



## Research Article

© 2020 Mongelli et al..

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

# The Diffusion of Religion among Young Students of the University of Bari

**Angela Mongelli**

*Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes,  
For. Psi. Com. Departement,  
University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy*

**Paolo Contini**

*Ph.D. in Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Pontifical University of Sh. Tommaso D'Aquino, Rome, Italy  
Professor of Sociology of Education and General Sociology,  
Apulian Theological Faculty, Italy*

**Raffaella Rubino**

*Ph.D. in Human Relations Sciences,  
History and Social Policies, For.Psi.Com. Departement,  
University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy*

**Fabrizio Gentile**

*Ph.D. in Theory e Social Research,  
University of Salento, Italy*

Doi: 10.36941/mjss-2020-0020

### Abstract

Religion has always been an extraordinary element of social cohesion, despite the fact that over the centuries its structure and power of influence adjusted to the epochal changes that, especially during the 20th century, have affected societies in the world. Through research, we wanted to highlight the features that characterise the concept of religiosity among young university students, with a focus on the intensity of religious sentiment, the relationship with God and, contextually, the religious institution, attested by attendance to the rites. This research, that was carried out through a structured questionnaire with closed answers, involved a population consisting of students enrolled in master or postgraduate courses and others enrolled in the fourth and fifth year of single-cycle courses of the University of Bari Aldo Moro in the academic year 2017-2018. The results show that, despite the large part of the sample declares itself a Christian Catholic faith, only a small part constantly attends religious services; rather, the percentage of students declaring to pray often or daily is quite relevant. We are witnessing a change in the way young people enjoy religion: more individual, more emotional, syncretically directed to the individual, rather than to a uniformly defined category.

**Keywords:** sociology, religion, young people, Bari University, change

## 1. Introduction

Religion has always been an extraordinary element of social cohesion, despite the fact that over the centuries its structure and power of influence adjusted to the epochal changes that, especially during the 20th century, have affected societies in the world.

The binding power of the religious ritual determines the insertion of the individual into a group with specific characteristics, which draws its strength from the sharing of institutionalised rituals; the loss of trust in religious institutions contributes to the birth of a new kind of religiousness in which a direct communication with God is favoured (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2007).

If, on the one hand, religion has to deal with that 'spiritual dispossession of the universe' (Morra 1992) (that is, obstinately privileging scientific knowledge and reducing, at the same time, the religious knowledge to a sort of 'fideism of lack' and the philosophical one to a methodology of the project of dominion over nature and men), on the other hand it has to deal with the secularisation process that has invested societies since the beginning of the 20th century, though in different ways according to times and places (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Germani 1975; Gauchet 1992; Casanova 2000; Contini: 2015; Bianco 2017; Berger 2017).

Nevertheless, this drift, which determines a shift in interest and attention to scientifically relevant areas of research, repudiating the idea of a non-demonstrable transcendent reality, should not lead us to a fatalistic conclusion about religion: being inextricably linked to the society, it cannot but adapt to changes, redefining its own premises and indicators.

As shown by various researches in Italy (EURISPES 2016, Sironi, Alfieri 2017), this change manifests itself, on the one hand, through a lower intensity of the sense of belonging, a weak religious practice, a subjective praxis divorced from the confessional doctrine; on the other hand, sometimes, the personal manifestation of a nostalgic feeling nourishes the aspiration of a religious belonging (Costa 2012).

In particular among young people there is a feeling of disorientation, that is linked to the simultaneous presence of several possible worlds to choose, all equally reliable and belonging to a wider complex world that structures and defines the traits of the 'weak thought' (Vattimo 1990). It is a particular declination of knowledge, characterised by the profound rethinking of all the notions that constituted the foundation of the Western civilisation in every field of culture.

The need for spirituality stems exactly from this bewilderment, from a more or less conscious will to look at religion as a possible matrix of values, redesigned according to a fruition with no doctrinal role.

The presented data seem to show how young people develop the tendency to create a direct bridge with God-father, in order to live the divine experience as an emotional experience by focusing on the emotional manifestation of Christianity.

This research aims to highlight the socio-individual religious dynamics, the characteristic features of the concept of religiosity shared by young students and perceive the sense of belonging that the young person manifests towards the Church as an institution.

## 2. Research and Method

Through research, we wanted to highlight the features that characterise the concept of religiosity among young university students, with a focus on the intensity of religious sentiment, the relationship with God and, contextually, the religious institution, attested by attendance to the rites.

This research, that was carried out through a structured questionnaire with closed answers, involved a population consisting of students enrolled in master or postgraduate courses and others enrolled in the fourth and fifth year of single-cycle courses of the University of Bari Aldo Moro in the academic year 2017-2018.

The choice of the target came from the belief, confirmed by other field research (Bichi, Bignardi 2015), according to which this is the age when young people mature their own awareness on the issue

of religious belonging.

In order to construct the sample, the non-probability sampling technique based on quota samples was adopted (Corbetta 2002). The university courses were grouped in three macro areas: the scientific one, that included the medical courses, biology and nursing sciences; the humanistic one, including courses in literature, philosophy, languages, psychology, pedagogy, communication and social sciences; the economic-juridical one, comprising the courses of jurisprudence, political science and economics.

In order to create the shares of the sample, that is composed of 548 respondents, out of a total of 5389 students enrolled at the University of Bari (Tab. 1 and Tab. 2), the number of students enrolled in each course was crossed with the genre.

**Tab. 1:** Distribution of the universe of reference by academic field grouping (percentage values)

Academic field grouping	V.%
Humanistic area	26,2
Scientific area	36,5
Juridical/economic area	37,3
Total	100

**Tab. 2:** Distribution of the sample by academic field grouping (percentage values)

Academic field grouping	V.%
Humanistic area	25,5
Scientific area	36,9
Juridical/economic area	37,6
Total	100

At the end of the administration phase, the data were coded, inserted and processed using S.P.S.S. software version 20, thus proceeding with the distribution of simple frequencies and associations between variables (Giorgetti, Massaro 2007).

### 3. Young Students and Religion

The survey involved a sample with a mean age of 23.6 years, composed of 63% males and 37% females.

When asked about religious affiliation, 71.8% of those interviewed stated they recognised themselves in the Catholic religion, while 23.5% said they did not feel represented by any religion. The percentages of students belonging to non-Catholic religions, non-Christian monotheistic religions, oriental religions and new age philosophies are not very relevant (Tab. 3).

**Tab. 3:** Do you identify yourself in a religion? (percentage values)

	V.%
Yes, in Christian-Catholic religion	71,8
Yes, in Christian non-Catholic religion	0,9
Yes, in a non-Christian monotheistic religion	1,3
Yes, in Eastern religions	1,6
Yes, in new age philosophies	0,9
No, in no religion at all	23,5
Total	100,0

If we consider the students of the scientific field, represented mainly by those enrolled in medicine, a

lower propensity to religious practice emerges: one could hypothesise that the setting of a scientific thought leads to a positivistic re-elaboration of the meta-empirical assumptions; the students belonging to the juridical area are much more inclined to follow the religious dictates, while the students of humanities are placed in an intermediate position, with a particular propensity to new age philosophies (Tab. 4).

**Tab. 4:** Do you identify yourself in a religion? Distribution by academic field grouping (percentage values)

	Humanistic area V.%	Scientific area V.%	Juridical/economic area V.%
Yes, in Christian-Catholic religion	72,8	61,5	81,6
Yes, in Christian non-Catholic religion	1,4	0,5	2,0
Yes, in a non-Christian monotheistic religion	0,0	2,9	0,5
Yes, in Eastern religions	2,2	1,9	1,0
Yes, in new age philosophies	2,9	0,0	0,5
No, in no religion at all	20,7	33,2	14,4
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

There were no particular distinctions in the distribution of respondents divided by gender and age.

#### 4. The Intensity of Religious Sentiment

In order to study the intensity of religious sentiment, the interviewees were grouped by more generic but internally homogeneous categories of young people who perceive themselves more or less sensitive to the subject of a faith.

For this purpose, two possible indicators of involvement were put in relation, namely the way and the centrality of faith, regardless of participation in the rites. These possible indicators have been studied using the *scaling* technique (Frudà 1989, Cannavò and Basevi 2003, Pitrone 2007, Cannavò and Frudà 2012) and their correlation allowed us to identify five 'types': the 'fervent', the 'averagely religious', the 'not so religious', the 'agnostics' and the 'convinced atheists' (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2007).

The males are 'fervent' to a larger extent compared to the females, who are placed mainly in the category of 'averagely religious'. The distribution of religious categories with reference to the course of study indicates a prevalence of 'fervent' among those who undertake economic-juridical studies, while the scientific mind-set determines the presence of 'not so religious', 'atheists' and 'agnostics' in the corresponding field (Tab. 5).

**Tab. 5:** Distribution of students by religiousness degree (percentage values)

Religiousness	V.%
Fervent	32,4
Averagely religious	22,9
Not so religious	23,5
Atheist	7,8
Agnostics	13,4
Total	100,0

#### 5. Mediation of Institutions and Religious Sentiment

The degree of involvement and participation represents a characterising element of youthful religious sentiment. It is essentially based on two dimensions that make it empirically observable: the

frequency of participation in the rites, consistent with the various institutional models of church that attribute an irreplaceable role to liturgical participation, and the direct relationship that the individual creates with God through prayer.

These two elements describe how much the interviewees are actively engaged in cultivating their creed, even though they are independent of each other. In fact, prayer represents an individual act, that is detached from the institutional dimension and is capable of determining a direct contact with God even in situations of solitude. All in all, a lack of interest in religious rites emerges from this survey, with a decrease of attendance at weekly masses beyond the Sunday one (especially among young people), as confirmed by the EURISPES Report 2015, according to which those who attend masses several times a week (13.1%) and every Sunday (28.2%) are mostly over 65. The 35-44 year-old category is in first place of those who attend one or two times a month (21.3%), while the youngest, both 18-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds, reach over 37% if they take part in the main religious festivals.

From this research, it emerges that most of the respondents participate in religious functions with a frequency of one or twice a month: this is probably determined by participation in 'obligatory' rituals, such as baptisms, weddings or funerals. This category is followed by those who never go to church.

If we add to these percentages those who, for similar reasons, go to church one, two or three times a month at most, it follows that in 74% of the cases students do not go to church or go there only if forced (Tab. 6). Females tend to go less to the church compared to males, showing a greater percentage only in relation to weekly attendance, while confirming the tendency of a less participative involvement of students of scientific subjects (Tab. 7).

**Tab. 6:** How often have you attended the mass over the last six months? (percentage values)

	V.%
Never in six months	28,8
Once or twice	31,8
Once a month	5,5
Two or three times a month	7,9
Every week	8,8
Everyday or almost everyday	17,2
Total	100,0

**Tab. 7:** How often have you attended the mass or religious functions over the last six months? Distribution by academic field grouping (percentage values)

	Humanistic area	Scientific area	Juridical/economic area
	V.%	V.%	V.%
Never in six months	22,9	38,0	23,5
Once or twice in six months	37,9	32,7	27,0
Once a month	7,1	7,8	2,0
Two or three times a month	9,3	6,4	8,0
Every week	6,4	7,8	11,5
Everyday or almost everyday	16,4	7,3	28,0
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

From the analysis of the frequency with which students pray, it emerges that there is a significantly higher percentage of those who do it often or every day, compared to those who attend masses. These data show that the male group is more inclined to daily practice; when praying becomes less constant, the female percentage prevails instead. By looking with hand lens at the percentage of those who attend masses daily and comparing it to that of daily visitors, an unexpected discrepancy

emerges (Tab. 8).

**Tab. 8:** Do you devote some moments to prayer? Distribution by genre (percentage values)

	Males	Females
	V.%	V.%
Yes, everyday	36,1	22,3
Yes, often	14,4	21,2
Yes, sometimes	26,7	34,2
No, never	22,8	22,3
Total	100,0	100,0

A greater predisposition to prayer comes out, regardless of the habit of participating in religious functions: those who did not attend the mass in the last six months, together with those who went there once or twice, find themselves praying, even if sporadically, respectively in 37.6% and 43.1% of cases (Tab. 9), while those who constantly follow religious functions pray more frequently. Prayer can be considered the independent variable in the relationship with participation in mass, as it constitutes, for young students, the preferred means of contact with God, being it less time-consuming and more functional for a concept of religiosity built on youthful needs and habits.

**Tab. 9:** Do you devote some moments to prayer and how often have you attended the mass or religious functions over the last six months: correlation between the two variables (percentage values)

	Yes, everyday	Yes, often	Yes, sometimes	No, never	Tot.
	V.%	V.%	V.%	V.%	V.%
Never in six months	5,7	7,6	37,6	49,1	100
Once or twice in six months	10,9	23,0	43,1	23,0	100
Once a month	10,0	16,7	60,0	13,3	100
Two or three times a month	16,3	48,8	34,9	-	100
Every week	45,8	39,6	10,4	4,2	100
Everyday or almost everyday	93,6	6,4	-	-	100

## 6. Conclusions

Against a percentage of over 70% of young people who declare themselves Catholic Christians, there is a percentage of constant visitors of religious functions amounting to over 20%.

Two considerations can be formulated: on the one hand, the weight of family influence during the early years determines a 'passive' acquisition of a specific religious position; on the other hand, the secularisation and disaffection of young people in relation to religion continue to grow, inexorably eroding the share of those who practise.

However, it is worth highlighting a result: more than 40% of the interviewees declare to pray often or even daily, suggesting a substantial change in the perception of religious sentiment, which adapts to the frenzy and the speed of contemporary times. A direct contact with God, which is cultivated individually, through prayer, is preferred to the participation in collective rituals.

The forms of political participation are changing (associations like parties, that are fundamental for the transmission of a shared sentiment, are currently disappearing), the approach to the labour world is changing, as it is less tied to the stability of a permanent job and more and more fragmented in space and time, and even the use of religion by young people is changing: it is more individual, more emotional, syncretically direct to the individual more than to a uniformly defined category.

## References

- Bagnasco, A., Barbagli, M., & Cavalli, A. (1997). *Corso di sociologia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Berger, P. (2014). *The many altars of modernity*. Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Berger, P., L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). Secularization and pluralism. *International yearbook for the sociology of religion*, 2 (1), 73-84.
- Biano, I. (2017). Il postsecular turn: politica, religione e società oltre la secolarizzazione?. *Società Mutamento Politica*, 8 (15), 81-102.
- Bichi, R., & Bignardi, P. (2015). *Dio a modo mio. Giovani e fede in Italia*. Milano: Vita e pensiero.
- Buzzi, C., Cavalli, A., & De Lillo, A. (2007). *Rapporto giovani. Sesta indagine dell'Istituto IARD sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 200.
- Cannavò, L., & Basevi, M. (2003). *Oltre Thurstone e Likert: la valutazione di atteggiamenti e motivazioni con la tecnica TLL*. Roma: Euroma.
- Cannavò, L., & Frudà, L. (2012). *Ricerca sociale. Dal progetto di indagine alla costruzione degli indici*. Roma: Carocci.
- Casanova, J. (2000). *Oltre la secolarizzazione. Le religioni alla riconquista della sfera pubblica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Contini, P. (2015). *Della Modernità. Nove approssimazioni*. Napoli: Diogene Edizioni.
- Cipriani, R. (1988). Al di là della secolarizzazione. *Studi di Sociologia*. 271-288.
- Corbetta, P. (2002). *Metodologie e tecniche della ricerca sociale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Costa, C. (2008). *Temi e problemi della complessità*. Roma: Armando.
- Costa, C. (2012). *La società postrazionale*. Roma: Armando.
- Eurispes, Istituto di Studi Politici, Economici e Sociali (2015). 26° Rapporto Italia. Roma: Eurispes.
- Frudà, L. (1989). *Le scale di atteggiamento nella ricerca sociale*. Roma: Euroma.
- Gauchet, M. (1992). *Il disincanto del mondo*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Germani, G. (1975). *Sociologia della modernizzazione*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Giorgetti, M., & Massaro, D. (2007). *Ricerca e percorsi di analisi dati con SPSS*. Pearson Paravia Bruno Mondadori.
- Khun, T. (2007). *La struttura delle rivoluzioni scientifiche*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Morra, G. (1992). *Il Quarto uomo. Postmodernità o crisi della modernità?*. Roma: Armando, 14.
- Mura, G., Cipriani, R. (1996). *Corpo e religione*. Roma: Città nuova Editrice.
- Sironi, E., Alfieri, S. (2017). Una generazione in panchina. *Quaderni Rapporto Giovani* (6rd ed.). Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Vattimo, G. (1990). *Il pensiero debole*. Milano: Feltrinelli.