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Imaginaries of the Sacred. A Sociological Contribution to an (Oddly) Underrated Research Object



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The reasons behind the genesis of this issue go far beyond my research interests. Although, of course, these interests also played an important role. It is possible to find entire libraries of social sciences on the subject of the sacred. With some effort, it is also possible to find sociological literature on the imaginary, even if this literature can be placed on far fewer shelves. Instead, what we will hardly find is sociological literature on the imaginary of the sacred. This issue of “Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary” tries, in its small way, to contribute to the discussion and analysis of this topic. This argument, we are convinced, is far from being marginal.

Already in itself, the sociological discussion on the theme of the sacred is very controversial, not simply for mere terminological questions. There’s more. The heated debates in the scientific community on this issue are also around important questions of content. It often happens that where some scholar attributes sacred qualities to a phenomenon, another may see it only as a profane phenomenon, perhaps simply characterized by a more intense emotional nuance. As is well known, on the other hand, the devil hides in detail.

I considered it important to edit this issue – accepting with enthusiasm the invitation of the journal – especially after having participated in several conferences and meetings dedicated to the theme of the imaginary of the sacred (or on similar topics). In fact, in the last two or three years, debates have been held between Italian exponents of the sociology of the imaginary and the sociology of religion¹: after each of these, I have increasingly

¹ You can find videos of some of these meetings on youtube, mostly held under the auspices of AIS (The Italian Sociological Association). I am referring above all to the “Sacred, Imaginary, Profound” webinar held on November 15, 2021. Furthermore, the AIS-Imaginary and AIS-Religion sections (together with AIS-Health and Medicine) had the opportunity to discuss further during the mid-term conference of the AIS held on December 17, 2021 at the University of Bergamo: in a shared session Ercole Giap Parini, Antonio Camorrino and Micol Bronzini discussed for their respective sections. A further “source of inspiration” for this issue, as a moment of fruitful debate, was the monthly appointment of “Alice’s Tea” conceived and animated by Domenico Secondulfo as well as by the intense participation of very valid colleagues.



understood the importance of offering some written contributions to common reflection. "Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary" gave me the opportunity to carry out this project. Furthermore, I felt the need for specific literature on the subject that would help to synthesize reflections on an object of study that was still little investigated.

Analyzing the imaginary of the sacred from a sociological perspective is anything but simple. The authoritativeness of the contributors and the quality of their writings allows, in my opinion, however, to look (you will excuse the immodesty in this case) very positively – but the reader's opinion remains sovereign – at the result of this small intellectual challenge. In this sense, I express my heartfelt thanks to all the contributors, as well as to the Journal that has given confidence and support to this ambitious project.

Luigi Berzano's article analyzes in a very convincing way the transformations that have affected the sacred in contemporary society. In the author's opinion, it is necessary to speak not only of "transcendent sacred" but also of "everyday sacred". Berzano also emphasizes the relationship between the sacred and the imaginary, identifying the "techno-imaginary" as one of the places where this relationship is expressed. Finally, a very original aspect of the author's research linked to what has just been stated, is that relating to "religion online" and "online religion", virtual space in which contemporary imaginaries of the sacred take shape.

The article by D.H.K Brown, G. Jennings, D. Contreras-Islas, J. Yun, and S. Dodd, focuses on the analysis of martial arts understood as practices capable of awakening or reinforcing a spiritual state of being. The different martial arts discussed in the paper (a very original thesis) would sacralize violence thanks to the medium of a sacred imaginary: an "affective body pedagogy" would emerge through which a traditional set of values would be internalized by practitioners. A set of values, precisely, based on the sacralization of violence: this process is understood, in a way that is only apparently paradoxical, by René Girard – author used by the authors for their analysis – as the way through which this sacralization, ultimately, "offsets [...] violent tendencies".

The article by Antonio Camorrino analyzes the different "imaginal regimes of the sacred", in an attempt to apply the categories of Gilbert Durand to the investigation of the sacred imaginary. To this end, the author proposes a synthetic reconstruction of the social relationship with transcendence starting from the axial age understood as the first "diurnal" moment of human experience, that is, as the original phase of separation of the mundane from the supermundane reality. Moving on to the analysis of modernity understood as a phase of "descent into the world of transcendence", Camorrino then discusses the imaginary of the "postmodern" sacred, suggesting a thesis according to which religion would still indicate the prevalence of a "diurnal" form of relationship with the sacred, while the new forms of spirituality would indicate a certain "process of nocturnalization of the experience".



Roberto Cipriani's article explores the imaginary of the sacred first of all by describing the distinctive features of the "divine" and the "diabolical". In doing so, the author undertakes a fascinating journey of analysis through artistic representations, from the "Middle Ages to Art Brut". In a very erudite section of the article, Cipriani also addresses the conceptual theme of the sacred, showing the theoretical position of different authors on the phenomenon. In the subsequent paragraph, the author discusses the intriguing case of Federico II understood as an exemplary figure of a "sacred and eschatological imaginary". Space is also dedicated to the analysis of the concept of "numinous", especially through a reinterpretation of the work of Rudolf Otto. The article concludes with further instructive reflections on the peculiar forms with which the afterlife was imagined and on the "religious-popular imaginary".

The double-signed article by Bernard Cousin and Renato Grimaldi deals with a very useful topic for mapping the transformations of the imaginary of the sacred. The authors deal with the "imaginary and morphology of the ex-votos". Cousin focuses his analysis on the phenomenon in the Provençal area, while Grimaldi focuses his investigation on Italy. The extraordinary accuracy and originality of the research clearly show the decades of work carried out by the two authors on the phenomenon of "painted votive tablets".

The article by Stefania Palmisano and Nicola Pannofino is the result of meticulous ethnographic research aimed at mapping the articulated constellation of new forms of spirituality in Italy. The authors identify the presence of different imaginaries of the sacred that refer to particular experiences, beliefs, and spiritual practices. Palmisano and Pannofino effectively show the diffusion in Italy of forms of spirituality that are respectively shaped by imaginaries of the sacred based on the centrality of nature, well-being, and mystery. Each of these imaginaries and the related forms of spirituality is composed of different "souls", described and analyzed in detail by the authors.

Domenico Secondulfo's article analyzes, in a very useful way with respect to the theme of the issue, the co-production relationship between the sacred, the imaginary, and society. To this end, the author insists above all on the relationship between the visible sphere and the invisible sphere and how this relationship materializes in the social practice of the rite. The sacred imaginary allows, that is, through the rite, to create a "bubble of reality" in which real and imaginal life coexist. Secondulfo pays particular attention to material culture, as well as to the ritual: the "enclosure" can be understood as that material and symbolic space in which the imaginary of the sacred converges and manifests itself in its maximum expression. In any case, the sacred, in the author's thesis, can be expressed both through a transcendent imaginary and through an immanent one. In postmodern society, especially through the imaginal medium of energy, more and more space is gained by a "form of the sacred that is diffusive and immanent in



nature". In the last section of the article, Secondulfo discusses the "everyday sacred" understood in a very original way, placing at the center of his argument a peculiar sector of human life surrounded by an aura of sacredness: knowledge (and its sacred object par excellence: the book).

Neil Turnbull's article proposes an interesting thesis according to which in modernity the sacred would not have disappeared from the social scene at all but, instead, as an effect of a transformation, it would have been "relocated". To this end, the author proposes a contribution thanks to which the imaginary of the sacred is investigated from an inverted perspective. In other words, Turnbull attempts, through a theoretical proposal, to "reimagine the secular imaginary". Turnbull, therefore, proposes to overcome the "Weberian orthodoxy" of "disenchantment" and secularization and to recover the reflections of Mircea Eliade relating above all to the intuition that modernity is witnessing a process of "Gnostic internalization and subjectivization of the sacred". In line with this reasoning, Turnbull refers to Shmuel Eisenstadt's analysis according to which "Western modernity is founded upon a theological imaginary with strong 'Gnostic components'". In conclusion, the author wonders about a possible "theological turn" that gives depth to the analysis of modernity and that allows investigating current events taking into account "the hidden theological premises of, and influences upon modern political formations and movements, as well as the political concerns and strategies of contemporary religious movements and institutions".

The hope is that this issue, as a whole, will contribute to the analysis of a field of study that has hitherto been very little investigated in the field of social sciences such as that of the imagineries of the sacred.

Antonio Camorrino

