Saintly Models and Lifestyles in the Sociological Tradition

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Abstract
This text intends to formulate a hypothesis of holiness as a daily lifestyle. The first point, *The transcendent sacred,* when introducing the three above-mentioned classics, is a common reference to the idea of the sacred as a transcendent reality of the individual at moments and during experiences of great religious intensity, albeit reserved exclusively to the administration of religious institutions. The second point, *The daily-life sacred*, refers to less intense forms of the sacred, different for each individual, which are discovered and constructed through personal vicissitudes and therefore 'sustainable' by everyday life. The third point, *Transcendent holiness*, deals with heroic, exceptional models of holiness proposed to its faithful by the Church. The fourth point, *Holiness in daily life*, forms a model of holiness of all the faithful representing professions, jobs, cultures and diverse sensibilities. The conclusion, *From heroic saints to sustainable models of holiness*, formulates two fields of future research: relations between models of sanctity and sociocultural, economic and ecclesiastical contexts; and the progressive power of the papacy in controlling and declaring holiness.

Key Words
Holiness; sacred; saints; sociology; lifestyles.

Contents

1. Introduction

Neither the term nor the concept of holiness has rung many bells in the sociological tradition when compared with the interest shown by other sciences of religion. Only the work of the sociologist Pierre Delooz (1969) is frequently cited, even by historians. For sociologists, the most significant theoretical references for analysing holiness are still the three works on the sacred by Émile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. This text too will refer to them in order to formulate a hypothesis of holiness as a daily lifestyle.

The concept of lifestyle applied to holiness is considered heuristically significant for three reasons. First of all, it is consequent to the recent teaching of the Catholic Church which proposes Christian perfection as a sustainable model for the common life of the faithful and aimed at everyone's lifestyle, beyond the heroic and exceptional models of tradition. Secondly, it is the concept of lifestyle – understood as a set of daily behaviors – that most clearly represents a model of sanctity of an individual who leads a normal working and professional life in current secular societies. Finally, in the current social context subjected to great transformations, not excluding religious ones, the lifestyle recalls an aesthetic dimension to which everyone feels called, and to be achieved with personal and different choices for each in everyday reality, far from *fascinans et tremendum* of transcendent holiness.

The paragraph *The transcendent sacred,* when introducing the three above-mentioned classics, is a common reference to the idea of the sacred as a transcendent reality of the individual at moments and during experiences of great religious intensity, albeit reserved exclusively to the administration of religious institutions. The following paragraph, *The daily-life sacred*, refers to less intense forms of the sacred, different for each individual, which are discovered and constructed through personal vicissitudes and are therefore "sustainable" by everyday life. The fourth paragraph, *Transcendent holiness*, deals with the heroic, exceptional models of holiness proposed to the faithful by the Church. The fifth paragraph, *Holiness in daily life*, forms a model of holiness of all the faithful representing different professions, jobs, cultures, and diverse sensibilities. The conclusion, *From heroic saints to sustainable models of holiness*, formulates two fields of future research: the relations between models of sanctity and their socio-cultural, economic and ecclesiastical contexts; and the progressive power of the papacy in controlling and declaring holiness.

2. The transcendent sacred

Durkheim (1912) sees the sacred as attaining not to a real, transcendent, divine Being, but to a symbolic set of functions where sacred figures and objects make sense of individual and collective life for those who recognize them. Its forms change and move from one society to another, protected by interdictions and isolated from the profane. This is why the sacred is the collective feeling that a society inspires in its members. In this function of strengthening social bonds, the sacred (and its organizing religion) cannot disappear in a

society, because of the three functions it fulfills. The first is to order the world in the sacred and the profane. The second is to organize times, feast days and rites: the sacred is a time among times. The third is to integrate the individual into the group, thus making up its immediacy, its organic bonds, and its mystical unifying network. It is the sacred as the root of all collective life or, in the words of Durkheim, the root of the «social divine».

Otto (1917) perceives the sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, an experience of knowledge and profound emotion at the confluence of the rational and the irrational. Only in this experience is the divine revealed. According to some authors, Otto's definition favours the Christian religion, making it a model – albeit theoretical – which the others should follow (v. Gilli 2021). In reality, his definition reflects the Old Testament at most, not the Gospels, where there is no such absolute notion of God – unless accompanied by another figure, for example Christ. In Otto's view the sacred is only a "numinous" (i.e. divine) experience, and nothing more.

Eliade's perspective, developed in the aura of Durkheim's work, is based on the contraposition of the sacred and the profane (v. Eliade 1957). Profane space is homogeneous, amorphous and "neutral". The sacred, on the other hand, derives from the determination, within the profane space, of a place defined by a hierophany, which is to say some manifestation of the sacred/divine, some event (even minimal, silent) that is not provoked by human means. Thus, it becomes a meeting point between heaven and earth; its constitution needs a consecration transforming it from chaos into cosmos. The greatest distinction of a sacred place is relative to whomever inhabits it. In Eliade's imagined framework, this subject is an idealized, ceremonial community which, as a unit and inasmuch as it is a unit, carries out extraordinary acts of consecration and celebration. This subject is always collective, never individual. The place which counts for an individual is one's own place, where one's choices do not involve any community or authority.

3. The daily-life sacred

The sacred of Durkheim, Otto and Eliade is the transcendent sacred, but other forms of the sacred today indicate that this vision is weakening, seen as an archaic leftover, restricted to the administration of religious institutions. This is borne out by the forms of daily-life sacred proposed by online research and by Gian Antonio Gilli's *Locus sui. Religioni di luogo* (*Their Own Locus. Religions of Place*). They are sacred forms of diverse levels of intensity, not necessarily attaining to the degree of mysterium tremendum et fascinans. The bases of these forms of the sacred are not the Scriptures of historical religions, and their identity is not only "quantitative", between big and small, but also – in terms of needs and itineraries – qualitative. It is a sacred which is different for everyone, discovered and constructed by means of personal vicissitudes, episodes, little "apparitions" and familiar memories of every type. For many symbol-poor subjects this is the only means of access to personal spiritual

experience. It is a "sustainable" sacred like that which characterizes little daily apparitions and illuminations of coming closer to the spiritual realm.

But are these forms of the daily-life sacred still endowed with a transcendent dimension? Or, on the contrary, is the experience of transcendence abandoned, and substituted by the social simulacrum of transcendence?

4. Transcendent holiness

This text omits the previous question relating to the two forms of the transcendent and the everyday, in order to formulate an analogous hypothesis related to a typology of the two forms of holiness which, from the heroic models of Christian perfection, reach models of holiness as a style of life common to everybody. I shall define the former type of holiness as transcendent holiness with reference to Peter Brown's work on the appearance of the saint in the world of late antiquity (v. Brown 1998). In the three central chapters, the saint appears among «the exceptional dead»: he or she is «the invisible companion» and his/her cult lives through his/her mortal remains. The saint studied by Peter Brown, mainly in Latin Christianity, is the protector, the interceder and the personal patron of either a group or a community. That is the function of the cult of saints in the period of initial evangelization, connected with the saints' thaumaturgy, first living and later dead in life first and then after death. And the saint par excellence, especially the martyr, was Christ, the true model of martyrdom.

Since the time of Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine, the Church has directed the devotion of the faithful towards the relics of martyrs from the early centuries, in the conviction that religious people could participate in the very holiness of the divinity and, to some extent, benefit from its attributes. Thus, they saints were considered privileged witnesses of Christianity. The flowering of these figures of holiness characterizing the last centuries of the Roman Empire had effects which went far beyond the Church's cultural life. In this way the saint carried out a first miracle in the eyes of viewers: being a religious person in every aspect of life, so that even his/her powers seemed less strange, even being part of the logic of guaranteeing the presence of God.

With the peace of Constantine the recognition of holiness, implicit in the cult of martyrs, spread to new forms of holiness and "exceptional" Christians. It is in the passage from Passions of the Martyrs to Lives of the Saints that there is an extension of the saint's potentiality to represent a model, which is no longer so much a matter of sacrificing one's life so as not to betray one's faith, as of being a great model (*documentum*) for everybody to imitate. Subsequently, when attention shifted to the whole life of the saint (who was not a martyr anymore), further functions of the saint – such as thaumaturgy and struggling with the devil – were discovered. To the ancient function of role model attributed to the martyr were added, in particular, those of intercessor and protector/patron, which, according to Brown's thesis, determined the

spread of the cult of the saints. The complementarity of these two functions, or the prevalence of one over the other, has been since then one of the most significant aspects of the cult. Such will be the saints of the ascetic movement, and bishops defending their flocks against the violence of political power, or doing charitable work to aid the underprivileged.

This new understanding of holiness led to a different representation of Christian perfection, extending to include new figures of exceptional saints: exponents of the ascetic movement; figures who have renounced integration into social structures; those who reached the apex of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; aristocrats destined to spend the rest of their days as bishops or abbots.

There is a specific datum concerning women and female holiness. Taking into consideration the subordinate function of women in late antiquity, the biography of a holy woman is envisaged as a means of disclosing practical examples, albeit in the tension between prescribed ideals and lived experience. An example is the rigorist attitude that may devalue the condition of marriage, all the more with respect to married women upon whom the ascetic ideal had already taken such a hold. Furthermore, it was necessary to consider all the women who, because of their family and social choices, would not have been able to identify fully with models of radical holiness, such as virginity. Important in this context were manuals of devotion for married women whose husbands did not approve of their religious or charitable choices, representing a form of romanticisation of *mediocritas*. Such manuals were an effective tool for twisting ancient ideals into a more prosaic reality which was, however, necessary to recover on a pastoral level (v. Scorza Barcellona 1994: 14 sgg.).

5. Holiness in daily life

After the model of holiness described above, a second model of Christian perfection was directed towards the lifestyle common to everybody. As, at the beginning of Christianity, the failure of persecutions led Christians to elaborate models of perfection regardless of martyrdom and to propose individual and collective models of asceticism, so it came about in later times, when an idea of holiness accessible to everybody took shape. Miracles were still important, but what was essential was that saints should fulfill the Church's needs. They should also, with their loyalty and orthodoxy, support the papacy at a time when the fundamental dogmas of Christianity were under attack from heresies and movements critical of the mediocracy of Catholic clergy in contrast with the ascetic rigor of other believers. This was one of the reasons why the founders of new orders uniting obedience to the Church, apostolic zeal and a lifestyle of poverty were often canonized.

An example is the process of femininization of Catholicism that took place during the XVIII century, giving life to the so-called "female Catholicism", which, once again, brought about a change in the models of holiness, even inside ecclesiastical institutions (v. Caffiero 1994: 278-279). In the context of

growing secularisation and religious cooling off among the cultured, urban elites, a further turning point in the history of holiness and its models took place: women were entrusted with a more active role, both in the family and in education.

Also in the XVIII century, there appeared the social saints – different from more traditional figures witnessing charity towards the poor, they were characterized by their project of preventing poverty by means of education and cultural growth for everybody (v. Berzano 2023). In Piedmont especially there was a group of both religious and lay people who faced up to the new problems of their time by trying out answers and activating initiatives in every field, not only to help the poor but to eradicate the causes of poverty. They represented a new model of holiness in the face of the great social transformations of industrialisation, urbanisation and immigration. Both They were diocesan or order priests, founders of new congregations, missionaries and laypeople: Don Bosco, with the marginalised boys from the periphery of Turin; Giuseppe Cottolengo, with people in extreme poverty in the Little House of the Divine Providence (Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza); Giuseppe Cafasso, with prisoners and those condemned to death; Don Orione, with the poor and the young; Francesco Faà di Bruno, aiding the disadvantaged; Marchioness Giulia di Barolo, with street urchins; Giuseppe Allamano, supporting missionaries in Africa; Cardinal Massaia, founding African missions; the Blessed Variara, promoting the rights of lepers; Giuseppe Marello, giving assistance to the chronically ill in the Santa Chiara hospice (v. Berzano 2010).

Even the Catholic Church's Magisterium has recently repeated that specific acts of heroism are not necessary to follow the path of holiness so much as living love in everyday life. Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

For me [...] not only a few great saints whom I love and whom I know well are "signposts", but precisely also the simple saints, that is, the good people I see in my life who will never be canonized. They are ordinary people, so to speak, without visible heroism, but in their everyday goodness I see the truth of faith. This goodness, which they have developed in the faith of the Church, is for me the most reliable apology of Christianity and the sign of where the truth lies. (Benedict XVI 2011)

6. From heroic saints to sustainable models of holiness

An initial conclusion for the sociology of holiness must perforce analyse it in its relations with socio-economic and economic contexts as well as that of the ecclesiastical power – a dynamic context subject to transformations, even in its religious dimension. A characteristic of the saint is to be at the same time totally different from, and yet extremely close to, his/her fellow human beings; the context bears witness to one or the other of the two poles. This happened at the dawn of Christianity, in the Middle Ages, during the Reformation, in the XVIII century, in traditional societies over recent decades and up to those of advanced modernity. Current transformations to which one

refers are those where the models of holiness which inspire the faithful are no longer those of the heroic, exceptional, radical holiness proposed from on high by the Church, but the "sustainable" ones of daily life. All of them lack the tremendum et fascinans of transcendent holiness in favour of models of daily-life holiness.

A second conclusion concerns the power of either the people or the papacy to declare the holiness of one of the faithful. Since the XVII century, in parallel with its increasing control over popular religion, the Catholic Church has limited the forms for proclaiming a "canonization by acclamation" on the part of the people. Starting from the decrees of Urban VIII in 1625 and 1634, the Church has forbidden proclaiming the holiness of a man or a woman who had first been the object of a public cult. Thus, the people ceased to create authentic saints, since this was an exclusive prerogative of the hierarchy. But, as a consequence, holiness itself no longer interested the people as a whole but only the hierarchy. The glory of the altars has been reserved for monks and nuns, priests, mystics and founders of religious orders, with the exception of lay witnesses to missionary expansion. It is not, however, just a matter of a different attitude on the part of the hierarchy towards the *vox populi*, but of more profound social transformations. Lay society's needs for mediation and protection have always been directed towards other categories of independent individuals free from hierarchies. Observing that in the meantime the same powers and aid systems began to fulfill analogous functions meant a significant transformation. But it is difficult to imagine that this transformation, in future administrative structures, will be able to respond to care and reassurance needs as deep and private as those which protective and mediatory saints have hitherto fulfilled.

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