

Article

## Flexible Catholicism, Religion and the Church: The Italian Case

Franco Garelli

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Via S. Ottavio, 50 - 10124, Turin, Italy; E-Mail: franco.garelli@unito.it

*Received: 14 November 2012; in revised form: 13 December 2012 / Accepted: 14 December 2012 / Published: 21 December 2012*

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**Abstract:** What is taking place in the religious field in some Western societies not only seems to reflect a crisis situation or irreversible decline in the church and dominant religious institutions. More than might be imagined, advanced modernity offers opportunities for traditional religions, even within a context fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. An example of this is represented by Italy, which is still today characterized by widespread affiliation to Catholicism, despite the increase in religious pluralism and undisputed secularization in the customs of the population. Comparing surveys carried out in 1994 and 2007 on a sample of the Italian population, the paper presents a version of religious modernity that has emerged both on the individual religious front and in the way religion is considered in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** Catholicism; Italy; beliefs; religious belonging; church

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### 1. Introduction/Background

In introducing the work of the most recent Synod of Catholic Bishops (celebrated last October in the Vatican and dedicated to the “New evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”), the archbishop of Washington Mons. Wuerl voiced the widespread sense of discouragement running through the clergy of the Roman Church when faced with a West seemingly turning its back on the Christian proposal. What was once considered the ‘cradle’ of Christianity now risks becoming its ‘tomb’. “How can Christ be proclaimed—the archbishop questioned—to a world that ignores him?” Why is it necessary to “re-propose the Gospel in our own districts and parishes”? What has led us back to being “missionaries in our own neighborhoods, rather than amongst far-off peoples?”

At the base of this change of perspective, according to Mons. Wuerl, lies the process of secularization that has influenced two generations of Catholics—between the 1970s and 1980s of the

last century—“to the extent that nowadays many of them do not know the Church’s basic prayers or teachings, do not perceive the importance of attending mass, rarely go to confession and have often lost the sense of mystery and transcendence”. A “tsunami of secularism” has washed away social indicators such as “marriage, the family, the concept of common good, the distinction between good and evil, while the sins of a few fuel distrust in the Church’s structures.” In other words, “the culture of secularism, materialism and individualism has influenced a large proportion of the faithful” and the church, well aware of the new situation has decided to change direction. “Our efforts to spread the gospel will not necessarily take us to distant lands or towards foreign populations”.

The cosmic pessimism expressed by Cardinal Wuerl certainly reflects the difficult period the church is going through today in some Western countries (particularly the United States), as a consequence of the scandal of pedophile priests or the accusations of feminism made against American nuns, or again the distance many faithful take from the indications the Vatican gives regarding sexual and familial morals. However, even in countries less directly involved with these tensions, there is no doubt that most of the priests of the Catholic ‘flock’ share all these worries, identifying in advanced modernity an obstacle to the Christian proposal. What is more, many scholars and observers of contemporary religious phenomenon would seem to agree with them. On this point, it has been suggested—referring to what is happening in countries with a long Catholic tradition, such as France, Belgium and Spain—that Christianity has reached the end of its social trajectory, is no longer part of common culture, and, in undergoing an irreversible decline, is being relegated to the margins of society and history; at most it persists only in some way within individual consciences. The emblem of this state of affairs is the image of Catholicism as the “end of a world” [1]. The end of a world not only as a result of empty seminaries and negative levels of religiosity, but especially due to the very capacity of Catholicism to put forward proposals concerning man, nature, and social life considered meaningful by the modern conscience.

Although it may be valid for numerous reasons, the scenario described so far is not applicable to all Western countries, nor does it explain the ambivalent and controversial way the relationship between religion and society can be outlined in advanced modernity. The wind of secularization has long been blowing in the Christian West, but this process does not necessarily result in the end or marginality of traditional religions in every context. In an open and pluralistic society, there is a great deal of ‘activity’ in the search for solutions to the problems related to meaning, and personal and social identity. Many people certainly abandon their religious ties with the past, those convictions adopted and matured in the course of religious socialization; whilst others choose spiritual pathways far removed from institutionalized religiosity; but still others can rediscover their faith of tradition, considering that “it is better to anchor oneself in the prevailing religion than to cast oneself adrift on spiritual paths which are irreconcilable with one’s own culture and habits” ([2], p. 12). They seem to be driven to this by a two-fold motivation, internal and external: on one hand by the need to have founding references in a period fraught with uncertainties and fears; on the other by the reaction produced in society where—as a consequence of continuous flows of migrants—groups of different cultures and religious traditions (particularly Islam) are firmly consolidated. Therefore, fairly large shares of the indigenous population can re-discover a resource of meaning in Christian belonging that offers reassurance in the challenges and confrontations with the religious identities of others.

In advanced society, therefore, there is no lack of new motives for re-evaluating the prevailing religion, even in a context where religious references are undergoing crises and defection. Furthermore, these very same churches and religious institutions are experiencing changing fortunes, finding themselves from some points of view in difficulty in contemporary society, but for others the focus of new opportunities. In fact, for some years now—as predicted in the past by José Casanova [3]—in Western countries we can witness the new leading role assumed by religious groups and institutions, repeatedly intervening in the on-going debate on the most crucial ethical and social issues such as the laity, bioethics, the definition and frontiers of life, the crisis of the public spirit, the educational emergency, environmental equilibria and so on. The current activism by the historical churches on the public scene indicates the extent they intend to play out their part in defining the rules of co-existence in pluralistic society, representing thereby reference point not only for their own faithful but also for those disorientated when faced with the onslaught of modernity.

What is taking place in the religious field in some Western societies does not, therefore, only seem to reflect a situation of crisis or irreversible decline in the churches and prevailing religious institutions. More than might be imagined, advanced modernity offers opportunities for the religions of tradition, even within a context fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. An example of this is represented by Italy, a nation still today characterized by a widespread affiliation to Catholicism, despite the increase in religious pluralism and an undisputed secularization in the customs of the population [4]. This contribution focuses precisely on the Italian case, and the description of the religious situation relies on data from the most recent and largest survey available carried out on a large sample of the Italian population aged between 16 and 74 in 2007. These data are frequently compared to those from a similar survey carried out in the first half of the 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Religious Belonging

As has been mentioned, a first distinctive element of the Italian religious situation can be identified as a belonging to Catholicism that seems “to withstand the test of time and the challenges of advanced modernity” [5]. Considering the data from the most recent surveys, we can see that still today more than 80% of the population continues to identify itself in the prevailing religious faith, even when confronted with a ‘religious’ panorama undergoing marked modifications with respect to the past. Two different trends can be identified concerning this, one outside the Catholic field, the other within.

Religious pluralism is not a recent phenomenon in Italy, since various religious minorities have long been present on the national scene, and are characterized by their active and dynamic presence not only at a national level but above all in particular territorial areas. The long established communities (such as the Evangelicals, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses) make up part of this picture, but there are also religious groups that were firmly established in Italy some decades ago, represented by the followers of some oriental religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism) or by the New Age phenomenon and the new religious movements. These all make up the religious minorities that have long co-existed in a country marked by a strong Catholic tradition, and these groups have often enjoyed a level of public consideration (in particular by the mass media) far superior to their numerical importance. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Details about samples, methodologies and findings of the two cited surveys are available in [2,6].

when added together, they have never involved more than 1–2% of the population, despite exercising a cultural influence on Italian society.

However, over the last 10–15 years this picture of minority religions in Italy has profoundly changed, both from a quantitative point of view and because of the presence of new actors on the national scene. Currently a sharp increase in religious faiths other than Catholicism can be observed, involving about 5% of the Italian population. This increment, however, is due not so much to the greater dynamism of the historical minority religions (whose numbers have remained stable over time) as to the spreading of new faiths and cultural traditions connected to the recent flows of migrants, among which the cases of Islam and Orthodox Christianity clearly stand out. With the continuous flow of foreign immigrants into Italy (particularly from North Africa and Eastern European countries) the importance and internal composition of the minority religions present in the country is consequently changing. Today Islam and Orthodox Christianity contend for the position of being the second religion in Italy (after Catholicism), having a substantial following among the respective foreign immigrants, who find in ‘their’ religion not only a bond with their culture of origin (a principle of distinction), but also a factor of affirmation of rights of citizenship in the public sphere.

An image of Italy emerges from this picture that, though still being in large part Catholic, the presence of religious faiths other than the traditional one is increasingly visible; and that often looks with some alarm at what takes place in the Islamic communities, fearing that their activism (the demand for new mosques, an ever-growing presence of students following the Islamic religion in state schools) can modify the national equilibrium.

However, as already said, religious pluralism in Italy is not only manifested by a God increasingly used as a plural, as a consequence of the greater presence of different religious faiths. In addition, the Catholic area is internally very differentiated, as is typical of a religious denomination still attracting a vast following throughout the population. This is another distinctive characteristic of the religious Italy that exponents of the church along with scholars and observers of national dynamics have long been aware of. The image with which Cardinal Martini (an authoritative figure in the world episcopacy and bishop of Milan for many years, who died a few months ago) described the situation of Italian Catholicism as well known: apart from the “lymph Christians”, there are also those “of the trunk, of the bark and lastly those who like moss are only externally attached to the tree”. Translated into empirical terms, this thought evokes the presence in Italy of many different ways of interpreting Catholic belonging and common identity.

The most recent surveys at our disposal [2] indicate that out of all the Italians declaring themselves Catholic (involving, as already noted, more than 80% of the population), 22% define themselves as convinced and active from a religious point of view, 32% consider themselves convinced but not always active, 35% adhere to Catholicism for traditional or educational reasons, and 7–8% because they share its fundamental ideas even if they interpret them in an autonomous and subjective way.

Some very interesting trends emerge from a comparison (see Table 1) of these data with those taken from a similar survey carried out in the first half of the 1990s [6]. First of all the number of more religiously committed Catholics has remained more or less stable (about 1/5 of the population), represented by those ‘active and convinced’ believers who are close to the ecclesial settings and who stand out in society for their particular cultural and religious sensitivity. These are people who are religiously committed, who regularly attend religious rites, who believe in a religious education for

their children; a number of them taking part in those Catholic associations (composed of groups and movements promoting the religious education of their members and notably active in works of charity and solidarity) that carry out a relevant role in the country. This is the hardcore of Italian Catholicity, which explains how the ‘Catholic subculture’ can persist even in advanced modernity, representing a cultural area that stands out in society not only because of its religious convictions but also for its ethical choices (conception of the family, receptiveness regarding life issues, altruistic engagement, attention to educational concerns and so on).

**Table 1.** Summary of Italians’ religious attitudes (%).

	1994 Survey *	2007 Survey **
<i>Religious belonging</i>		
Catholic	88.6	86.1
Other religion	2.6	4.8
No religion	8.8	9.1
<i>Kind of religious adherence</i>		
Convinced and active	20.2	21.0
Convinced but not always active	36.9	28.8
By tradition and/or education	24.8	31.3
Share some ideas	8.7	7.5
No religion	8.8	9.1
<i>Belief</i>		
Christ is divine	86.4	81.5
Immortal soul	66.2	65.4
Life after death	45.2	39.8
Hell exists	52.3	49.7
Heaven exists	74.2	63.5
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>		
Never	17.1	23.7
A few times per year	16.8	13.5
A few times per month/week	27.0	28.2
At least once a day	41.3	32.5
<i>Attendance at mass</i>		
Never	13.0	21.8
A few times per year	37.3	36.0
At least once a month	18.5	15.7
At least once a week	31.1	26.5
<i>In the last year, I have:</i>		
Taken part in processions	42.3	33.9
Taken part in pilgrimages	14.8	15.6
Taken a vow	17.8	13.3
Had mass celebrated for the dear departed	43.7	34.7
<i>Acceptable behavior</i>		
Divorce	63.0	71.0
Homosexuality	38.0	50.6
Masturbation	55.5	72.2

Table 1. Cont.

<i>In favor of:</i>		
Euthanasia	22.5	37.3
Recognition of homosexual couples	15.6	30.2
Family planning	71.7	87.7
<i>Abortion is acceptable:</i>		
Never	20.7	23.9
In certain cases (e.g., fetal malformation, mother's life in danger)	61.5	52.9
When both parents agree	9.6	10.6
When the woman decides	8.2	12.5
<i>In favor of:</i>		
Women priests	39.7	43.9
Married priests	45.0	47.7
Church financing from taxes	58.0	57.1
The crucifix in public places	---	76.7

\* Source [6]; \*\* Source [2].

On the contrary, over the last 10–15 years there has been a certain movement in the Catholic positions described as less definite or more uncertain. This is demonstrated above all by a decrease in the number of people who consider themselves “convinced but not always active” and an increase in those declaring themselves Catholic more as a result of culture and education than for religious or spiritual reasons. This latter trend is emblematic of the reaction produced in the part of the population encountering difficulty in finding its place in advanced modernity, in a society fraught with uncertainties and fears, lacking cultural reference points, and destined to become increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious. As a consequence, many can rediscover in their faith of tradition and culture that ‘familiar’ anchorage that offers security and certainty in a world undergoing enormous changes.

The vast majority of Italians make up part of these two groups of religiosity (‘convinced but not always active’ Catholics, and Catholics for traditional and cultural reasons) described above. Although they are characterized by two different religious profiles, these two groups, in fact, have various tendencies in common, among which is a religious experience marked by personal timings and rhythms, a discontinuous presence in ecclesial settings, a selective and autonomous way of relating with the church and its teachings. These are all characteristics that indicate a flexible relationship with religion, typical of those who value the Catholic identity for some of its aspects but at the same time interpret others in a personal way. In this picture, the religious ties of many Italians do not seem particularly binding and reflect individualism in belief (or that ‘do-it-yourself religiousness’) typical of the present times. However, the tendency to ‘think of oneself’ as religious (and in our case ‘Catholic’) is much more widespread than considering oneself far from or unrelated to religious values.

The existence of a Catholicism made up of very different and composite profiles can perhaps explain why in Italy—with respect to that which occurs elsewhere—the number of people declaring themselves not belonging to any religion is very limited. As is known, the ‘without religion’ group is very substantial in many European countries, involving 35–40% of the population in France, Belgium and Germany [7]; whereas in Italy the corresponding number stands at around 9%, and has shown no

particular growth trend over the last decades. In Italy, moreover, there are fewer cases—with respect to the European trends—of “faith without religious belonging”, indicating a spiritual quest that excludes any connection with churches and religious institutions. On the contrary, in Italy, we find those who identify themselves—as has been seen—with Catholicism even without manifesting a particular religious involvement; while a minority, but not irrelevant share, of the population finds itself in the singular position of a “religious belonging without believing”. In short, a substantial proportion of Italians still today prefer to declare themselves ‘Catholic’ rather than ‘without religion’, despite revealing uncertain and ambivalent religious convictions.

Obviously, this overall picture changes in accordance with the socio-demographic characteristics of the population and the different contexts where people are located and live ([8], pp. 79–80). The greatest religious involvement (both regarding the sense of religious belonging, and—as we shall see further on—concerning the beliefs and attendance at religious rites) on the whole interests women rather than men and gradually decreases with age when passing from the elderly to the young. The young-adult group, moreover, is the social category most characterized by a difficult relationship with the Catholic Church, especially in not accepting various precepts concerning sexual morality; this does not, however, mean that among the young generations the orientation to define oneself ‘Catholic’ and to consider religious faith as a reference point in life does not prevail. Lastly, it can be seen that the levels of religiosity are higher in the South of Italy than in the other geographical areas of the country (North and Centre), also due to the greater diffusion in those areas of a popular religiosity of ancient origins. However, even faced with these prevalent trends, it is necessary to note that social groups well adjusted to advanced modernity (characterized by a good level of education, important professional activities, and established in culturally and economically dynamic contexts) do exist, demonstrating high levels of religious involvement and therefore confirming the variety of religious expression throughout Italy.

### 3. Religious Life and Practice

The data concerning religious practice in Italy seem to be congruent with the different ways the population feels bound to Catholicism. For many Italians, religion is more a reference of ideals than a practice in life, representing for the most part a “sacred face” [9] to turn to in crucial moments of existence rather than a set of rites and practices to partake of in the ordinary conditions of life. Furthermore, there is a widespread tendency in Italy to focus attention on the great religious events that revolve around the Catholic Church (such as the World Youth Days, the proclamations of the Blessed and Saints, Papal visits to local churches, the commemoration of charismatic religious figures, *etc.*) that register a higher level of mobilization than ordinary participation in the religious sphere. According to various commentators, these contrasting images indicate the paradox of a Catholicism still able to fill the public squares, while the churches in general remain empty. In other words, many Italians are attracted by the “spectacle of faith” connected to collective religious events emphasized by the mass media, while they desert their parishes and communities in everyday life.

The problem raised here can be considered relevant to the Italian situation, even if the image of a country swaying between “crowded squares” and “empty churches” does not seem to reflect reality, nor is it confirmed by the most recent empirical surveys ([10]; [5], pp. 71–81). If we consider recent

decades, it can certainly be seen that also in Italy regular religious practice has become a minority event, as the population in this field too has substituted the commitments of observance with those of preference. However, attendance at Sunday religious rites is still significant throughout the nation, and at a much higher level than can be found in many other European countries, be they Catholic or Protestant. Currently about 25% of Italians say they take part in weekly community religious rites, compared to the 6–7% of the French, around 10% of Belgians and Germans, 14% of the Spanish and less than 5% in Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, intermittent or discontinuous religious participation is very widespread in Italy (involving about 5% of the population), typical of those who instead of breaking off their ties with religious rituals, tend to live them out according to their own timings and rhythms, not complying therefore with the indications of religious authority.

Data on prayer also illustrate a religious Italy characterized by very different positions. Taking into consideration the whole population, 32% declare that they pray assiduously and consistently (at least once a day), 28% several times a week, 13% a ‘one off’ during the year, while just under 25% never or almost never.

In addition, the vast majority of Italians participate in religious rites of passage as a solemn celebration of the most important moments in life. The most appreciated is the religious funeral (70% of the population acknowledge its importance), followed by christening (67%) and church weddings (63%). This last piece of data is roughly confirmed by the official statistics, thus reflecting the share of the population that chooses the religious rite when getting married.

In addition to the data analyzed so far, other important signs regarding prevailing religiosity in the Italian context appear from the way the population relates to the sacred and transcendental sphere, allowing us to evaluate if and to what extent religious sentiment not only exists but accompanies people throughout their lives.

Scholarly opinions on these issues contrast, in that some have defined our present day as a period of “spiritual deprivation” (the incapacity of people today “to speak to the angels”) [9], whereas others see in it unmistakable signs of re-enchantment of the world [11]. The Italian situation seems better described by the latter perspective. Growing numbers of the population (even those not particularly involved in religious practice) seem to live in an ‘extraordinary’ world, sensing the presence of God and the sacred in their lives, having the sensation of being part of a world of spirits and mystery transcending the terrestrial experience. According to the most recent surveys, about 2/3 of Italians declare that they have experienced the close presence of God in some circumstances during their lives, while 50% believe that from time to time God can be glimpsed in their existence, sending out messages and signals perhaps not always easy to decipher. More than 27% maintain that they have received a divine grace or favor. These perceptions do not only involve people of low social extraction or those attracted to popular religiosity, but characterize also the lives of those who live advanced modernity to the full, and who perhaps are able to extract from it new reasons for widening their horizons and finding refuge in a protective God.

Faced with these trends, it seems quite conceivable to claim that a demand for spirituality exists in Italian society, which from certain points of view is expressed in the religious forms proposed by the Catholic Church, but for other reasons is manifested in autonomous pathways. Many consider themselves more spiritual than religious, meaning that they believe more in the values of the spirit than

the model of religiosity proposed by the churches, even though they do not reject the idea that it is possible to pursue a spiritual life within the traditional religious forms<sup>2</sup>.

The issue of spirituality also focuses attention on oriental religions or new cults and religious movements, incorporating different needs and sensitivities from those of the Western Christian tradition. The interest expressed in alternative spirituality is increasing also in Italy (as in other Western countries), but it is manifested more at a cultural than religious level; with the result that in fact only a very small and specialized minority pursue oriental religions or dedicate themselves to the New Age and new cults, or attribute a religious value to the practices of human enhancement.

#### 4. Uncertain and Dubious Beliefs

This survey also presents new and interesting information about area of beliefs, a subject that is often a focus of disagreement and debate. This contention is due to the presence of particularly focused groups openly engaging in atheist propaganda, not only because they are convinced many Italians believe in God out of habit rather than conviction, but also because they want to counter the influence the Catholic church has on national life and the numerous interventions the Church makes on issues surrounding public co-existence. On one hand, therefore, they aim at shaking the Italian tree of the Catholic faith, maintaining that behind many a believer there hides a true atheist with no interest in spiritual or religious questions whatsoever. On the other hand, they intend to assert their stance of ‘non believers’, which in their view is particularly sacrificed in a country so deeply conditioned by the proximity of the Vatican and the historical intrusion of the Catholic church into national affairs. These organized groups, therefore, set up initiatives with the intent of illustrating how irrational believing in God is today. However, such polemics do not seem to be able to change the prevailing orientations of Italians in this field<sup>3</sup> ([2], p. 15). The positions rejecting the existence of God or a transcendental being (expressed generally by those declaring that they are atheist-agnostic or indifferent to religious issues) cannot be overlooked in Italy (they involve 17% of all Italians) but certainly do not reach the much higher levels found in other European nations, such as France, Belgium and Spain (where 1/3 of the population does not believe in God) [7].

In Italy, therefore, belief in God still appears to be widespread, even though important new findings concerning the way it is expressed can be seen. Over the years, there has been a decline in the number of those whose belief in God is certain (represented today by 46% of all cases), while at the same time there has been an increase in the percentage professing doubtful or uncertain faith, or a faith that fluctuates according to the different moments in life and state of mind. About 25% of the population admits to believing with doubts, while 12% declare their faith to be intermittent, reflecting the high and low moments in life. All these interesting data indicate that also in this field many Italians experience precariousness in their lives, a typical characteristic of the present times.

Furthermore, many Italians see in religion the solution to their need for meaning in existence since it represents a resource when facing the negative moments encountered in human experience. Moreover, the positive images of God attract more consensus than the negative ones, while ideas denying the importance of the sacred and divine in the present day are firmly rejected. Adherence to

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<sup>2</sup> On this issue see [12].

<sup>3</sup> See also [2] on changes in believing.

the fundamental beliefs of Christianity can be seen to be selective. The most accepted are those related to Christ's divinity, inspirations from the Holy Scriptures, the immortality of the soul, but regarding other truths proposed by the church—especially those concerning the hereafter and the 'novissimi' (what awaits man at the end of time)—uncertainty abounds, also because very often these issues have not been touched on since the years of catechism.

## 5. The Ambivalent Relationship with the Church

The feelings the majority of Italians nurture towards the Catholic church—by which we mean all the groups and organizations that it is made up of together with those who run it—is one of both closeness and distance. The church is definitely not the institution that enjoys the greatest level of trust in the nation (the family, the school, the police forces are more appreciated by Italians), even though the consensus it enjoys far out-weighs that given other public bodies, such as the judicial system, local administration, parliament and more generally the political parties.

This goodwill seems due first of all to the fact that the majority of the population consider the Catholic church an integral part of the national landscape, because of the numerous works and structures underlining its presence throughout the territory, because of the multitude of places of worship (parishes and sanctuaries) scattered all across the nation, because of the wealth of initiatives that it is able to promote in areas of public service (for the education of the young, for the most marginalized in society, cultural activities). These are all settings and structures generally open to public participation, and in which a substantial share of the population has taken part at some point in their lives (in general during childhood or adolescence), and retained a positive impression.

Another element favoring the Catholic Church in Italy can be found in its religious offer which addresses the whole population, able therefore to embrace different religious sensitivities, "keeping together popular devotion and more essential and modern religiosity, committed Catholics with Catholics for reasons of tradition and culture, practicing worshippers and occasional believers, people and groups of exclusive faith and those undergoing their religious quest" ([5], p. 4). In other words, the Italian church has never cultivated—in its pastoral choices—the idea of the limited flock or the elite religious group, "in the conviction that Catholic sentiment is extremely widespread throughout the population, even though it may be expressed in different forms and intensities and is not without ambivalences and contradictions" ([5], p. 4). Due also to this fundamental choice, the Catholic Church is perceived by a large proportion of the population as being 'close at hand'.

Moreover, the close intertwining of the Catholic culture with Italian history and civil life has been widely acknowledged (both by intellectuals and normal people), and although in some cases the effect has been negative and restricting, in others it may have favored harmonious outcomes. However, apart from the different evaluations, the idea that Catholicism is a distinctive trait of Italian society still persists, even if it is increasingly obliged to face challenges from other cultural matrices and various ideologies. Still today, Catholicism seems to play an important role in the nation at various levels. On one hand, it proposes a sufficiently well tested system of meaning that the majority of the population can recognize itself in; on the other, it offers a set of symbols and rites that accompany the civil and institutional life of the nation and mark out its most important moments, being culturally accepted also

by non-believers. Often, therefore, the Catholic church is called upon to celebrate national liturgies, thus acknowledging its role beyond the religious horizon.

For various and complex reasons, therefore, the majority of Italians do not seem to question the bond between the prevailing religious confession and national identity. However, this is opposed by a part of the lay world together with various religious minorities that have always been against any religious monopoly in Italy, demanding pluralism in faith and cultural choices, along with equality between Catholicism and other religious denominations. Hence the battles fought by these groups against the crucifix being displayed in public buildings, in favor of abolishing Catholic religious teaching in Italian state schools, (though it was agreed in the Concordat between Church and State), condemning the preferential treatment (economic incentives and tax relief) the Catholic church alone enjoys in Italy; and most of all to limit the frequent tendency of the church to powerfully intervene on the most important issues in the public debate, conditioning legislative choices and thus the life of the nation.

Yet, the population as a whole adopts a more inclusive and low-profile position on such matters<sup>4</sup>. According to the findings of the most recent surveys it emerges that most Italians don't seem to contest the bond between the prevailing religious denomination and national identity; as a result, they are in favor of the crucifix in public places, the teaching of Catholicism in state schools, approve of their (and other) Churches receiving a share of taxes paid to the State, accept that religion expresses its opinion on the important questions of the moment. Obviously it is not a matter of blind, all-embracing assent. Religious works are appreciated but there is resentment about the Church's tax exemptions; educational activity in ecclesiastical contexts is approved of but there is no great enthusiasm for Catholic schools; above all there is objection to the fact that the Church goes beyond its proper tasks (*i.e.*, religious activities), "interfering" in politics and making self-serving choices which are by no means innocent.

There is also a considerable amount of hair-splitting about the Church's pronouncements. Its comments on social and public ethics are the most welcome, e.g., when the Church reminds people of their charitable duties, draws the attention of politicians to the public good, tries to keep the country united, aims at strengthening the collective ethos; but its hierarchy's voice is less welcome when it speaks of sexual and family ethics, a field in which for some time Italians have been exercising considerable autonomy of judgment and behavior; and again, opinion is divided on the Church's thinking on the subjects of the beginning and end of life, bioethics, genetic engineering, where to draw the line for unlimited science—even if most people approve of "Catholic prudence" on these engaging issues, questioning the individual and collective conscience.

This whole picture illustrates just how ambivalent the relationship between Italians and the Church can be. Alongside those who accept it as it is or would like it to be more engaged in defending traditional values, there is a growing demand among the population for a less hierarchical and bureaucratic Church, nearer to the real conditions of life, open to dialogue and treating better those either 'distant' from the Church or whose pathways have been more difficult. There is also the widespread idea that the Church in Italy holds too much power, enjoys undue advantages in a now religiously pluralistic society, and has an invasive presence in the political sphere. Not many would

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<sup>4</sup> Here I recall some considerations put forward in my book ([2], pp. 12–13).

like a voiceless church, not expressing its teachings in the religious field or not directing Italians and believers to the common good. However, the ideal church would be one not overstepping the bounds of its religious and spiritual mission and offering faith and hope.

The diffuse affiliation to Catholicism does not stop many Italians from manifesting a very flexible and even critical approach to the Church and the official positions it takes on sensitive issues. However, this autonomous opinion does not seem to result in a break in the relationship with the religious institution, but rather gives rise to both a selective and tolerant approach, typical of those who adopt the indications they recognize themselves in and abandon those considered too difficult and distant from their own sensitivity.

There are—empirically verified—images that clearly illustrate this particularity of the Italian situation. Not only does the majority continue to identify with Catholicism, but—as noted elsewhere—([2], p. 14) “it is the possibility of being good Catholics without sharing the hierarchy’s directives in various fields, especially family and sexual morality. This does not however prevent the majority from calling upon the Church to hold firm to its own principles and not allow itself to be influenced by predominant opinions. In other words, firm points of reference and ideals are necessary, but then on the personal level everybody makes use of them as he or she sees fit”. This is another aspect of the particular religious style characterizing the Italian case.

## 6. Flexible Catholicism

Several years ago, rethinking the secularization theory, some scholars observed that advanced modernity also produces religious forms. They were referring to the affirmation of a search for meaning—developing outside churches and religious institutions, favoring autonomous spiritual paths and adherence to forms of expression dealing with new sects and religious movements—in contemporary society.

This phenomenon is important, even if it does not consider the way in which up to now religious research has manifested itself in the vast majority of the population. This is because, on the one hand, a search for spirituality with no fixed frontiers attracts a lot of people and, on the other hand, there is a tendency to maintain a link with the traditional religion, although in more flexible and articulate forms than in the past.

The Italian case—as this paper explains—reflects on this last scenario, specific to the transformation of belief, which is taking place in the most traditional and consolidated religious belonging.

Therefore, there seems to be an “Italian case” with regard to the religious question comparing what’s happening in Italy with the rest of Europe. In spite of declining attendance at religious ceremonies and the vocations’ crisis, religious feeling in Italy is still widespread and is familiar in the lives of many people. Although we are talking about a society where other religious faiths are on the increase, the “no religion” category is not growing as it is elsewhere because the great majority of people continue to see themselves as Catholics belonging to the religion of their “home” religion rather in cultural and/or religious terms than on the spiritual level. Many people may disagree with the Catholic church on specific issues (e.g., its influence on political life or its bioethical and family moral teaching), but they continue to turn to the church at the key moments of their lives (birth, marriage, death) or to satisfy basic religious needs, in addition to re-evaluating personalities and religious

activity in favor of the common good, exercising charity and solidarity. In this scenario, Catholicism “of the family” or “of intentions” prevails, indicative of the flexible, selective, “made-to-measure” way in which many Italians continue to belong to the traditional faith, even in the age of pluralism of religious choice. Alongside them, however, there is a substantial minority of Catholics who are ‘convinced and active’, representing the hardcore of the Catholic presence in the country and giving rise to an ecclesial associationism which is still widespread and engaged both in socio-assistential voluntarism and in the field of education. To sum up, in Italy there are different forms of Catholicism and this cohabitation of heterogeneous sensitivities is one of the factors explaining the persistence of a religious belonging which passes the tests of time and advanced modernity.

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