16.8	10.6	12.5	12.4	5.5	0.4
Only spiritual	10.2	1	7.6	13.5	14.3	8.8	10.3	24.3
Spiritual	46.2	87.9	53.8	22.1	36.3	48.7	69	5.3

and religious								
Number of cases	N=3033	N=607	N=873	N=954	N=287	N=2654	N=145	N=243

Therefore the majority of regularly-practising Catholics, who say they are convinced in their faith, do not separate spirituality from religion. But in what form do they express their “intrareligious” spirituality? Analysis reveals two main tendencies.

The first confirms the importance of religious experience rather than faith. Data relating to experience show a powerful growth, over a period of 15 years, in the number of people who have had direct contact with the sacred. In 1994 53% of interviewees said they had the feeling that God was watching over their lives; today the percentage is 67. In a parallel way, the number who sense the presence of the Devil or evil has grown from 15% in 1994 to 35% today. This scenario demonstrates an important change in Italians’ religion, almost as if they were more willing to recognize the invasion of their daily lives from the ultramundane world. In some countries this phenomenon is generally traced back to the themes of resacralization, re-enchantment and remagicking of the world (Houtman and Aupers 2003; Partridge 2004; Davie 2010). In Italy, on the other hand – where the most widespread direct experiences of the supernatural are not correlated with a corresponding increase of involvement in the world of the paranormal – it is collocated in the rediscovery of popular religiosity and the spread of the Catholic charismatic movement (Pace 1983; Marzano 2009).

The second tendency can be summarized by the selective use of traditional religious practices which, more than others, allow the cultivation of a personal relationship with God and the enhancement of its most intimate and subjective aspects. Comparison of the groups considered shows that it is mainly the “spiritual and religious” who have recourse to such practices. If in the year before the interviews, 15.6% of the sample had gone on a pilgrimage and 6.9% had spent some in a monastery, the percentages almost double for the “religious and spiritual” Catholics (26.8% and 12% respectively). The same applies to prayer, very widespread in our country where 35% of Catholics say they pray at least once a day. The data demonstrate the close connection in Catholicism between prayer and the religious dimension because those with both religion and spirituality pray more than the “only spiritual”: 55.1% of the “religious and spiritual”, 30.7% of the “only religious” and 15.9% of the “only spiritual” pray at least once a day.

6. Conclusions

This analysis leads us to two main findings. The first is that, although extrareligious or alternative spirituality is a typically Anglosphere phenomenon, it is also gaining ground in our country, as can be seen from

changes within institutions and organizations and the growth of the *holistic milieu*. The second is that although Italians today are more interested in extrareligious spirituality, there is no spiritual revolution on the horizon. In Catholic Italy the worlds of religion and spirituality are not only compatible but also superimposable. As a general rule Italians' spirituality is fed by: 1. Direct experiences of the divine founded on a conception of the sacred as being "alien" or "other" to the individual (typically the God of Christianity) and drawing strength from cultural heritage and Catholic theology; 2. Traditional practices (pilgrimages, monastic retreats, spiritual reading) which encourage the most intimate, subjective and personal aspects of relations with God and are reinterpreted in a way which is closer to contemporary sensibility. The article raises more questions than it answers, reminding us of all the work that remains to be done in order to conceptualize, in both analytical and theoretical terms, the relationship between spirituality and Catholicism in Italy. Two questions, above all, need to be faced up to. In the first place sociologists of religion should address the problem of social power. If ecclesiastical hierarchies do not take up a position – except very rarely – with regard to the many faithful who live the religion "in their own way", it is not because Catholicism today is more democratic than in the past. More trivially, in the face of the crisis of parishes, hierarchies have realized that, in order to evangelize, they depend more on virtuoso organized minorities – New Catholic Communities and Ecclesiastical Movements – than on a mass of believers who regularly attend their parish church (Turina 2010).

Secondly, we need to study the relationship between alternative spirituality and Catholic spirituality. What are believing and active Catholics looking for when they attend the *holistic milieu*? What beliefs do Catholics who call themselves "only spiritual" and pray to "the God within" hold? Considering the increase in people of the church opening up to yoga, Zen and New Age, how will the relationship between alternative spirituality and "popular religiosity" be redefined?

This work is only a point of departure, yet it offers sufficient material to enable us to claim that the time has come for Italian sociology to deepen its analysis of spirituality through qualitative research. Isolating certain words and phrases – as questionnaires do – increases the risk of transmuting people's responses and discourses into descriptions of social reality. The risk can be avoided by using research methods, such as ethnography, which permit us to contextualize beliefs and discourses in the practices and social interaction of the objects of study (Wood 2010).

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