Chapter 4

LANDSCAPES OF "NEW WESTERN (IR)RELIGIOSITY": MUTUAL PLAUSIBILITY OF THE THEISTIC AND ATHEISTIC OPTIONS AS AN UNEXPECTED EFFECT OF POST-SECULAR SOCIETY[*]

Stefania Palmisano[†] and Roberto F. Scalon[‡]
Department of Cultures, Politics and Society,
University of Torino, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a series of critical considerations about religious belief and unbelief, starting from a general "anatheistic" assumption (Kearney 2011), and thus accepting the challenge of

---

[*] Whereas this chapter is the result of collaboration (Sections 1 and 2 were written by R. F. Scalon, Section 3 and 4 by S. Palmisano), the conclusions are a joint effort.

[†] Associate professor. Email: stefania.palmisano@unito.it.

[‡] Assistant professor. Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Torino, Italy Email: roberto.scalon@unito.it.

rethinking the question of God "after God." In this scenario the spirituality, theism and atheism categories are recaptured and redefined as attitudes deriving their plausibility from the same anatheistic framework, thus managing to legitimate one another without necessarily being contradictory. The privatisation and individualisation of the religious, apparently the central trait of "post-secular" religiosity, can also be described in terms of a religious rebirth in accordance with new interpretations of the sacred which may appear plausible in the secular age while, at the same time, keeping alive the hypothesis that they are also the most emblematic expression of contemporary irreligiosity. On the theoretical level, the concepts of "Western Irreligiosity" and the "Age of Secularisation," both coined by the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce, occupy a central role. On the empirical level, the chapter presents a typology of attitudes emerging from a recent empirical qualitative research investigating (ir)religiosity among Italian young people.

1. "WESTERN IRRELIGIOSITY"
AND "POST-SECULAR SOCIETY"

In an attempt to identify the essential characteristic of modernity, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt recalled Weber's analysis, according to James D. Faubian's proposed interpretation:

> What he [Weber] asserts – what in any event might be extrapolated from his assertion – is that the threshold of modernity has its epiphany precisely as the legitimacy of the postulate of a divinely preordained and fated cosmos has its decline; that modernity emerges, that one or another modernity can emerge, only as the legitimacy of the postulated cosmos ceases to be taken for granted and beyond reproach. Countermoderns reject that reproach, believe in spite of it (…) (Faubion 1993, 113-115)[1].

From this point of view, "post-secular"[2] grammar describes, in terms of realising the modern programme, the total deployment and fulfilment of

---

[1] Quoted by Eisenstadt (2003, 105).

[2] Altough it is not possible here to join the vast debate on the concept of "post-secular society" (in Italy, Belardinelli, Allodi, Gattamorta 2006 and Colombo 2013 deserve special mention).

what Augusto Del Noce[3] called "the age of secularisation" (Del Noce 1971). From a philosophical perspective, Del Noce is a basic point of reference for our proposed analysis, particularly with regard to his concept of "Western irreligiosity," as we shall see later on. But on the sociological level his concept of "post-secular society," by which he means not society characterized by the end of secularisation and an itinerary of de-secularisation processes but a – still fully secular – society which however contrasts with both the direct and the unexpected effects of secularisation (Barbano 1990, Donati 2009). Thus we are talking about the arrival point of a deconstruction (for example, the secularisation process as disenchantment of the world) and, at the same time, the precondition of a new construction thanks to fully-secular society's more mature awareness of itself. Therefore, post-secular society is not post-modern but rather entirely modern in Weber's sense: as such it can never rise above its endemic relativity, arbitrariness and indefiniteness; in short, it cannot overcome its reflexivity (Eisenstadt 2003, 208-214). Yet this very reflexivity drives the process which – based on a fully secularised (that is to say, totally uprooted from pre-modern elements) society – may reflexively and continuously generate, deconstruct and regenerate the post-secular.

The manifest core of this double process of deconstruction/ reconstruction is eminently social, economic and political: modern social development – a new social and cultural order – as an advanced but never definitive synthesis of "socio-cultural evolution"[4]. But the latent core of the two processes is eminently spiritual, being made up of the religious question in the broadest sense as continuous tension between the transcendent and worldly order. So the post-secular is consequent to the

---

[3] Together with Norberto Bobbio, Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) is the most important post-WWII Italian philosopher, both having been scholars of modern society and secularisation (Important works: *Il problema dell'ateismo* [The Problem of Atheism] 1964 and *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* [The Age of Secularization] 1971). For an English synthesis of Del Noce's thought, see the *collection* of selected writings, edited and translated by Carlo Lancellotti (Del Noce 2014).

[4] This is really an ambiguous concept. From the 1980s onwards, Luciano Gallino (1927-2015) – one of the fathers of Italian academic sociology – highlighted the centrality of the "socio-cultural evolution" idea, particularly by comparing it with the – only apparently analogous – concept of "development" (Gallino 2016).

epochal change which the total, permanent deployment of the secularisation process has caused on the level of "society's theological matrix" (Donati 2010). Reflexivity as an endemic condition of the fully secularised modern implies the assertion of a continuous deconstruction/ reconstruction of the "religious sense," its meanings and its contents. This gives rise to a post-traditional cosmological paradigm, especially with regard to method and therefore to merit, in the sense that its concepts of man, nature, society and their reciprocal relationships may be interpreted in different ways – which are not however necessarily alternative to one another (Eisenstadt 2003, 208-214). Traditional narrations belong by right to these interpretations, but they cannot be accepted in the traditional way to the extent that any claim of objective validity is inevitably destined to fade away from the reflexivity (Giddens 2000) – at least on the theoretical, discursive plane. In this way post-secular society definitively confirms Karl Jaspers's analysis, not for no reason taken up and accepted by Eisenstadt (2003: 197-217), describing the modern age as the fourth axial age of human history.

Therefore we must confront the question of religion in post-secular society. According to Augusto Del Noce the age of secularisation is the result of a programme coherently triggered by atheism: on the one hand – on the cultural, moral and political level – atheism is the result of modernity; on the other – on the strictly philosophical-theoretical plane – it is its postulate in terms of "rejecting the supernatural without proof." In this context analogies with a process described by Eisenstadt citing Weber following Faubion's interpretation are instructive. Del Noce (1964) shows that modern atheism in the XX century is revealed on a philosophical level as an "optional factor," clearly exposing its nature as "arbitrary [unproven] postulation." Del Noce insists that Reneé Decartes, the father of *cogito* who had already introduced modern thought into the history of Western philosophy, indicated this aspect of arbitrariness as the characteristic trait of modern atheism[5].

---

[5] "Così Cartesio stesso aveva messo in luce l'arbitrarietà per cui si erige a a evidenza valida per sé l'esistenza della realtà estesa indipendentemente dal riferimento a quelle dell'io e di Dio, e il giudizio è per lui un atto della volontà libera". Del Noce (1990: 16-17). ["In this way

Furthermore, in the history of modern Western thought the atheistic option took shape gradually, reaching the fullness of its development in the XX century. In the XVII and XVIII centuries it was expressed within the deist paradigm, especially in the form of religious, metaphysical rationalism consisting of either reducing God or the mystery of being to reason. It is this very operation which creates the presupposition that will sooner or later justify reason's loss of interest in "ontologism as the philosophy of metaphysical experience" (Del Noce 1990: 20) and its claim of being superior to religion. There are two consequences: the first is the definitive exclusion of the latter from the horizon of thought and culture; the second is the affirmation of the axiom of the normality of the human condition which, by banishing the concept of sin and evil, loses its character of fallen nature. The necessity of redemption is gradually substituted by the imperative of freeing man from the precariousness of his condition through his ability to dominate nature and produce culture. Religious, metaphysical rationalism, as a propaedeutic form of atheism developed within the deistic register, evolves by adopting the characteristics of a new gnosis and finally flows into explicit atheism, albeit in different forms: from "negative or nihilistic atheism" (fruit of sceptical rationalism) to "positive or political atheism" (for example, positivism). The last step leads to tragic atheism, i.e., as in Nietzsche's critique, where rationalism reaches its critical point and passes over into irrationalism. It is at this point of disruption that tragic atheism *seems* to demand a "passing over"; like the "'Anti-Christ' Nietzsche labouring under a continual Christian temptation," it opens up different, contradictory paths to contemporary man; paths which are – including the "annunciation of a new God or the renewal of religious life" – all possible at the same time.

What Del Noce terms "tragic atheism" clearly identifies the profound nature of contemporary atheism which is typical of post-secular society – very different from both positive, militant atheism and negative, nihilistic

---

Descartes himself underlined the arbitrariness advanced as valid evidence of the existence of extended reality independent of any reference to the thinking subject or to God; he saw judgment as an act of free will"].

postmodern atheism. Although tragic atheism may be a reconsideration of one of these two other forms of atheism, its novelty consists in its linear development and its conferring the necessity of what I call "rational plausibility" onto the religious question. This is made possible by the post-secular reflexivity triggered by awareness of the direct, unexpected effects of secularisation.

It is legitimate to wonder whether these considerations, deriving from reflection carried out in the historical-philosophical and social-theory fields, are in any way borne out empirically in the field of sociological investigation inherent in young people's attitudes towards the religious question.

2. NEW WESTERN (IR)RELIGIOUS TRENDS

From recent empirical research carried out through semi-structured interviews with 144 young Italians between 18 and 29 years old (Garelli 2016) there emerges a complex, interesting scenario regarding youth experience of the religious question, that is, belief and non-belief options. Here we would like to underline three connected aspects: first, the rational plausibility of the religious question; second, the post-secular religious attitude as the starting point of new Western (ir)religiosity; third, the issue of border definition between "religious" and "spiritual." We shall deal the first two points synthetically, while we shall concentrate more at length on the third, in the second part of this paper.

"Rational Plausibility" of the Religious Question

The first research finding concerns young people's intellectual approach to the religious question. The problem is whether – in our time – having a religious (of belief or of non-belief) option makes any sense, is "plausible" or not. A deliberate choice was made to ask the young people to make an assessment which would be more like a rational judgment (or a

reasoned proposition) than a simple opinion. The requested, expressed declarations are generally the product of reasoned (but not necessarily deep) reflection, and they should not be thought of as instinctive answers or superficial opinions – their answers were informed by "rational plausibility." Three important data became clear from the interviews: a. The young people show no embarrassment in facing up to the religious question by adopting a level of rationality in order to define belief and non-belief; b. The term "plausibility" as we use it – varying often in intensity from one case to another – seems to have been defined as "preventative measure" by those interviewees among whom the tendency to consider plausible what is not considered prudent to exclude is widespread; c. Rational plausibility as precaution/prudence turns out to be a function of pluralism, to the extent that it is the cultural and axiological context of reference. As a general rule, the interviewees don't feel like judging as non-plausible the option which (albeit different from or opposite to theirs), they see concretely adopted in the reality of their social and cultural lives, whether it is the option of faith or that of atheism or agnosticism.

The believer therefore considers non-belief as plausible, as the non-believer considers belief as plausible, each assuming that mocking the other's point of view is imprudent for cultural and ethical reasons. Both believing and non-believing youth seem to share a universe which is primarily cognitive and, as a secondary consequence, also axiological, informed by the pluralism paradigm. Pluralism is first of all a meaning capable of fuelling processes implicit in forming a judgment about reality: it is one of the cognitive certainties, which is to say that a subject may consider it indisputable and totally reasonable. Secondly, pluralism is also a value to the extent that it appears as undeniable and insuperable fact. Thirdly, the process – the fact that pluralism is made up of and strengthened by, as a typical element of the subjects' cognitive and axiological environment – constitutes a measure of both rational plausibility and rule of life. In sociological terminology the concept of pluralism – from the perspective of the agent subjects – is of the greatest importance for understanding the processes in function of which they are

oriented in their two fundamental operations: a. definition of the situation; b. choice of conduct understood as rational social behaviour.

Post-Secular Religious Indifference and Unbelief as Starting Points of New Western (Ir)religiosity

The profession of atheism or agnosticism (by two-thirds of interviewees) is not necessarily linked to a position of drastic religious indifference, either with regard to the social, cultural and political repercussions of the religious question or their personal religious sensibility. On the contrary it constitutes a kind of no-man's-land for absorbing complexity and defining strategies and starting points capable of rejuvenating the religious question.

About two-thirds of the interviewees claim that religious indifference is a very common phenomenon among their peers; nevertheless, most of them consider it as a "generic" tendency resulting from superficial reflection or a process of spiritual and moral impoverishment. This critical awareness of the phenomenon can mainly be found in the most convinced and active religious subjects, but it is also present among non-believing youngsters, those who declare themselves agnostic and those who cultivate some form of alternative religion. A small minority of young Italians experience atheism as positive, militant belonging.

Furthermore, there is a general opinion that this situation of widespread religious indifference should be interpreted as an advanced stage of a long process of mankind freeing himself from that state of ingenuity and ignorance which easily ensured his submission and servility for centuries to dominant institutions, established authority and official truths.

This opinion is often accompanied by a critical attitude towards the Catholic Church, but in the vast majority of cases the criticism does not go so far as condemnation or rejection; it is rather a denunciation of the Church's inadequacy to do its duty and meet the expectations placed in it, a desire for renewal, not disappearance, which will render the Church

capable of facing young people who, on the surface, seem indifferent or even incredulous.

For at least half the interviewees, unbelief was not a first step towards dismembering their religious faith but rather a starting point for rethinking and reflecting upon the whole religious question, to be carried out by making use of the greater freedom and reflexive capacity available today as well as a wider range of experience and cognitive background than could be counted on even in the recent past. The result of such reflection may just as well be a re-launching as a fading away or even abandonment. In any case, they are not necessarily definitive choices – and this is post-secular society.

Unbelief may thus be seen as "necessary": a reflexive-type resource indispensable for the individual's complex set of knowledge, experience and relationships which is being continually updated. The process may vary as to duration according to the subjects and their circumstances. Therefore, unbelief may be an attitude activated over a fairly restricted period of time necessary for reconciliation or balancing between the faith and cognitive-experiential dimensions, continually placed under stress by the speed and intensity of daily life in complex societies. Looked at in this way, unbelief can be seen as the basic component of a method for managing and reducing complexity, necessary to keep existence within a framework of – possibly even transcendent – sense.

The third important datum concerns objective empirical feedback about the variegated forms of spirituality which new Western (ir)religiosity seems to be assuming, as an impression of religious ferment in a post-secular age. This is the aspect we propose to focus on, in a more detailed analysis of the semi-structured interviews, in the second part of this paper.

3. NEW CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

The debate about the contemporary world's – here used as a synonym of post-secular society's – religious landscape can, to put it simply, be expressed in the continuum between two opposite poles: the hot pole of

"resacralisation" in terms of "spiritual revolution" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005); and the cold pole of radical secularisation as effective indifference towards the religious question and the problem of God (Bruce 2002). In the light of research data, this section offers a typology of attitudes expressed ideally in the space between the above opposite poles, illustrated as follows.

Religious and Spiritual

A third of the interviewees declared that they had a (lukewarm or intense) religious spiritual life, which is to say linked to beliefs, practices and experiences of church religion. One interviewee is quite specific:

> I have a spiritual life which feeds on my religion, weekly attendance at Mass, parish meetings, the Rosary and the sacraments (25-year-old female, practising Catholic).

As a general rule, religious and spiritual young people consider themselves (more-or-less convinced) believers in the Christian God and combine this faith with (more-or-less regularly attended) ritual practices as codified by the Catholic religion. For them spirituality represents unmediated access – intimate, emotive and personal – to God. This relationship, based on direct experience, re-unites feelings, doubts, emotions and corporeality, aspects which have often been neglected by church religion in the name of "purity of faith." Regardless of how these youths understand God, as a parent, a friend, non-judgemental, but at the same time merciful, undemanding and loving. In the following interviews they thank God, blame Him for the world's injustices, meet Him in order to relate the day's suffering and joy or to remain silent in the hope of comfort or assistance:

My spiritual life is fuelled daily. I offer Him everything that has happened during the day. I thank Him for my experiences with which He tests me and helps me to overcome. I often feel His presence making me stronger. I shall continue to attend Mass and look after the children at the parish social centre, my Catechist friends and Father… (26-year-old female, believing and practising Catholic).

My spiritual life means being with God, Who is above all things, Who is everywhere, can be reached at any moment through prayer and can be thanked for the good things that happen to you and blamed for the things you consider wrong. He does not get offended! He loves everyone and forgives everything (24-year-old female, a doubting believer).

I have an image of God which I found in an icon and is very dear to me: two people embracing, one of whom is Jesus. The icon is called Jesus and His friend. "My" God is a friend embracing me, supporting me and listening to me, but friendship necessarily implies reciprocity: I too must dedicate time to Him, listen to Him and simply remain in his presence. (26-year-old male, developing believer).

Although many interviewees base their spiritual seeking on church life, an almost equal number – in contrast with official institutions – claims that spiritual life may develop independently of clergy and Church, as evidenced by the following quotation:

My spiritual life is with God. I believe that you can achieve contact with God in Church as much as anywhere else as long as this contact takes place intimately within us and the divine message is different from one person to another. This may be considered an individualist interpretation of faith, and perhaps it is, but I believe that rather than an obligation to attend places of worship, faith should be felt as a direct relationship with God (28-year-old female, lapsed Catholic).

The spiritual life of "religious and spiritual" youths is fuelled by ordinary experience from daily events, not sensational happenings such as miracles or the feeling of being in contact with God or the dead. Most interviewees answered the question "Have you had important religious experiences?" by giving as examples the sacraments, parochial life

(retreats, encounters with priests and religious, friendships), charitable (in many cases missionary) activity, stays in monasteries, attending Catholic schools and reading instructional literature. A small number of them added that the experience described "was not really important but was the only one that could be associated with the adjective 'religious.'"

Let us now turn our attention to the remaining group made up of little more than one-third of the young people, who stated that they had a non-religious spiritual life. They refer to a spirituality which is "other," "different," "distant" from that of church religion, often described as "incompatible." Two profiles emerge from this group: spiritual alternatives and spiritual atheists. Although both identify with "extra-religious seeking," and although the latter are more numerous than the former, it is useful to examine the two profiles separately because they have different identifying characteristics from the sociological point of view.

Alternative-Spirituality Seekers

A small number of interviewees fit the picture of "alternative-spirituality seekers." They believe that spiritual seeking is directed towards an effusional power, a superior being or a supernatural force – sometimes called "cosmic energy," "light," "inner divine spark" or "sacred nature" – different from the Christian God. With the intention of connecting with this concept of the divine, their spirituality cuts loose from the moorings of traditional religions in the sense that it does not take the form of a religious dimension but of a new kind of religion. Its main characteristic, according to the interviewees, is exaltation of the authority of the self in spiritual matters. More precisely, this authority replaces that of official institutions invalidating the quest for the sacred. The following quotation, where the interviewee relates having approached the idea of karma in order to train herself in distinguishing between good and evil, illustrates the golden rule "It's right because it works for me":

My "spiritual route" is connected with the concept of "karma," the principle "What goes round, comes around," which I have adopted because it helps me to distinguish what is good or bad for me (F, 28, spiritual).

The following passages demonstrate the creativity of alternative-spiritual discourse because they recall the invention of a personal itinerary – with an ethical slant in the former and a mystical in the latter – through reviewing concepts pertaining to other sacred repertories:

I created my own kind of "religion" allowing me to have a good quality of life. It is a very practical religion (in my opinion necessary in modern society), linked with the concept of karma with the difference that the positive effects – easier to receive by doing good deeds – are felt not in the next life but in this one (M, 28, syncretistic).

I cultivate my spiritual life with respect, equilibrium, sensitivity with regard to the natural, cosmic world, seeking contact with "the whole," regardless of how "alternative" or vague it may seem. I believe in an equilibrium going beyond – even traversing and guiding – myself. I feel close to the typically Japanese ideal of harmony (which I seek also through music and art), of letting oneself be carried along by the "stream" (even though that may lead to a gradual abandoning of one's own will, which in truth I am trying to regain. All this is very confused, and may seem ridiculous, but I'm hoping to enrich my religious culture through study, reading and travel in order to find myself (if necessary), in a specific, conscious spiritual form. My aim is in-depth awareness and abandonment of myself to natural harmony which is also intense energy. This abandonment should not be an act of "loss" or "death," but the liberation of conscious energy allowing me to live well with my body, with the social body and the natural body in perfect fusion with the spirit (24-year-old female, ridicule).

In international debate this spiritual approach has been defined with recourse to a broad, variegated selection of expressions: "alternative spirituality," "mind-body-spirit," "holistic," "New Age," "feminine," "creative," "non-institutional," "non-religious" and "non-church." We

chose "alternative spirituality" because it seems less demanding than the others and more relevant to the Italian environment which, as we have shown in this chapter, is far from a "spiritual revolution." We believe that, although there is no lack of young people involved in the holistic milieu, Italians' spiritual nomadism turns out to be more ideal than factual, more a matter of intention than of life-practice. This is demonstrated by the fact that statements like the following – inspired by "trans-religious" ideas – do not trigger mixing practices, contrary to American *fusers* who combine practices from different religions according to their inclinations:

> I hope, I feel that somebody is helping us, male or female, energy, God, Allah, Buddha, Gea, Krishna… it doesn't matter, it's all the same thing (F, 23, personal).
>
> God is not a single definite entity but rather a natural expression of cosmic equilibrium and the planet Earth. Identifying the divine in an anthropomorphic image is reductive and 'self-centred.' As I see it, the divine is contact with everything, with the delicacy and natural beauty which for centuries we have been ignoring and destroying (23-year-old male, uncertain).

The syncretism of these quotations may, however, indicate another interpretation of the phenomenon, in contrast with spiritual creativity: other interviewees assert that alternative spiritualities are nothing but a brand for those who want to seem "different" or "anti-system"; far from being the result of a deliberate voyage of discovery, experience, fulmination, evidence and/or confirmation, syncretism – according to them – amounts only to a hotchpotch of easy-listening words in an attempt to outline a portrait of the self which is both "fascinating" and "fashionable":

> I believe that spiritual alternatives such as Buddhism are more a passing fancy involving a lot of young people than a real faith (27-year-old male, indifferent).

Independently of the awareness with which spiritual alternatives handle the key concepts of their language, they are united by a strong

emphasis on their alienation from Catholicism, in order to avoid being automatically labelled as religious because they define themselves as spiritual:

> Mine is spirituality, not religion. It cannot be labelled because it is not conventional religion. I don't believe in the God of religion (27-year-old male, I don't know how to define myself).

From these statements there emerges an implicit definition of alternative spirituality relating to the (polemical) relationship with the original (Catholic) religion which has been experienced, tolerated or rejected. This opposition is even more obvious in answers to the question: "How widespread is alternative spirituality among the young people you know?." The vast majority claims that it is a niche phenomenon but, when explaining the reasons why their peers are involved in the holistic milieu, they primarily identify dialectics with Catholicism, at sometimes guilty of irrationality and at others of demanding conformism with a superior authority limiting individual freedom or uninterested in people's mental and physical wellbeing, and yet again of having failed to live up to its message:

> In recent years I have met a lot of boys and girls who have discovered energy-linked alternative spiritualities such as reiki and I think the reason is increased awareness that the Catholic religion, as it is practised and preached, is unconvincing and unsatisfying, making its followers dependent on something which can neither be explained nor proved but whose history has been divulged in the conviction that it will be accepted as it is (24-year-old female, atheist).
>
> Meditation, seeking interior serenity, has taken root in recent years, perhaps because the increasingly Catholic society leaves little space for oneself (27-year-old female, agnostic).
>
> In my opinion alternative spiritualities have become so widespread because they are not based only on venerating a God but also on mental and physical wellbeing in this and other possible lives (28-year-old male, believer).

Spiritual Atheists

Although many interviewees who declare themselves unbelievers or indifferent reject the idea of spirituality, others claim that they either have, or would really like to have a (albeit non-religious) spiritual life. For some of them, spirituality consists of seeking harmony and wellbeing (I feed my spirituality by doing whatever helps me to live better, to get on better with myself… I see spiritual life as an attempt to seek wellbeing and happiness) while for others the question is more complex. Their answers suggest the third ideal type, spiritual atheism. They express rather heterogeneous conceptions of spirituality. Whereas the common denominator is the absence of religious belonging, as we shall now see internal differences are multiple and variegated:

> A spiritual life? Yes, I try to help others to do good as far as possible or at least not to do harm (29-year-old female, lay).
> I have a spiritual vision but not in a religious sense. In a spiritual sense I base my life on values of compassion and understanding… I act in such a way as to nourish a spirit of values which improve existence (24-year-old female, religious-identity seeker).
> This is my spiritual life: I'm ecological, I believe in happy simplicity, the environment before material things (26-year-old male, atheist).
> I don't believe in God, or rather I don't believe in God as the transcendental being propagated by traditional religion. However, I believe that there exists a set of principles and values based on my moral choices. This is God for me. I have my spiritual life even though it is not linked to a particular faith. I extract enjoyment and spirit from daily life, reading books and attending cultural and charitable events which are an excellent spiritual gymnasium (29-year-old female, atheist).
> My spiritual life consists of searching for the most plausible answers to many, difficult existential problems and is fuelled by all the philosophical-religious experiences which come my way (26-year-old female, atheist).
> I have my spiritual life. I do not follow a God or any doctrine. I fuel it with the things that happen to me which I'm not able to explain rationally (26-year-old female, atheist).

While "spirituality without God" allows very different interpretations, we believe we can detect a characteristic distinguishing the profile of the spiritual atheist from that of spiritual alternatives: the latter are open to the supernatural – in William James's (2009) terminology, the suprasensible – expecting the divine to manifest itself in incomphrensible, mysterious forms, but the former are not. We contend that this trait, albeit little thematized in research, is crucial in identifying the two groups: the research of spiritual alternatives is directed towards an "Other-than-the-self" divine, in whatever form it manifests itself; that of the spiritual atheists does not presuppose a transcendental, supranatural "Other" but an imminent, ordinary "other" understood, for example, as humanity, society, community and nature. For many spiritual atheists the "Other" is the social world encountered through the world of charity:

> I'm mixed up about belief. If it's possible to talk about fuelling my spiritual life, what I love doing… is going back to Kenya as often as possible, doing charitable work with a lay missionary very devoted to God (26-year-old female, mixed up, convinced).

Some spiritual atheists encounter spirituality when they "get on well with others," "do good unto others," "gather together in peace" or "celebrate important occasions." It's Durkheim's lesson to us: in the collective effervescence of rituals and in a sense of solidarity people feel part of something which transcends them, something which is nothing more than society's "transcendent" reality. In the words of one interviewee: "Sometimes I feel something greater than me which is not called God." Hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred, is here situated in the worldly sphere, which is however sacralised. In this way, according to a small number of interviewees, beauty too – in the forms of art, in ecology, music, literature and philosophy – becomes a kind of "rumour of angels": books, songs, landscapes, paintings and poetry trigger spiritual experiences by revealing hidden connections, evoking wonder, encouraging reflection, offering a break in one's daily routine and motivating self-awareness.

4. SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND ATHEISM: SEPARATED RELATIVES?

Research findings indicate that interest in spirituality is growing among young people. This increase can be seen particularly within Catholicism, where the adjective "spiritual" is widely seen as both an increasingly pacific and accepted legitimation of the search for a relationship with God based on individual liberty and the advantage of distancing himself from phenomena – such as violence and terrorism – often associated with religion. But the increase can also be observed outside churches in the "alternative spiritual turn" of the cultural industry and various spheres of social life as well as the growth of young Italians declaring themselves "spiritual but not religious" a label which has become fashionable even among atheists, unbelievers and the indifferent.

The success of the spirituality concept is due to its inclusivist meaning as distinct from a notion of religion which is increasingly manipulated as an identity marker, ethnocentric and exclusivist. Following this line of reasoning, we can say not only that there exists considerable continuity between religion and spirituality but also that the spirituality category itself calls into question the modern dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Contemporary spirituality presupposes the laicism of modernity, being at the same time its issue and overcoming it in the direction of a new enchantment of the world.

An analysis of the differences among the spiritual religious (yearning for the Christian God), the spiritual alternatives (open to the supranatural, seeking an impersonal, immanent deity) and spiritual atheists (who use the language of spirituality to describe an immanent "other") clarifies the necessity of problematizing the confines between what is, and what is not, religious. In other words, a spiritual profile fuels styles of life, social practices and cultural objects which may not be exclusively assigned either to the "religious" or the "secular" realm.

Finally, from the sociological perspective the study of contemporary spirituality demonstrates that religion and atheism are not fixed, monolithic

categories. The modern opposition between them needs to be reconsidered because, as the ideal types above show, the profile of the spiritual may consist of characteristics of both religion and atheism. From the philosophical point of view, the vision of a spirituality for atheists does not only offer the possibility of recounting ordinary experiences, attributing to them an otherworldly value; on the basis of compatible elements of their different metaphysical conceptions of existence, they offer both atheists and believers the opportunity of fruitful dialogue which may result, as Walters (2010) hopes, in their reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The research data confirm that in what we have termed new secular (ir)religiosity, atheism is finding it difficult to attract credibility and followers in terms of militancy, which is to say in the form of so-called freethinkers "organized atheists and secular humanist movements" (Cimino, C. Smith 2007).

The claim of anti-religious militancy as a salient characteristic of atheist identity – albeit confirmed as present and organized (Le Drew 2013a, 2013b) – pertains to a group which in post-secular society maintains a typically enclave character; in general the claim seems to have relatively modest influence on the process of constructing atheist identity (Smith 2013). Even the irreligious socialisation phenomenon (Merino 2012) is substantially confirmed by our data, indicating in religious indifference a widespread cultural and spiritual characteristic of post-secular society. However, as was pointed out in the presentation of our typology, such an attitude is not necessarily an anti-religious prejudice (Kearney 2010, Agar 2014; Joas 2014); whereas it explicitly stigmatizes demands seen as extremist and intolerant, both religious and atheist fundamentalism, gelling into what we might call a kind of "post-secular pragmatism" (Rorty 2002, Fiala 2009). The question is still open.

REFERENCES

Allodi, L., Belardinelli S., Gattamorta, L., (eds) (2009), *Verso una società post-secolare?*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino. [Toward a post-secular society?].

Agar, J. (2014), *Post-Secularism, Realism and Utopia. Transcendence and Immanence from Hegel to Bloch*, New York, Routledge.

Barbano, F. (1990), "Introduzione" ["Introduction"], in L. Berzano, *Differenziazione e religione negli anni Ottanta*, Torino, Giappichelli.

Berzano, L. (1990), *Differenziazione e religione negli anni Ottanta*, Torino, Giappichelli. [Differentiation and religion in the 1980s].

Bruce, S. (2002), *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Wiley-Blackwell.

Bruce, S. (2006), *Secularization and the Impotence of Individualized Religion*, Hedgehog Review, 8 (2), pp. 35–45.

Borghesi, M. (2013), *L'epoca post-ateistica tra irreligione e opzione religiosa*, in G. Colombo (ed.), pp. 131-141. [The post-atheistic era between irreligion and the religious option].

Cimino, R., Smith, C. (2007), *Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism*, Sociology of Religion, 68, 4, 407-424.

Colombo, G., (ed.) (2013), *Religione e fede nell'età post-secolare*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero. [Religion and faith in a post-secular age].

Del Noce, A. (1990), *Il problema dell'ateismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino (first published 1964). [The problem of atheism].

Del Noce, A. (2014), *The Crisis of Modernity*, ed. by C. Lancellotti, Montreal-Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press.

Del Noce, A. (2015), *L'epoca della secolarizzazione*, Torino, Aragno (first published 1970). [The age of secularization].

Donati, P. (2009), *La sfera pubblica nella società post-secolare: oltre il multiculturalismo con la ragione relazionale*, in Allodi, L., Belardinelli S., Gattamorta, L., (eds), pp. 109-140. [The public sphere in post-secular society: beyond multiculturalism with relational reason].

Donati, P. (2010), *La matrice teologica della società*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino. [The theological matrix of society].

Eisenstadt, S. N. (2003), *Comparative Civilization & Multiple Modernities*, 2 Vols, Leiden-Boston, Brill.

Eisenstadt, S. N. (2003), *The Construction of Collective Identities and the Continual Reconstructing of Primordiality and Sacrality – Some Analytical and Comparative Indications*, in S. N. Eisenstatdt, Vol. 1., pp. 75-134.

Faubion, J. D. (1993), *Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer in Historical Constructivism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Fiala, A. (2009), *Militant Atheism, pragmatism, and the God-shaped Hole*, International Journal for Philosphy of Religion, 65, 3, 139-151.

Gallino, L. (2016), Modi di produzione, formazioni sociali, società. Per la critica dell'equivalenza sviluppo/evoluzione. *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 70-71, pp. 29-52, (first published 1985). [Modes of production, social groups and societies. Towards a critique of the development-evolution equivalence. *Notebooks of sociology*, 70-71; 29-52].

Garelli, F. (2016), *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio?*, Bologna, Il Mulino. [Little atheists growing up. Really a godless generation?].

Giddens, A. (2000), *Runaway World. How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*, New York. Routledge.

James, W. (2004), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Barnes & Noble Classics (first published 1902).

Joas, H. (2014), *Faith as an Option. Possible Futures for Christianity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Kearney, R. (2010), *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, Columbia University Press.

LeDrew, S. (2013a), *Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism*, Sociology of Religion, 74, 4, 431-453.

LeDrew, S. (2013b), *Reply: Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism: Identity, Politics, Ideology*, Sociology of Religion, 74, 4, 464-470.

Merino, S. M. (2012), *Irreligious Socialization? The Adult Religious Preferences of Individuals Raised with No Religion*, Secularism and Nonreligion, 1, 1-16.

Palmisano, S. (2016), *La spiritualità del dio personale*, in F. Garelli, pp. 181-212. [The spirituality of personal god].

Rorty, R. (2002), "Cultural Politics and Arguments for God," in N. K. Frankenberry (ed.), *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

Scalon, R. F. (2016), *Una generazione "senza Dio"?*, in F. Garelli, pp. 145-179. [A "godless" generation?].

Smith, J. M. (2013), *Comment: Conceptualizing Atheist Identity: Expanding Questions, Constructing Models, and Moving Forward*, Sociology of Religion, 74, 4, 454-463.

Taylor, C. (2007), *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press.

Walters, K. (2010), *Atheism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York and London, Continuum.