

Introduction

New Theoretical and Methodological perspectives on Sanctity

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This monographic issue represents one of the main arrival points of the ERC project NeMoSanctI (New Models of Sanctity in Italy (1960s-2000s) – A Semiotic Analysis of Norms, Causes of Saints, Hagiography, and Narratives).¹ The task of the project was to examine the new models of Catholic holiness emerging in contemporary culture by applying a semiotic approach that allowed an interdisciplinary team of researchers to look comparatively at a broad corpus of texts belonging to different genres but which, despite their superficial and formal differences, conform to a common axiology and show recurring features at deeper levels.

The essays included in this issue are representative of some of the main thematic cores developed in this project. The first core responds to a theoretical and methodological concern by reflecting on how semiotics can contribute to the study of models of holiness, mainly considered as models of perfection of life mediated by recurrent narrative structures.² Paolo Bertetti's essay is a good example of this theoretical investigation.³ Bertetti focuses on the fundamental notion of figure⁴ and summarizes how it has been developed in the semiotic tradition, especially in relation to the study of biblical religious culture, starting from the famous approach proposed by the CADIR. After an effective overview, Bertetti focuses on a specific case study, looking into the figure of

¹ The project NeMoSanctI has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314). A list of publications can be found on NeMoSanctI's website (nemosancti.eu). The project took place at the University of Turin between March 2018 and February 2024. Jenny Ponzo directed the project as the PI and Francesco Galofaro was part of the research team. This number of Ocula has also received funding from the Department of Communication, Arts, and Media "Giampaolo Fabris" of the IULM university of Milan.

² Some of the essays proposing relevant theoretical-methodological reflections issued from the project are: Ponzo and Marino (2021); Ponzo (2022a); Galofaro (2022a); Ponzo and Galofaro (2021).

³ Paolo Bertetti as well was part of the research team of NeMoSanctI.

⁴ On figures, see also Galofaro (2023a).

the stigmata and reconstructing how its representation and meaning changes over time in Christian-Catholic religious culture.⁵

A closely related research line concerns the study of different ideas of the sacred and of sanctity, and their relationship with the forms of life that characterize a certain culture. This perspective is developed in particular in the essays by Ugo Volli, Luigi Berzano, and Jenny Ponzo. Ugo Volli's comparative glance to Jewish and Cristian traditions demonstrates how there is not such a thing as a universal notion of "sacred". In particular, there is not a strict equivalent of the thematic role of the saint in Jewish tradition. At the same time, however, it is possible to find different forms of life representing religious excellence. Commenting Émile Benveniste's linguistic analysis of the Indo-European roots covering the encyclopedic field of holiness, Volli argues that the Jewish term *kadòsh* presents a similar semantic trait of "separateness", while it lacks of a semantic mark of "humanity": in the Bible, it is only applied to deity, sacred buildings, and to the land of Israel, while the title *Hakadosh* ("the saint one"), attributed to some rabbis, is a recent innovation. In a similar way, the notion of "saint" as a noun is specific to the Christian tradition, as well as the legal definition of the virtues which are related to it. Rather, as Lotman wrote, Jewish culture aims to define an ethical grammar applied to society as a whole. The excellence of some forms of life, such as the *nazir* and the sage, is not directly defined by moral qualities nor by ascetic practices, but by the respect of religious norms or by their knowledge of the Torah, which is the prerequisite for all virtues. A possible thematic role comparable to that of the saint could be the *tzaddik*, i.e. the spiritual leader of a hasidic group. As Volli writes, *Tzaddikim* are often attributed miracles, therapeutic powers, and metaphysical knowledge, as well as a personal relationship with the divine sphere. Of course, they represent only part of the Jewish semiosphere, which is a rich and articulated structure.

Luigi Berzano's contribution is significant to foster the interdisciplinary dialogue between semiotics and sociology on the notion of lifestyle. Semiotic scholars draw a distinction between "form of life" and "lifestyle". A form of life is expressed by a coherent deformation of the set of structures which define a project of life (Fontanille 1993: 5, our translation). Consequently, it mediates between two levels: the level of the practices and strategies and the level of culture. On the other hand, according to Landowski (2012), lifestyles designate a mix of trickery and ingeniousness featuring a minority of people. From this point of view, it is more related to the notion of tactics. From a different, sociological perspective, Luigi Berzano considers lifestyles as a set of daily behaviors. For this reason, a new notion of sustainable sanctity represents a model of an individual, leading a normal working and professional life in current secular societies. From a diachronic perspective, the traditional model of a transcendent sanctity based on the heroicity of virtues has been recently flanked by a new model, more adequate to the transformation of economy and to urbanization. Consequently, while traditional saints were separated and scarcely integrated in society, newer saints reflect the needs of a lay and sec-

⁵ In the framework of NeMoSanctI, stigmata were also studied from different perspectives, cf. Ponzo (2023a); Galofaro (2023b, 2020); Papasidero (2023a).

ularized society. This new, middle-class saint, however, seems less capable of expressing a transcendent and direct contact with the divine. A link between the sociological and the semiotic perspective on lifestyle is represented by the “individualization” of the notion of sanctity: Berzano consider “aesthetic” the dimension of the calling, achieved with personal and different choices.

Jenny Ponzo’s contribution focuses on the border between human and animal, which is, according to ethnologists, rather weak and fuzzy: in different cultures, some kinds of humans are considered animals and vice versa (Descola 2005). Sanctity follows the concept of personhood, which can be, and in fact has been, extended to non-humans in correlation to a mark of agency. In fact, a form of life is not related to a specific essence, and can trespass and weaken the frontier between humans and non-humans, which is traditional in our culture. For this reason, the notion of saint, considered as a form of life, seems able to trespass the border, since in many cases, presented by the author, animals are symbols of saints, helpers of saints, or saint themselves. Ponzo’s contribution can foster the ethnosemiotic discussion of Descola’s typological classification of cultural “ontologies” into naturalism, analogism, totemism, animism. Such a subdivision seems precisely related to the increasing degree of “personhood” granted to nonhuman beings (Sahlins 2014). But, if these “ontologies” can co-exist in a single culture, namely in western culture, then the features which have been used to construct the classification should be reconsidered as sets of semantic traits which can be attributed to beings depending on the considered text, practice, or context, in view of a tactical or strategic goal.

Another relevant core concerns the analysis of models of spiritual quest and perfection that are located in areas of the semiosphere partially or completely outside the boundaries of institutional religion and characterize spiritual and secularized forms of sanctity and sacrality.⁶ On the one hand, while the representation of religious saints in contemporary culture is often inspired by secular themes and iconographies, the representation of secular exemplary characters often takes on traits that make them similar to traditional religious figures. Simona Stano provides a relevant contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon. Starting from a reflection on the concept of the post-secular, which refers to a situation of coexistence and unresolved tension between religious and secular worldviews, Stano identifies in the “cult of the self” one of the most characteristic and pervasive features of the post-secular dimension, which she examines by analyzing two case studies. The first concerns a 2018 film that presents a fictional and ironic narrative about the affirmation of such a cult in contemporary society, while the second concerns the communication style of Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni. Stano identifies several common features, including the use of the mirror, or mirror devices such as the smartphone, which are associated with different meanings and functions, as well as the rejection of any rules or taboos that may limit the realization and free expression of the self, which becomes the only recognized deity. At the same time, these representations of a secularized form of sacredness also draw on traditional religious iconography, such as the title “Saint” in the film and the iconography of the Virgin and the goddess Venus in the case

⁶ See for example Chiais (2021, 2022); Ponzo (2020); Ponzo and Chiais (2022); Marino (2021a).

of Chiara Ferragni. On the other hand, new and syncretic religions and spiritualities have emerged in the 20th century, some of which are inspired by institutional religion. These cults take place in the margins and on the borders of the semiosphere, as the article by María Luisa Solís Zepeda claims, and often revolve around figures reminiscent of Catholic saints. Solís Zepeda focuses on some relevant case studies of dissident “saintly” figures venerated in Mexico by groups with criminal lifestyles. The study of these cults, including especially “La Santa Muerte”, is carried out within the framework of theoretical and methodological reflections on mysticism.⁷ In particular, the author uses a structural semiotic approach to identify Spanish mysticism of the Golden Age as a normative form of mysticism, in comparison to which she identifies “abnormal” and “dissident” forms of mysticism.

A basic principle of NeMoSanctI was that the representation of saints is not univocal and proposed by a single authorial instance, but is polyphonic and constantly changing over time. In fact, since its origins, the figure of the saint is the result of a layering of representations proposed by different cultural subjects who may be more or less close to religious institutions and doctrine. From this perspective, hagiographers embedded in the ecclesiastical milieu, eyewitnesses and the subsequent narrators who retell and embellish their testimony in different cultural contexts, secular writers and intellectuals, artists and journalists, television and cinema writers, and the prosumers of digital and social media are all subjects who actively contribute to shaping, enriching and mediating the figure of the saint.⁸ The idea of the progressive evolution of the figure of the saint due to the layering of different representations over time is effectively presented in the article by Massimo Leone, who gives an overview of the literary and visual representations of Saint Thaïs from the Middle Ages to modern times, focusing in particular on the themes of conversion and theater. According to Leone, the relationship between theatricality and sanctity is crucial: there is a spectacular component in sanctity that is not only intrinsic to religious experience in general, but is particularly linked to the social role of saints and their ability to convey spiritual truths and promote spiritual, cultural and social change. The spectacular nature of saintly figures can also explain their success in audiovisual and digital media, which perhaps make the elaboration of the saintly figure even more polyphonic, because these modes of media production bring with them new forms of shared (and blurred) authoriality, as the article by Armando Fumagalli argues. Fumagalli focuses on Italian biographical television series about saints and explains some of the main reasons for the great popular success of some of these narratives. In these fictions, written by a complex and intersubjective authorial instance, saints are portrayed from different perspectives, including secular

⁷ Mysticism was a relevant subject of study in NeMoSanctI, cf. for example Galofaro (2022b; 2022c); Ponzio (2021, 2022b, 2023b); Papisidero (2022).

⁸ For this reason, in the framework of NeMoSanctI, we explored the representation of saints in a number of textual genres, from novels and tales to litanies, from ex votos to comics, from internet memes to web apps, cf. for example Kubas (2023, 2022, 2020); Ponzio (2023c, 2023d, 2022c, 2019); Ponzio, Galofaro and Marino (2021); Marino (2020, 2021b); Ponzio, Kubas and Papisidero (2022); Papisidero (2020, 2023b).

perspectives that are not interested in the religious and spiritual dimension per se. However, Fumagalli claims that the most successful fictions are those that can portray the inner depth of the protagonists, their spiritual experience and growth, among other particularities.

In conclusion, the papers of the present number of Ocula show how the criteria associated to religious excellence are subject to innovations due to the relation between cultures and to social change: for example, depending on the period, they can include or exclude animals, they can be addressed to every human being or to specialised groups of people. These criteria are not necessarily codified as a set of explicit, emendable rules; in different Catholic semiospheres they take the form of exemplary models, forms of life which are manifested by practices and daily behaviours. In this frame, innovative cults use those traditional figurative codes representing sanctity to “sacralise” new values, leaving unresolved the tension between secular and spiritual worldview.

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