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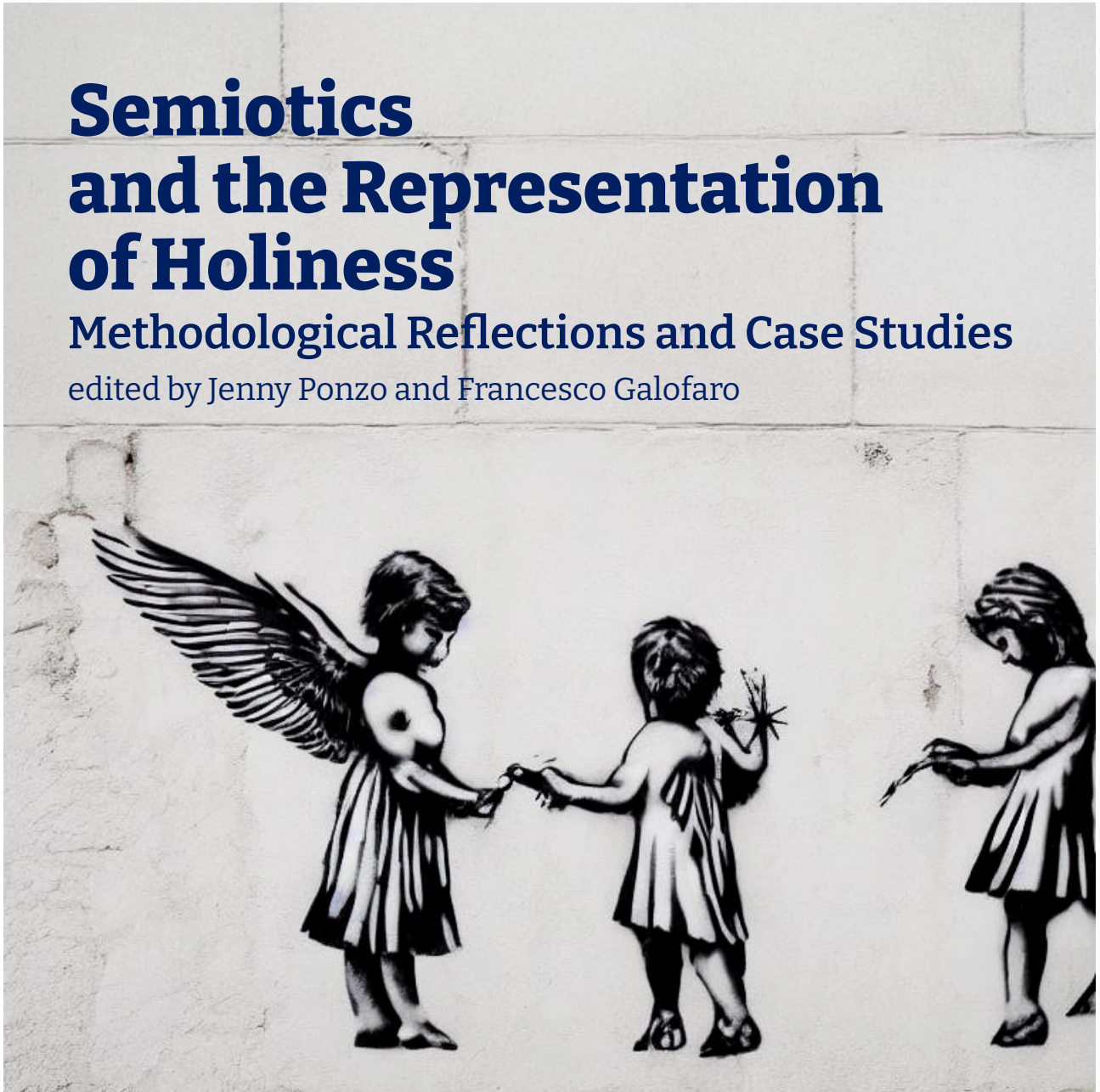# Semiotics and the Representation of Holiness
## Methodological Reflections and Case Studies
### edited by Jenny Ponzo and Francesco Galofaro

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31 **Semiotics and the Representation of Holiness**
Methodological Reflections and Case Studies
edited by Jenny Ponzo and Francesco Galofaro

## Contents

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 figure[4] 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

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[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 a 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-

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[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

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[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

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[7] Mysticism was a relevant subject of study in NeMoSanctI, cf. for example Galofaro (2022b; 2022c); Ponzo (2021, 2022b, 2023b); Papasidero (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); Ponzo (2023c, 2023d, 2022c, 2019); Ponzo, Galofaro and Marino (2021); Marino (2020, 2021b); Ponzo, Kubas and Papasidero (2022); Papasidero (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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# Figures of Sanctity
## Semiotics, Sacred Texts and Theory of Culture[1]

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**Abstract**
This study aims to show how the analysis of the figurative component of meaning can contribute to the study of the religious discourse and, in particular, to the study of the imaginary and the models of sanctity. To do this, we will first briefly present the semiotic concept of «figure», then we will see how the figurative analysis has been used in the study of biblical discourse by the scholars of the Centre pour l'Analyse du DIscours Religieux (CADIR) of the Catholic University of Lyon. Finally, we will take a brief look at some studies that extended the figurative analysis to the more general study of the religious imagery, also suggesting possible topics to investigate.

**Key Words**
Figurativity; semiotics of religion; sanctity; CADIR; biblical text.

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## 1. Figurativity in generative semiotics

In the metalanguage of Algirdas J. Greimas' generative semiotics a textual element is considered figurative (i.e., it is a "figure") if it has a counterpart in the natural world. Greimas uses the expression "natural world" (taken, mutatis mutandis, from Merleau-Ponty) to refer to the world of sense experience, fully organized and culturalized, and therefore already significant and endowed with meaning. In fact, figures are not simply "objects" belonging to the world they refer to, originating from perception, but are also elements of a cultural nature that are already organized semiotically (Greimas 1973, 1983a; Greimas & Courtés 1979). When considering texts, the *figurative level* is part of the content plane; it is the "concrete" level of the variables, already identified by Vladimir Propp (1928), as opposed to the invariant (and abstract) level of narrative structures and the functions.

On a more abstract level, the figures can be grouped into themes: while the figurative can be defined as «the set of contents of a natural language or of a system of representation having a perceptible correspondent on the level of expression of the natural world» (Courtés 1986: 13), the thematic level instead «is characterized by an abstract semantic investment of a conceptual nature, without necessary links with the universe of the natural world» (Courtés 1986: 13). For example, the figure of the letter, observes Courtés, can refer to the theme of information. However, the relationship between thematic and figurative is not two-way: each theme can in fact be expressed through different figurative paths, and vice versa each figure can refer to different themes depending on the context. Thus, the theme of information can be expressed by including different figures such as those of the "announcement", the "newspaper" or the "e-mail", whereas the figure of the letter can also refer to themes such as "recommendation", "concession" etc. This means that figures can also be studied as constant elements semantically invested with ever variable meanings.

The figurative process is seldom punctual: a figure rarely appears isolated but recalls other figures that can be associated with it. The figures are not objects closed on themselves, they meet other related figures, constituting *discursive configurations* that have their own organization. Greimas' classic example is the figure "sun" that «organizes around itself a figural field that includes rays, light, heat, air, transparency, opacity, clouds, etc.» (Greimas 1973: Eng. trad. 115). Furthermore, each figure brings with it a series of characteristic actions linked to it; Courtés (1979-80) gives the example of the letter, a configuration which in addition to the object "letter" includes in a stable manner at least three pairs of action figures: "write"/"read", "close"/"open", "deliver"/"receive". Each figure is therefore always connected to some narrative virtuality; it makes certain courses of action possible and precludes others. According to Greimas (1973), the configurations are real autonomous micro-stories capable of inserting themselves syntagmatically within the different textual macro-stories.

Figures and configurations can migrate from one story to another, constituting a recognizable invariant within any text in which they appear (see

Perissinotto 1995). In this sense, the configurations are similar to the concept of *motif*, as it is understood in folklore studies and above all in the history of arts (Greimas and Courtés 1979, *ad vocem*). However, figurative semiotics is not a reproposition of the iconological analysis of the Warburgian and Panofskian tradition. What distinguishes the semiotic notion of "figure" is in fact its close connection, if not interdependence, with the narration: as we have seen a figure is in fact almost always inserted within configurations and figurative paths whose logic is definitely narrative, in the sense that the creation of a theme will inevitably bring with it not only a series of related figures, but also a series of related actions.

In any case, as for the motives, the figures, rather than simple textual elements, are autonomous entities of a historical, cultural and trans-textual nature that belong to the common competence of the subjects (sender and recipient) involved in the communicative exchange established through a text (Bertetti 2013). Figures have their own meaning, partially independent of the narrative text in which they are inserted. From this point of view, the study of the figurative goes beyond the textual sphere and is rather part of a semiotics of culture.

## 2. Figurativity and religious discourse

Since the mid-1970s the figurative component of texts has been one of the main interests of the CADIR (Centre pour l'Analyse du DIscours Religieux), a group of biblical scholars and semiologists within the Catholic University of Lyon. The group, of which we recall at least Jean Delorme, Jean Calloud, Jean-Claude Giroud and Louis Panier, was interested in the semiotic study of the biblical accounts, with a particular focus on evangelical narration.[2] In their studies figurativity is closely linked to the thematic narrative models that organize and support it. In his synthesis of the Group's work, Jean-Jives Theriault (2006: 71) writes: «The particular figurativeness of the texts of the Bible produced a more precise elaboration of the figurative dimension, a testing of its relationship with the narrative component and a better recognition of its contribution in the signifying articulation because of its putting in discourse».

For the CADIR scholars, the figures have a dual nature: on the one hand they have an actual existence within the text, on the other hand they are cultural elements, which circulate in the semiosphere and have a virtual existence as inscribed in the common competence of enunciator and enunciatee: «The figures, or figurative sets, are certainly within the text. But we recognize them, or we resort to them as materials available for discourse, only to the extent that they are memorable or memorized as well» (Calloud 1985-86, III: 24).

It is what they call a «memory of figures», or a «discursive memory». Similarly, Joseph Courtés (1986) writes of a *figurative code*, made up of possible thematic contents recorded in culture and a series of selection rules, and Greimas (1973) hopes for a *discursive dictionary* able to describe and inventory these figures.

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[2] The results of their studies are published in the journal *Sémiotique et Bible* and in several collective volumes, among which CADIR (1993), Delorme (1987), Delorme *et alii* (1995), Groupe d'Entrevernes (1977, 1979).

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Figures are endowed with their own virtuality of meaning. When they are convocated within the text at the moment of the putting in discourse, this meaning can be actualized, in whole or in part, but also be emptied, and figures become available for other semantic investments resulting from the particular discourse that arranges them. In other words, the thematic – closely related, as Courtés (1986) also observes, to the narrative organization – becomes the way in which each figure is actualized within the single text, convocated to assume the deepest meanings. In this process the figure can undergo increases in meaning, desemanticisation and resemanticisation, and take charge of different thematizations, thus becoming a vehicle of new meanings.

As Louis Panier wrote:

Before being convened in a specific text, the figure of the tree, the table, the horse... corresponds to an immense virtual set of possible meanings, uses, and probable arrangements: we then speak of discursive configuration. Once put into discourse, in a singular text, the figure, because of the specific path in which the text inscribes it, is realized with a particular function (a thematic value), which it is precisely up to us to specify. (Panier 2009: 4)

If the figurative component – as indicated by Greimas (1973) – is descriptive and representative of the world, the thematic component not only identifies a conceptual and abstract level but assumes a classifying and categorizing function with respect to the figures of the natural world. Thematic and figurative are therefore articulated «according to the two constitutive forms of discourse: the descriptive or representative function (the discourse depicts, speaks of the world) and the predicative or interpretative function (the discourse categorizes, classifies)» (Panier 1986: 237). It is on the basis of this *thematic classification*, immanent to them, that the figures intervene in the discourse.

A characteristic of the figurative level is to be «observable», while the thematic one seems rather to be «interpretable». Following the CADIR scholars, the evangelical discourse and, in particular, the parables of Jesus operate a continuous reinterpretation, or more properly a *thematic recategorization*: a good example (also taken up by Greimas 1993) is that of the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the thematic isotopy of the "foreigner", related to the figure of the Samaritan, is neutralized and replaced in the course of the story by that of the "man". In this case the parable overcomes the opposition thanks to a deeper category, common to the two isotopes. Unlike folklore tales, based on the restoration of an order corrupted by villainy, parables propose a new definition of values: «The parable of the Good Samaritan does not deny the Law which prescribes "love one's neighbour", but changes the relationship between the subject and the object of "loving"» (Delorme e Geoltrain 1982: 111).

As a whole, the parabolic discourse is governed by a particular organization of the relationships between thematic and figurative within the text. As shown by Geninasca (1987), a Swiss scholar who often collaborated with CADIR, in the parables the figurative dimension is developed and detaches itself from the

thematic contents it manifests in order to convey a discourse that is strongly argumentative; this gives rise to a true and own *figurative reasoning*.[3]

As Panier outlines:

the parable is a "figurative" discourse intended to transmit in a "figurative" way lessons or "abstract" notions or to reproduce, in a figurative way, in the manner of a "model", the issues of the main story; but the analysis of the parables shows that the figurative level of the discourses is not "limited" in its relationship to the "realities" that it is supposed to "figure" but that it constitutes in itself a consistent semiotic plan. (Panier 2008: 7)

## 3. Figures in progress

For CADIR, figures – especially biblical figures – are always «figures in progress». Precisely because the figures are at the same time virtually inscribed in the competence of the enunciator and the enunciatee as cultural constructs, and are actualized in the text at the moment of their convocation in the discourse during the enunciation they do not exist except through their reiterations, repetitions and deformations in the intertextual concatenation, and in their interpretation in the act of reading.

This conception of figure leads the Lyon group to re-read the patristic conception of figural interpretation of scriptures in a semiotic way. This rereading is the result, once again, of collective work,[4] and is expressed in particular in Calloud 1993, Panier 1995 and Delorme 1997.

The reading of the biblical text in the first centuries of Christianity seems to be subject to two apparently opposing principles: on the one hand the global unity of the biblical corpus, safeguarded by the uniqueness of the instance of the enunciation (God) and of the referent (Scripture is about Christ, «hidden treasure of the Scriptures»[5]); on the other its division into two Testaments, the Old and the New, of which the second presupposes the first but at the same time transforms its function. The semiotic hypothesis of CADIR is that the Old and New Testaments have a relationship similar to the "immanence/manifestation" one, where from the Christian perspective the Old Testament is a text, object of reading and rereading, of which the New Testament is both an elaboration of the immanent semantic universe and a key to rereading which validates its authenticity and reveals a level of immanent meaning. As Panier wrote:

The New Testament defines a reading position of the Old – that is to say an instance of enunciation – such that the Old Testament as a whole is truthfully established as a text and as a network or path of figures to be read: the New Testament establishes in the Old the order of the figure. (Panier 1995: 33)

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[3] On the figurative reasoning see also Greimas (1983b).

[4] As Calloud himself notes (1993: 31).

[5] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 26, 1.

In this regard there is a phrase that often returns, expressed in different formulations, in Augustine's work: «Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet» («The New Testament is hidden in the Old; The Old Testament is revealed [that is, it is manifested; *nda*] in the New»).

This conception of the relationship between the Old and New Testament originates a practice of reading and interpretation in which the figurative apparatus is of primary importance. This practice was already described by Auerbach (1938), who defined it as figural interpretation. As Auerbach explains «figural interpretation establishes a connection between two facts or persons in which one of them not only means itself, but also means the other, while the other understands or fulfils the first» (Auerbach 1938; Engl. tr. 59).

Following Panier, the Jewish Scriptures offer the New Testament writings a figurative «treasure» whose «paths and correspondences must be followed within the Old Testament itself […], and in which one will find the correspondences, the harmonics, in the writings of the New Testament» (Panier 1995: 34). Thus, for example – as Calloud (1993: 46-47) tells us – the flight from Egypt is related to the return from the Babylonian exile in the book of Isaiah, and the death of Rachel at the birth of Benjamin (Genesis, 35) is referred to in connection with the deportation to Babylon in Jeremiah 31, a passage in turn quoted in Matthew 2:18 in relation to the massacre of the innocents. Each new occurrence of a figure is grafted onto past occurrences and at the same time illuminates it with a new light, bringing an increase in its meaning.

In the dialectic between the Old and New Testaments – it is the coming of Christ, i.e. of the Divine Word, which delimits the interpretative horizon, putting an end to the concatenation of figures and bringing it to its fulfilment.

## 4. Figures of Sanctity

CADIR's research is obviously much more complex and multifaceted than we can summarize here. With regard to generative semiotics, it deals in an original way with various often overlooked issues, such as the relationships between immanence and manifestation, enunciation and the act of reading – a taboo for Greimasian semiotics – and between figurative magnitudes and narrative organization. From the point of view of the semiotics of religions, figurative analysis lends itself to being generalized from the study of biblical texts to a broader study of religious imagery – including that related to sanctity – and its diachronic transformations. Examples in this sense are not lacking although they do not always explicitly mention the CADIR studies.

For example, Francesco Garofalo (2020) analysed the presence of botanical figures, such as flowers and gardens, in the sources of the Litany of Loreto, reconstructing how the function of these figures changes from the Old and New Testament through the acclamations of the Great Akhatist Hymn (626 B.C.) and the Aquileian version of the litany (8th century). In particular, he dwells on the development of the "mystical rose" antonomasia that, like other botanical isotopies, originates in the *Song of Songs* and is semantically reinterpreted in relation to the Virgin in line with a recurring source-outcome schema /Flower -> Fruit = Mother -> Son/. Garofalo also observes that, passing from the

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Akathist hymn to the Litany to the Virgin, the botanical figures change from a mainly *cosmological* thematization to a *soteriological* thematization.

Remaining with botanical figures, Massimo Leone (2020) has examined the figure of the withered flower, whose transience opposes the durability of the divine word, studying it in its transformations and re-semanticisations in its migration across texts and discourses through Jewish and Christian culture. In the context of ERC project NeMoSanctI, Jenny Ponzo (2020) has investigated the construction of the figure of the Virgin Mary (common to Islam and Catholicism), the different themes and values it has taken on in Catholic and Muslim traditions and its usability from the perspective of ecumenical dialogue; she concludes that the dialogue on the respective figuration of Mary is limited and concerns especially the thematization of her as perfect pious and devout person.

However, the study of figures and their migrations through texts – even in different semiotic systems – can be useful in many different areas of the Semiotics of Religions. For example, we could study the way in which figures from the Old Testament or the Gospels are reused in the writings of certain mystics (such as those by Therese of Lisieux), characterized by a dense network of references to sacred writings.[6]

Or again, extending the more traditional iconographic analysis, we can figuratively approach the attributes of the Saints and the so-called signs of holiness. An interesting example in this regard is that of the stigmata, on which I am conducting a study. Some starting points are outlined here.

As is known, the stigmata are the five wounds in the hands, feet and side of Jesus Christ, caused by the traumas suffered during the Passion and reproduced on the bodies of some mystics, starting at least from Saint Francis of Assisi, who according to his biographers, received the stigmata on Mount La Verna in 1224. Muessing (2013) shows clearly how stigmatization phenomena had already occurred before Francis during the early Middle Ages; these took on various forms, often attributable to extreme practices of asceticism and bodily mortification sometimes pushed as far as self-harm. The thematic context – as we would define it semiotically – to which these phenomena refer was that of the imitation of Christ, driven to the point of participation in the pain of the Passion.

It is Francis' reception of the stigmata that redefines the concept in Christianity, attributing the stigmatization to a supernatural event and to a personal encounter with God: a hierophany (Klaniczkay 2016). However, in the original testimonies and in the oldest pictorial representations the stigmata would still be understood as a visible bodily sign of an internal experience (Frugoni 1993), which indicate the mystic's participation in the suffering of Christ. It was Thomas of Celano who first attributed Francis' stigmata to a "miraculous" and supernatural gift, and their transformation into a sign of the Saint's identification with Christ. Later on Bonaventure of Bagnoregio explores the phenomenon in more detail in his *Legenda Maior* (1263), retelling the life of the saint and describing how Jesus himself imprinted the stigmata on the body

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[6] For a semiotic analysis of Teresa of Lisieux's writing (as well as that of Gemma Galgani), albeit not specifically in relation to figurativity, see Galofaro (2019).

of Francis as a direct consequence of the Vision. Following in Bonaventure's wake, Giotto consecrates this iconography in the pictorial representations of the Basilica of Assisi.

Following Frugoni (1993), behind this redefinition there would have been the intention of the Church to make Francis' holiness – and with it his revolutionary lifestyle – unique and at the same time in some way "inaccessible", thus becoming an "admirable", rather that "imitable", holiness (Ricci 2021) in order to channel the Franciscan phenomenon towards more traditional forms of spirituality.

From a semiotic point of view, as regards the study of the figures and the relationship with their thematic basis, we can clearly see how these subsequent redefinitions of the stigmata correspond to a double thematic recategorization: from a physical sign which, in the Gospels, figurativises the theme of the "suffering" that Christ had to undergo during the Passion for the salvation of humanity, the stigmata first become a figure of the imitation of Christ which thematizes the "participation" of the mystic in this suffering, and finally the figurative representation of the "identification" of the Saint with Jesus Christ.

## Conclusions

In the Greimasian conception, figures are the result of a close correlation between cultural elements and perceptive elements. They have a dual nature: on the one hand they have a perceptive origin, constituting the emergence of the sensitive within language, on the other they are always the result of a categorization work carried out on the natural world by a semiotic "reading grid". (Greimas 1984: 199). This grid has an eminently cultural nature: as Lotman teaches[7] – recalled in this regard by Greimas himself (1968: 21) – it is in fact through the organization of a culture that our experience of the world is interpreted, organised and endowed with meaning.

Recent semiotics, in the wake of *De l'imperfection* (Greimas 1987), have approached figurativity by privileging the aesthetic-perceptive component, trying to trace its sensorial and perceptive roots, going back to the sensitive act as a place of emergence of meaning. Conversely, the studies of the CADIR group – as well as those of Courtés and the others referred to in the fourth paragraph – focus on the cultural component of figures, investigating the way in which the figures are organised, sedimented and handed down within the cultural universe. In doing so, they provide us with an example which it is interesting today to take up again within the framework of the theory of culture.

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[7]    See for example Lotman (1975: 33-35).

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# 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.

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1. Introduction
2. The transcendent sacred
3. The daily-life sacred
4. Transcendent holiness
5. Holiness in daily life
6. From heroic saints to sustainable models of holiness
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## 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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**Methodological Reflections and Case Studies**
edited by Jenny Ponzo and Francesco Galofaro

# Religious Dramas in Italy
## Dramaturgical Models, Thematization, and Narrative Effectiveness of Biographical Miniseries[1]

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**Abstract**
In this essay I will deal with the topic of religious miniseries for Television, that will be seen especially from the point of view of their dramatic structure. A genre that has been –amd still is- extremely successful in Italy in this new century, it has had also some other products which have been a failure, at least in terms of audience. I will argue that, although many times audiences have shown to appreciate religious content, this content has to be created with a dramatic structure that conveys conflicts and emotions. I will shortly describe different dramatic models that are used, and their different outcome in terms of engagement of the audience.

**Key Words**
TV and religion; TV series; Italian TV dramas; Lux vide; Screenwriting.

**Contents**
1. A successful television genre
2. Irreversible secularization?
3. The topic or the quality of the story – what matters more?
4. Dramaturgical models
5. Empathizing with the Saints
6. What is missing
Bibliography

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[1]   This essay develops and updates some ideas partially published in some essays in Italian, particularly: Fumagalli (2008: 203-213, 2011: 137-155).

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## 1. A successful television genre

All those involved in television in Italy know that in our country, religiously themed dramas have been and continue to be products that usually achieve great success. The reception given to these dramas is one of the true "phenomena" of Italian television in the last thirty years and is quite specific to our country, with no equivalents of this magnitude in other European nations. The miniseries on Pope John XXIII (2002), produced by Lux Vide, directed by Giorgio Capitani and starring Ed Asner, remains the most successful drama of the 2000s, with a 51% share and an audience of about 15 million viewers in the second episode. But alongside this, we could mention numerous miniseries – especially in the first 15 years of this century – that were the most-watched productions of the year or at least among the top three or five television successes of their season in the drama genre: in the first decade, the two miniseries on Padre Pio (one for Rai, starring Michele Placido, and one for Mediaset, starring Sergio Castellitto), then the various miniseries on Pope John Paul II (two for Mediaset produced by Taodue, and one for Rai, starring Jon Voight), the one on Mother Teresa, the drama on Saint Peter, the one titled *Chiara e Francesco*, aired in autumn 2007, also at the top of the ratings, the miniseries on *Saint Augustine*, and the one on Saint Philip Neri titled *Preferisco il Paradiso*, both aired in 2010…

The idea that religious dramas are easily appreciated by the audience has led producers and professionals, inspired by a religious inclination that we could generously define as "very generic" or "quite mild," to venture into this genre. Between 2005 and 2015, many stories of saints were proposed to the two main networks, Rai and Mediaset, and these networks carried out a certain selection, mostly commissioning work to reliable authors and producers with good credentials, although some operations of questionable taste and outcome – as we will see – were not lacking. Fortunately, in these cases, the audience response was lukewarm, if not cold. A different discussion would need to be made for Sky, which entrusted Paolo Sorrentino, with the participation of HBO, with a very high budget for his series *The Young Pope* (2016) and *The New Pope* (2018), and then returned to religious themes with a series written and directed by Niccolò Ammanniti, *Il miracolo* (2018), and in recent years with the two seasons of *Christian* (2022 and 2023).

In these cases too, while critics applauded Sorrentino, especially for the first of his two series, the audience remained essentially niche, if not truly minimal, as in the case of Ammanniti's series. In the case of Sorrentino, *The Young Pope* started its first episodes at around 900.000 viewers, that became around 500.000 in the following ones. The total audience (reruns in different days and times) reached a number of 1.400.000 viewers. *The New Pope* had numbers much smaller, that were about 200.000 for the different broadcasts (Sky Atlantic, Sky Cinema, etc.) of the first day. Numbers very similar to the ones of Ammanniti's *Il miracolo*, that was around 250.000 viewers in the first day of release of the different episodes. Normally these numbers can become

doubles in the reruns of the week and on demand.[2] These are numbers that are from five to twenty times smaller than other series that we will mention soon: it shows that we are speaking of two basically different genres and approaches.

The Tv series mentioned above are Tv productions that share the fact of having a very authorial approach to the religious phenomenon, dictated more by the desire to express something personal (perhaps even to engage in a bit of psychoanalytic self-analysis) than to investigate and narrate the religious phenomenon in its essence.

It is an approach similar to the one of the new platforms, which in various ways and in different genres (often, curiously, the horror genre) approach the religious phenomenon and incorporate it into their productions (see, for example, *Midnight Mass*, a 2021 series for Netflix).

In Italy, we have two particularly striking cases of fictional long multi-seasonal series with explicitly religious characters as protagonists. We are talking about *Che Dio ci aiuti*, first aired in 2011 and now in its seventh season, with consistently high ratings, and, of course, *Don Matteo*, which is absolutely unique in the European, if not global, television landscape.

Its success, which has lasted for more than twenty years (the first episode aired on January 7, 2000), makes it one of the most striking cases of European television serials for viewer affection and ratings. The fact that it is a series explicitly inspired by Christian values and that its protagonist is not an eccentric, not a protester, but a one hundred percent priest whose main goal is to save souls, makes it even more surprising, raising many questions and challenging many clichés about television serials...

Moreover, it is a series practically not analyzed by cinema and TV scholars, a product with very little bibliography, compared to the thousands of essays found on series with much lesser cultural and social impact (for an analysis of how the series works and how it has changed over the years, see Fumagalli, Albani, Braga 2021, vol.2: 51-62).

But just to make a few references now, there are some surprising and noteworthy facts. In 2014, already in a context of fragmented audiences, declining shares, and the pulverization of audiences, the ninth season had a new surge in ratings, even higher than the previous seasons, with numbers that reached even then unthinkable figures: 7,922,000 average viewers, with a 29.3% average share for the entire ninth season, inaugurating a "second youth" for the series, a youth that still continues. *Don Matteo* is a product that seems to have enormous "usability": its episodes have been replicated many times, at any time, on different Rai channels, often filling RaiUno's summer daytime. Sometimes even the reruns in prime time have exceeded the 20% threshold. Apparently, despite such intensive exploitation, it has not tired the viewers.

The ratings of *Don Matteo*, like those of other recent Rai series (*Che Dio ci aiuti*, *Doc*, *Mina Settembre*, *Blanca*, *Imma Tataranni*, *Il Commissario Ricciardi*, *Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco*, etc.), thus pose a question and even a challenge to those who say that the audience has now fled, that it is impossible

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2    We have checked the numbers on Wikipedia, for Sorrentino's *The Young Pope*, and in different pages in <www.davidemaggio.it> and <www.tvzoom.it>.

to achieve high ratings on generalist networks. Or worse, that to achieve high ratings on television, it is necessary to fill the products with sex and violence. The success of series like these raises more than one doubt about many theses that those who are familiar with scholarly literature on the topic now know by heart.

## 2. Irreversible secularization?

The success of religious dramas is one of the many signals (alongside the massive participation in events like the World Youth Days, the weekly attendance at religious services, which has decreased in some countries while remaining stable in others for decades) that reveal that a certain facile rhetoric about overcoming the religious dimension, the inevitability of secularization, etc., is all up for discussion. Sociological research attests, instead, that there are very different situations in different countries, depending on a thousand factors, including historical, cultural, ecclesiastical, etc. The difference, for example, between Italy and France, as well as between Great Britain and Poland, Germany and the United States, etc., is huge.[3]

To narrow down the object of analysis to something more specific, in these brief reflections, I will try to focus mainly on the dramaturgical models used by historical miniseries with religious content, those that depict a real historical figure. The attempt will be to illustrate how this type of television narrative encompasses deeply different, if not antithetical, models in how they approach the events of the life of a saint or sacred history. In this, I will also be aided by direct experience as a script consultant on some of these television products: I have played a role as a consultant for Lux Vide on some of the most well-known productions aired in the last 25 years.[4]

We have no space here to discuss the different semiotic approaches to narration, but, as it will be very soon evident, my analysis and reflections will follow that area of Semiotics that is more related to its Aristotelian origin, with some of its main concepts that refer back to his *Poetics* (see Chiarulli and Fumagalli 2018). The Aristotelian line of analysis of drama, with authors such as Wayne Booth, Robert McKee, John Truby and others, that in some way may be considered a minority current of Semiotics in some countries, is in fact gaining more and more ground, as it is proving to be very useful for practical and professional purposes, as it is more flexible and connected with the real organic texture of a drama, and helps a lot to analyze and create stories, especially for wide audiences, as one should do when working for mainstream cinema or television.

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[3]  For Italy, see for example the books by Franco Garelli (e.g. Garelli 2020) and Bichi and Bignardi (2016). For a more general view about Europe see the report of the Pew Research Center at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.

[4]  I have served as a consultant for Lux Vide, with varying degrees of involvement in projects, starting with the 2000 miniseries on *Lourdes*. Later, I collaborated with the production company for *Maria Goretti*, *Giovanni Paolo II* (Rai fiction with Jon Voight), *San Pietro*, *Paolo VI*, *Chiara e Francesco*, *Sant'Agostino*, *Preferisco il Paradiso*, *Sotto il cielo di Roma* (Pius XII), *Maria di Nazareth*, and, to a very limited extent, for *Don Bosco*.

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## 3. The topic or the quality of the story — what matters more?

Firstly, the myth that religious fictions succeed solely due to their themes needs debunking. There is not a suspension of the need for the typical viewers' engagement; they always expect to be emotionally involved. In other words, when faced with such fiction, the viewer does not enter a religious reverence before the screen, abandoning the remote control as if it were too profane for the subject matter. If the fiction does not please or convince, the channel can be changed without hesitation. An example from 2007 is a Mediaset miniseries about Don Luigi di Liegro (head of Caritas in Rome, who had passed away a few years earlier), starring the very popular – at that time – actor Giulio Scarpati. The miniseries titled *L'uomo della carità* had such low ratings for the first episode that the second episode was moved to the "brother channel" Rete 4.[5]

In cinema, a similar fate befell films like *Antonio Guerriero di Dio* and *7 Km da Gerusalemme*, both of which earned very little (receipts below 100,000 euros as per available information).

In all three cases, in my opinion, the reason was glaring script errors. The miniseries on Don Luigi di Liegro seemed to intentionally commit every mistake one should not make in a good cinematic biography.[6] For instance, keeping the protagonist isolated, denying access to his inner world, and lacking dimensions of internal growth. In the case of the two theatrical films, though made with sincerity, enthusiasm and ample financial resources, the dramaturgical errors were equally conspicuous. The film about St. Anthony turned the Portuguese saint into a dull preacher who monotonously insisted on the same topic. In *7 Km da Gerusalemme*, the entire first hour lacked "directionality", a path toward some direction, only clarifying and becoming more interesting toward the end but in a disjointed, episodic yet sincere and genuinely felt manner. However, sincerity alone does not make a good film.

It is always crucial, even in religious fictions, to work thoroughly on the characters, their problems, desires, to create what I have elsewhere called a "vertical" story that, in a few minutes, can establish a profound intimacy with the main character. This should make us much closer to them than we would in real life, making them our friends, close, intimate.[7]

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[5]   The viewership results were 14.66% for the first episode and just over 9% for the second. In Italy in 2007, a good result for Canale 5 was over 20%. There are religious fictions (many of those mentioned earlier) that have exceeded 30% share.

[6]   For some pertinent reflections on the biopic genre, or the biographical film, see Arlanch (2007: 67-103) and Arlanch 2008, a volume entirely dedicated to the biographical film genre. Arlanch is the author, among others, of the screenplays for *San Pietro* (with Salvatore Basile), *Chiara e Francesco*, *Sant'Agostino*, *Sotto il cielo di Roma - Pius XII* (the latter with Fabrizio Bettelli), *Paolo VI*, and *Maria di Nazareth*, as well as several other miniseries with non-specifically religious content, all of which have been highly successful. In recent years, he has been the head writer for two of the biggest contemporary television hits in Italy, the series *Doc – nelle tue mani* and *Blanca*. See also the pages dedicated to the biopic in Seger (1992). I have dealt with the biopic, taking up some reflections by Arlanch and Seger and reflecting on my consulting experience, in Fumagalli (2019: 303-317, 2020: 164-174).

[7]   On the themes of "friendship" with the main character of a story, see the reflections of Booth (1983, 1988). I emphasize these elements in the analysis of the film *A Beautiful Mind* in Fumagalli (2020, vol. 2).

This idea is fully shared by the best American screenplay schools, and I must say that one reason why Lux Vide has achieved one success after another — both with religious fictions and other challenging biographical stories like those about Maria Callas or Edda Ciano, to the more recent successes of *Blanca*, *Doc*, *Diavoli*, *Buongiorno mamma*, etc. — is that since its inception, it decided to invest heavily in working on stories, taking the best from the Hollywood tradition and adapting it to the Italian context.[8]

At this point, it seems important to preempt an objection: discussing Hollywood dramaturgical models does not mean reducing the complexity of the story to the level of *Independence Day* (which, anyway, is much less banal than some Italian critics tend to think) or the *Transformers* saga. Even English films like *Billy Elliot*, *Notting Hill*, or *The Full Monty*, or seemingly "different" and bold films like *The Truman Show*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *The King's Speech*, or *Inside Out*, are based on strong dramatic models. They also use classic narrative structures of Hollywood cinema[9] (which are essentially universal structures): a three-act structure, a strong antagonist, subplots, a final climax with the protagonist's awareness acquisition and transformation, etc. It is not surprising, then, that these same models can be effectively adapted to religious content fictions, as has indeed been done in the most successful cases.

## 4. Dramaturgical Models

Concerning religious dramas produced in Italy over the last 25 years, we think that we can divide their dramaturgical framework into four essential modes.

1. *Absence of models.* The first is a substantial absence of strong dramaturgical models. It is challenging for this to happen on television because both among television screenwriters and the Rai and Mediaset structures, which exercise a certain preventive control, there is a basic dramaturgical awareness. Therefore, it is difficult for substantially deconstructed stories like those of the aforementioned *Antonio, Guerriero di Dio* or, even more so, like *7 Km from Jerusalem* to pass, as they were productions intended for cinema and distributed in theaters. A different discussion would be necessary for the series on Sky, but we will not delve into that, also because as of our writing (January 2024), Sky Originals in Italy is changing its approach compared to the previous decade, when they broadcasted products like *Il miracolo* or *The Young Pope*.

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[8]  It is also the educational strategy — obviously hyper-synthesized here in a slogan: there would be many other things to specify — followed in the Master in International Screenwriting and Production that we founded in 2000 together with my friend Luca Manzi, and which I still currently direct. It is no coincidence that many successful professionals (screenwriters, development managers, creative producers, network or platform executives) have been trained there.

[9]  For three somewhat different ways of framing the same basic model, see McKee 1997 (Italian translation: *Story, International Forum* 2001); Truby 2007 (Italian translation: *Anatomia di una storia* 2009); Vogler 1992 (Italian translation: *Il viaggio dell'eroe* 1998).

2. *Elementary oppositions*. The second possibility is to apply basic drama-turgical models (inciting incident, well-defined and strongly present antagonist, clear opposition between good and evil) in a very elementary and flat manner. The result may be trivial and simplifying, but it usually works. This occurred with the miniseries on Pope John XXIII broadcasted on Canale 5 under the title *Il Papa buono* (The Good Pope, 2003). The title itself is indicative of a choice of very elementary oppositions on which the narrative was played, not devoid of its effectiveness on the audience. The miniseries, directed by Ricky Tognazzi and starring Bob Hoskins, did not reach the peaks of Rai's "twin" (15 million viewers), but still had excellent ratings (almost 10 million viewers on average and a share around 35%).

3. *External and superimposed models and conflicts*. The third possible model is for those who take a story with a religious content, but, perhaps because they do not fully believe in the dramaturgical power of specifically religious themes or because they are accustomed to other types of stories, or maybe due to a lack of specifically religious sensitivity, they try to focus the story on conflicts and dilemmas that have little to do with the religious dimension. This happened with a dramatic mishmash titled *La sacra famiglia* aired on December 10 and 11, 2006, on Canale 5 with relatively low audience success (an average share of about 21%): «Clumsy attempt to reinterpret the story of the birth and childhood of Jesus, this miniseries, which claims to be inspired by the apocryphal Gospels, actually seems rather indebted to themes, tones, and narrative modules from novels and soap operas» (Cotta Ramosino 2007: 308-310). This is how Laura Cotta Ramosino begins her review-analysis, continuing with justified indignation:

To summarize the plot of the first episode, in fact, rather than the story of salvation, it seems like watching an episode of *Beautiful*: a girl running away from an unwanted marriage, a quirky widower still in search of love quarreling with his restless son for the possession of the aforementioned girl, attempts of rape narrowly averted, unwanted pregnancies and reparative marriages, resentful ex-girlfriends, but in search of redemption, lascivious and available neighbors. (Cotta Ramosino 2007: 308-310)

This is the model followed to some extent (i.e., less obviously off-center) by a fiction on Saint Francis aired on Canale 5 in 2002, produced by Taodue and starring Raoul Bova.[10] In this case, deviations from the Franciscan story are of various types: Francis (who actually wanted to become a noble knight when young) becomes a "democrat" *avant la lettre*; his relationship with Chiara is shaped on the romantic cliché of a love story (although, in reality, the two had about ten years of age difference between them); an artificial opposition is created by Francis between "good" heretics (who translate the Gospel into the vernacular) and the "bad" ecclesiastical institution, etc.

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[10] *Francesco*, directed by Michele Soavi, produced by Taodue for Mediaset, aired on October 6 and 7, 2002, on Canale 5.

4. *Strong dramaturgical model and specifically religious theming*. It is, in our opinion, the most effective and relevant model, usually followed by Lux Vide productions, where an attempt has been made to "believe" in the specifically spiritual and religious potential of the story, without giving up on constructing dramatic arcs and conflicts that would capture the attention of a broader audience. Sometimes, for example, this attempt to find strong conflicts can lead to some more or less small exaggerations: for example, the attempt to find a "flesh-and-blood" antagonist can push screenwriters to accentuate, in the lives of the Popes, a certain conflict between the "good" (modern, open, advanced) Pope and "bad" curia members (retrograde, closed, reactionary). These are easy simplifications, which materialize in exaggerations and forcings compared to historical facts that are sometimes presented in the script, sometimes emphasized by the direction of actors with shots of perplexed looks, envious glances...[11] Obviously, where the life of the biographee itself has presented external conflicts and antagonisms, the risks of resorting to exaggerations or deviating from historical truth are much smaller: for example, in the case of the life of Giovanni Bosco, who had to face countless difficulties to start his "oratories", or John Paul II, who had, before his pontificate, to deal with Nazism first and then communism. However, in general, fidelity to historical facts and the desire to work on true character arcs and relevant themes have ensured that products set up in this way (such as *Fatima*, *Lourdes*, *Padre Pio tra cielo e terra* with Michele Placido, *Mother Teresa* starring Olivia Hussey, *Saint Peter* with Omar Sharif, and various others already mentioned) were of excellent historical-biographical quality and beloved by the audience. Outside of Lux, it seems to me that, for example, *Padre Pio* with Sergio Castellitto, produced by Rizzoli for Canale 5 and directed by Carlo Carlei, and, although with an overall slightly lower quality, *Papa Giovanni Paolo I: Il sorriso di Dio*, writ-

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[11]   It is worth noting that authorship in Tv series is usually divided among at least four fundamental figures: screenwriter, director, producer, and network. To this, the artistic contribution — sometimes crucial — of the main actors should be added. But the matter is even more complex because some production companies have a true team of story editors and creative producers (or delegate producers) who thoroughly follow each project, both in the development phases, working closely with the screenwriters, and in the production and post-production phases, accompanying or supervising the work of directors, editors, and dubbers. Likewise, usually, the producers of Raifiction and the representatives of networks (usually Raiuno) actively intervene in the development of the project, for example, influencing the choice of actors and directors, intervening in the editing, etc. Naturally, network interventions are more significant when the project is entrusted to small or inexperienced production companies. As one can imagine, the final result — although perhaps excellent — is often the result of complex and sometimes heated negotiations among all these authorial instances, negotiations that become even more complicated in the case of an international co-production, where representatives of networks (and therefore funders) from different countries are involved, often expressing not only their artistic interests but also the diverse sensitivities of the audience. The complexity of managing these "voices" is one of the reasons why many Italian producers give up co-productions. From these considerations, it emerges how misguided — often surprisingly so — journalists and even television critics are, when they tend to attribute the artistic responsibility for a Tv series solely to the director, as if it were a film by Nanni Moretti... On the complex dimensions of authorship in cinema and fiction, see Chapter 2 of Fumagalli (2020, vol. 1), and for Italian Tv series see Barra and Guarnaccia (2018), which contains very concrete and interesting testimonies about the work of development managers, creative producers, and commissioners of recent major Italian Tv series.

ten and produced by Francesco Scardamaglia, directed by Giorgio Capitani, and aired on Raiuno in the fall of 2006, also adhered to these criteria.

As we argue extensively elsewhere (Fumagalli 2020, vol. 1: 164-174), the main issue in biographical films is to identify a theme that gives dramatic unity to the story and does not reduce it to a bundle of unrelated anecdotes. It is the theme (the universal dimension of human experience explored in this specific film: see McKee 1997 and Truby 2007) that helps choose which episodes to narrate and which not, because it is always about choosing an infinitesimal part of a person's life, even if you have 60 hours, like in *The Crown*, and not the typical two hours of a movie, or the approximately three hours of a two-part miniseries, or even the 8 to 10 hours of the series now made for platforms.

Then it is necessary to find a clear and powerful climax (especially when working in cinema, where the ending is crucial for word-of-mouth success,[12] unlike TV), connected to a character's transformation arc. It is also necessary to give the main character a reasonable number (realistically manageable within TV timeframes) of significant relationships, so that unknown characters do not constantly enter and exit, but we can see these relationships grow, mature, and signal both the maturation of our character and the changes he/she generates in those around him/her. Finally, to limit ourselves, of course, to a few and very brief general indications, if possible, authors should structure the story in the organic formula that works masterfully for audiences worldwide, that of the three acts Aristotle spoke about more than two thousand years ago.[13]

Among all, three very successful examples from a narrative and thematic point of view seem to me to be, among Lux Vide products, *Chiara e Francesco* (2007), *Sant'Agostino* (2010), and *Maria di Nazareth* (2012). All three written by Francesco Arlanch. The first, written under the supervision of Salvatore Basile and directed by Fabrizio Costa, completely avoided possible "romantic" shortcuts or anti-institutional deviations, completely absent in the life of the saints of Assisi, to try to faithfully render the lives of these two saints and their relationship, focusing on relevant spiritual dimensions and constructing an alternate editing of their lives that implicitly suggested correspondences, analogies, the reciprocal influences of the two deeply connected characters, even if they had very few opportunities to be together.

In *Sant'Agostino*, very effectively directed by the Canadian Christian Duguay,[14] the theme of the story was the young Augustine's search for truth and his decision to stop using his gift of speech for power, but to put it at the service of his brothers, first as a Christian and then as the Bishop of Hippo. In

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[12] A very powerful ending is, for example, in the recent film by Paola Cortellesi, *C'è ancora domani*: the strength of this ending, which gives a powerful uplift to the entire story, is one of the elements that, in my opinion, explains the extraordinary and totally unexpected box office success of the film. See my review at https://www.scegliereunfilm.it/ce-ancora-domani/.

[13] See our comments in Chiarulli and Fumagalli (2018).

[14] Duguay is a Canadian director who has worked for both TV and cinema, both in Hollywood and in Europe (*Human Trafficking*, *Belle et Sébastien*, *Jappeloup*, *Medici – Master of Florence*, etc.)

this miniseries, screenwriter Francesco Arlanch gave – respecting historical data but focusing on it from a television perspective – a fundamental role to Augustine's mother, Monica (played in the miniseries by an important and experienced actress, Monica Guerritore), thus creating a strongly emotional perspective on the life of the saint of Hippo and giving the predominantly female audience of RaiUno's Tv series a character with whom to identify and with whom to read (and be moved by) Augustine's tormented and adventurous story.

In *Maria di Nazareth*, directed by Giacomo Campiotti, the challenge was to find a conflict and a transformation arc in a character, Mary, whom Christian tradition claims to be without sin. Here too, Arlanch's and the authorial team's solution (notably the then head of drama at Lux Vide, Sara Melodia, a woman of exceptional abilities, who sadly died prematurely[15]) is, in my opinion, intelligent and profound, again very respectful of the scriptural data and effective in facilitating empathy from the female audience: Mary is seen as a mother with a most lovable Son, who, however, must move from the role of a natural mother to that of a disciple and must fully accept the mission that the Son has to save mankind, that is, to die for them. She must also undergo a transformation arc, although without going from evil to good, from sin to grace. She must move from being the natural mother of a perfect and most lovable Son to being the co-redeemer who recognizes in Jesus her Savior and adheres to and participates in his work of redemption. Said like this, it might seem abstract, but in the miniseries (which was a great success with the audience and was broadcast in many countries around the world, including the USA), all this is dramaturgy, storytelling, choices in the face of dilemmas. To enrich the panorama of characters are two other women among the main characters: Herodias, who represents the negative pole, the one who surrenders to evil and to the logics of power and money, and Mary Magdalene, who instead undergoes a change from a normal life to sin and then, thanks to Jesus (but also thanks to Mary's intervention), from sin to salvation.

## 5. Empathizing with the Saints

In addition to this reflection on underlying dramaturgical models, there is another important aspect that I would like to draw attention to. When working on biographies for cinema or television, one quickly realizes that the saint (if well narrated) is a kind of character with whom it is very easy to empathize. Just reasoning from a purely dramaturgical point of view, it becomes increasingly clear how saints are naturally likable characters. That is, if freed from the crust of clichés in which we sometimes embalm them, they are true "heroes". Their lives are extraordinarily consistent and full, and, if well represented, cannot fail to captivate.[16]

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[15]  See on her Fumagalli (2021: 50-52).

[16]  It was a conclusion that Louis de Wohl had reached independently: he was a great writer who, after converting, dedicated himself almost exclusively (also on explicit commission from Pius XII) to writing very popular biographies of saints. He wondered, in fact, where else he could find people so rich internally, who had fought such interesting battles, with such a strong ability to be loved by the reader.

When making biographical stories for cinema, for example, one usually has to embellish the real character a lot (think of stories like *A Beautiful Mind* or *Erin Brockovich*) to make them likable. When making biographies of "great" men in some field, there is a risk — if faithful to the historical truth of the character and if one goes deep — of bringing out all their limits and pettiness, often causing rejection in the audience: think of a not very recent James Ivory film about Picasso, Richard Attenborough's cinematic biography of Chaplin in 1992, or biographical films that promised a lot but left the audience quite "cold", like the recent *Elvis* or Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* or Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar*.[17]

In this sense, saints need much less dramaturgical makeup — usually, they don't need any at all — than any other character. They are personalities of great charm: if you can look at them deeply, attentive to the personality of each one and away from stereotypes, their lives are often of extraordinary cultural, human, and spiritual fecundity. Just to stay with the example of St. Francis, think of the spiritual and civil scope of the revolution of the mendicant orders, with consequences ranging from the paintings of Giotto to the invention of the nativity scenes, from the valorization of the poor to the return to considering Jesus not only as the true inaccessible God but also as the true Man close to each of us. Often, as in this case, the physical, tangible, and even architectural traces of the life of a saint are still present in the daily life of millions of Italians.

## 6. What is Missing

All well, then? In a certain sense, one could answer yes, if one avoids falling into the stereotypes and dramaturgical traps mentioned above. However, there is still a dimension that Italian religious miniseries, having established themselves since the early 2000s as a grand popular narrative, capable of recalling the roots of our culture and values, have yet to fully explore, except for brief hints. It is the realm of true cinematic artistic expression. While there have been formidable acting performances (notably Castellitto's portrayal of Padre Pio, widely acclaimed), there has not been a miniseries that attained the level of a genuine work of art, reaching aesthetic heights. This is not an easy task, but not impossible, at least in principle.

The curious thing is that if we examine the essence of cinema, it is almost by definition oriented towards a specifically Catholic perspective, as it has a structure we could describe as "sacramental". Just as the sacrament is a tangible reality that serves to manifest the presence and efficacy of a non-tangible reality (grace), cinema, through the visibility of actors, images, light, and sound, in its highest and most successful forms, should aim to communicate profound inner experiences. The semiotic category that unites these two worlds and dimensions is the well-known notion of metaphor.[18] If we can say that cinema,

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[17]  The narrative construction is very effective in the biographical film about Freddie Mercury, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which was, in fact, a great worldwide success. The screenplay work was done very intelligently.

[18]  For some reflections on the metaphor that also refers to the dimensions of sacramentality, see Fumagalli (2003: 459-496).

by aiming to express inner worlds through the visible, is sacramental, we can also say that Catholic sacramental theology is somehow naturally "cinematic" or at least should contribute to building fully artistic films where all sensory components contribute to the aesthetic unity of the inspiring idea.[19]

Naturally, only a few authors and films manage to achieve this, so there is much ground to cover. Additionally, the mass audience orientation of TV series requires being extremely clear and explicit, at least in the fundamental lines of the text. In other words, refined and aesthetically valuable texts, like Andrei Tarkovsky's films or more recent ones by Terrence Malick, would be evidently challenging and unacceptable for television audiences. Malick, for instance, in *The Tree of Life* (2011) and the more recent *A Hidden Life* (2019), a poignant biographical film about the farmer Franz Jagerstatter, who opposed swearing allegiance to Hitler, reached remarkable expressive and artistic peaks. Consider for example the audacity of attempting a visual representation of Paradise in the moving finale of *The Tree of Life.*

However, over the years, American cinema has provided examples of films that, while not specifically religious, have successfully dealt with spiritual realities in an engaging and effective way, utilizing the specific cinematic elements: dramaturgy, images, work on objects and environments, quality of light and music, editing, etc.

At times, these results are achieved by films seemingly far from what cinephiles would label as "engaged", films that, when initially released, might not be considered suitable for cinephile screenings until years later, when they are reevaluated. Yet, some mainstream films manage to open metaphorical doors of great relevance. Consider, for example, *Forrest Gump*, an immensely popular film that opens with a feather falling from the sky and landing next to Forrest's shoe. The film concludes with the same feather exiting the book Forrest holds while accompanying his son to the school bus, gently soaring back into the sky until it settles on the screen (on the camera) in the last image of the film. In the scene before the final one, standing by his beloved wife's grave, Forrest had said, "I don't know if we each have a destiny... or if we are all just floating around accidently-like on a breeze... but I think... maybe it's both... maybe both is happening at the same time...". What does this feather, moved by the wind but certainly not by chance, present from the beginning to the end of the film, indicate? Does it suggest a certain protection from above — a kind of sacrament/visualization of God's protection — that accompanied Forrest from the beginning to the end of the story? Perhaps. While screenwriter Eric Roth[20] likely left the meaning of this feather undefined for the audience to interpret, it still seems like an excellent example of "sacramentality", a visual reference to something beyond, whether secular or religious.[21]

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[19]   On these themes, see Lewerenz and Nicolosi (2005).

[20]   Eric Roth is one of the most profound and interesting contemporary screenwriters, who has worked with Steven Spielberg, Michael Mann, Martin Scorsese, in films that are always original and important such as *Ali, Munich, Insider*, the more recent *A Star is Born, Killers of the Flower Moon*, and many others.

[21]   In any case, the feather is in the screenplay exactly as seen in the movie. The screenplay also specifies that the feather eventually rises towards the sky and goes up and down until it stops

Consider the aforementioned *A Beautiful Mind* which leads the viewer to share the illusion and then the disappointment of a mentally ill person, offering a profoundly internal and specifically spiritual experience, even if not directly religious.

The artistic peaks and communicative effectiveness of American cinema are quite challenging for us to reach. Moreover, all arts have needed time to mature aesthetically and establish themselves. Cinema is a young art form: it has just over a century behind it, and sound cinema only about ninety years. Moreover, experience teaches us that, to mature and flourish, art always needs a creative humus made by a certain number of talents working closely together, side by side. This was true for the great Hollywood cinema of the golden years (from the '30s to the '50s), as it was for Italian Renaissance painting, German symphonic music and Italian operatic music of the nineteenth century.

What we mean to say is that true art more easily emerges where there is a foundation of solid professionalism, established creative formulas, from which the great artist can then soar upwards. It is challenging for a single artist to create everything from scratch. Similarly, we believe that in religious fiction, we have likely reached that base of solid narrative professionalism that could, in the future, give space to truly artistic works in the fullest sense.

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right on the lens of the camera, transforming the image into black (see the screenplay at www.weeklyscript.com)

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# Sanctity and Theatricality

## Exploring the Conversion and Representations of Saint Thaïs through Hagiography, Literature, and Art post the Council of Trent

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**Abstract**
This study concentrates on the multifaceted representations of Saint Thaïs across hagiography, literature, and art, focusing on the narratives of her conversion post the Council of Trent. Exploring verbal and visual texts, the paper identifies four key perspectives: the historical veracity of Saint Thaïs, the evolution of her depictions through cultural and religious history, a semiotic analysis of genre transposition, and her relevance to faith and conversion themes. Furthermore, it allows a general reconsideration of the semiotic value of saints, highlighting how their portrayals reflect and influence the interrelation between religious belief and cultural narratives. This comprehensive examination sheds light on the intricate interplay between religious doctrine and cultural expression in shaping the legacy of Saint Thaïs.

**Contents**
1. Hagiography
2. Literature
3. Transposition
4. Conclusions
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*Car il est vrai que les immondices des peuples
entrent dans l'âme des saints pour s'y perdre
comme dans un puits.*[1]

France 1943 (1891): 242

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will focus on hagiographic, literary, and artistic representations of Saint Thaïs. I will refer to the theme of her conversion and the texts, both verbal and visual, that recounted it in modern times, especially after the close of the Council of Trent.

The character of Saint Thaïs is interesting from several points of view. I have isolated four of them, which will determine the parts that compose the present paper. Firstly, there is the hagiographic problem of verifying the historical existence of the saint. Secondly, there is the philological problem of how her representations have evolved over the course of cultural history and, above all, the history of religious ideas. In this second part of the research, we shall wonder how the principles affirmed and disseminated by the Council of Trent influenced literary or artistic representations of the saint and, especially, of her conversion or, vice versa, how these texts reflect, as it were, the ideas of the Catholic Reformation. Thirdly, Saint Thaïs will be the subject of a semiotic investigation, which will address a double problem of transposition. First, a question of content, i.e., the permanence of Thaïs, her story, and her status as a saint through multiple passages from one genre of writing to another: from the hagiographic document to the romanticized biography, from the latter to the poem, from the poem to the opera libretto, and so on. The considerations that will emerge from this part of the talk will probe the following line of research: what are the genre specificities or literary analogies triggered by the discourse that recounts the lives of the saints? The second part of the semiotic question also concerns the problem of transposition, but in relation to expressive form. Which elements remain, and which change, when we translate the saint's biography, through the mechanisms of intertextuality, from speech to image, and from image to sound? Finally, an anthropological question. What is the relevance of Thaïs to general issues of faith and conversion, irrespective of the historical period in which the saint's life was evoked and portrayed? In other words, what is the mythical value, if any, of Thaïs' conversion, and how does it relate to the proliferation of words, images, and other expressive forms that recount it?

I plan to use four strategies to explore the topic. First, I'll look into what's already known about Saint Thaïs. Then, I'll give a quick history of how she's been portrayed in literature over centuries, focusing on a poem from the late 1500s by Ambrogio Leoni that hasn't been closely studied yet. This will include looking at how her conversion is depicted and its connection to the ide-

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[1]  "For it is true that the filth of the people enters the soul of the saints to be lost there as in a well"; all translations in the article are by the author, unless when it is differently specified.

as of the time. Third, I'll discuss how her story has been transformed across different types of art, starting with an analysis by Louis Marin of a painting by Philippe de Champaigne. Lastly, I'll talk about the cultural significance of Thaïs' conversion, showing how theater and puppets play a role in telling her story, using Anatole France's version of Thaïs and its opera adaptation by Massenet as key examples.

## 2. Hagiography

Thaïs is commemorated on October 8 in Byzantine synaxaria, in the Syriac martyrology of Rabbān Slībā, in Slav-Byzantine martyrologies. and, from the sixteenth century, in Latin martyrologies. However, as Agostino Amore, author of the entry «Taisia» in the twelfth volume of the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (BSS, 12, 97-9), points out, there are several elements that make hagiographers doubt the historical existence of this saint (Cesare Baronio, for example, did not include her in his Roman martyrology (Baronio 1586)). What are these elements? Firstly, the available documents give no indication of the saint's hagiographic details, such as day of birth or place of burial. What's more, the oldest texts recounting Thaïs' life do not even mention her name, while the name of her converter varies between four different versions: Bessarion, Serapion, John, and, more frequently, Paphnutius. A third suspicious element is the date of commemoration indicated by the martyrologies: strangely enough, it coincides with that of the commemoration of Saint Pelagia, whose story has many features in common with the life of Thaïs. It is likely, then, that the latter is merely the product of an analogical multiplication of the stereotypical hagiographic model of the sinful and then penitent woman. Naturally, this multiplication would refer, according to this reasoning, to the archetypal figure of the Madeleine (Mathieu-Pinto 1997). Agostino Amore also rejects the thesis of Albert Gayet, who had claimed to confirm the historical existence of Thaïs through the archaeological evidence of the (supposed) discovery, at Antinoöpolis, of both her sepulcher and that of her spiritual father. The epigraphic data of the inscriptions found by Gayet and reproduced in his essay «Antinoé et les sépultures de Thaïs et de Sérapion» (Gayet 1902), were deemed questionable by the scientific community.

The dossier compiled by Agostino Amore for the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* is fairly complete from a hagiographic point of view but omits much of the literary tradition that has amassed around Saint Thaïs. Even more deficient is the all-too-brief iconological overview compiled by Claudio Mocchegiani Carpano (*ivi*: 99). As for the first author, since his aim is to demonstrate the inadequacy of historical evidence in support of the saint's existence, he neglects to weigh up the literary tradition and the space she occupied in the religious imaginary of Christianity. From the point of view of literary history, and even more so from the point of view of semiotic analysis, the difference between hagiographic document and narrative invention lies not only in the codification of writing genres, but also in the relationship between texts and extra-textual reality, i.e., in the way the former veridically refer to the latter. In the case of Thaïs, however, it is perhaps more interesting, even in relation to the histo-

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ry of religious mores, to abandon this approach of historical verification (or falsification) of textual semantics, and undertake a literary analysis of a saint who was a narrative character before becoming a hagiographic reality.[2] This operation could be described as an essay in the semantics of representational systems, as Louis Marin would have put it.

## 2. Literary sources

The earliest literary source concerning the conversion of Thaïs is contained in a Greek legend dating back to the fifth century (BHG, II, 261-2, nn. 1695-7). Other versions were written in Syriac (BHO, 249, n. 1137) and Slavonic (Anal. Boll. 82, 1160-1, nn. 8012-19; Suppl., 287, nn. 8012-3). They already outline the fundamental core of Thaïs' story. This basic narrative structure will be transformed, modified, developed, and enriched by many subsequent texts, but it will nevertheless remain faithful to its starting point. Thaïs is described as a publicly sinful woman, probably a prostitute, a dancer, a mime, an actress, or all of these at the same time. One day, a monk converts her. She gives all her possessions to the poor and retires to a cell to atone for her sins. After three years, Thaïs receives a divine sign indicating the end of her penance. She leaves her cell, but a fortnight later God calls her to heaven. This story, with its clear and dramatic opposition between holiness and sin, good and evil, was a great success with medieval authors, who immediately recognized its extraordinary theatrical potential. Among the features that characterize the saint's conversion, several seem to harmonize perfectly with the idea of a Gothic staging: on the one hand, the public and, perhaps, even theatrical nature of sin and redemption; and, on the other, the contrast between the openness of the stage and the enclosure of the cell, which makes it possible to articulate a mythical spectacle, based on dialectics between void and full, closed and open space, life and death, and humanity and divinity.

All these factors meant that the legendary Greek and Slavic texts, which had already been translated into Latin in the sixth century, were transposed in the tenth century into a famous religious drama entitled *Paphnutius*, composed by the Benedictine nun Hrothsvita of Gandersheim. A century later, Mabord, Bishop of Rennes, transformed the theatrical text into a poem. It should therefore be emphasized that, from the very beginning, Thaïs' literary tradition is characterized not only by a dramatic vocation, but also by its readiness to lend itself to transpositions between different literary genres, which is perhaps a consequence of its intrinsically theatrical nature.

When Jacobus de Voragine included the story of Thaïs' conversion in the *Golden Legend* (Jacobus de Voragine 2007), he triggered its widespread dissemination during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. Two scholars have

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[2]  Yet it is crucial to note that hagiographic figures were not primarily intended for literary creation, particularly in their origins. If instances of falsification or blending between hagiographic traditions exist, they likely arose from various motives, such as the embellishment of a saint's biography with details absent from their actual life, or the oral mingling of legends that were later recorded in texts.

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focused on the literary tradition of Saint Thaïs in this period. In 1922, Oswald Robert Kühne published *A Study of the Thaïs Legend*, with special reference to Hrothsvita's *Paphnutius* (Kühne 1922). A more general overview of medieval texts referring to the Thaïs' legend can be found in Margareta Wietzorek's *Die Legenden der Thaïs und der Maria Aegyptiaca in der romanischen Literaturen, vornehmlich des Mittelalters* (Wietzorek 1939), published in 1939.

How does the *Golden Legend* recount the conversion of Saint Thaïs? Jacobus de Voragine reproduces almost without change the text of the *Vitae Patrum* dedicated to the *Vita Sanctae Thaïsis, meretricis*, which is contained, with a brief philological commentary by Rosweyde, in volume 73 of the *Patrologia latina*. The *Vitae Patrum* are even mentioned as the source of the saint's story in the very first line of the narrative: «Thaïs meretrix, ut in vitis patrum legitur [...]» ["Thaïs the courtesan, as is read in the lives of the Fathers [...]"] (Jacobus de Voragine 2007: 1166). In short, a clear theatrical dimension characterizes both the text of the Legend and its sources.

Firstly, the harmful influence that Thaïs exerts on the men who frequent her is evoked by a highly dramatic description: «amatores sui prae zelo litibus inter se consertis frequenter puellae limina sanguine juvenum replebant» ["her lovers, out of jealousy, often filled the threshold of the girl with the blood of young men, entangled in disputes among themselves"] (*ibidem*). Next, the text proposes an element that plays a central role in the unfolding of the conversion story and is, at the same time, a typical *mise-en-scène* mechanism, namely, disguise: when Paphnutius sets out to convert the sinful woman, he disguises himself as a gallant young man. Disguise is a form of lying, through which the monk wishes to convince Thaïs of the falseness of her moral principles. Given the importance of these concepts in the narrative structure of the saint's conversion, it may be appropriate to interpret the story using a theoretical instrument elaborated in the semiotics of Algirdas J. Greimas: the square of veridiction (Greimas and Courtès 1979: 417-418). This is a graphic diagram in the shape of a square which, combining the modalities of being and appearing and their contradictories (non-being and non-appearing), produces four epistemological situations: truth, lie, secrecy, and falsity. The story of Thaïs' conversion unfolds all these combinations of essence and appearance: after the moral falsity of the prostitute's conduct and the lie of disguise, the text of the *Golden Legend* stages, like a theatrical canvas, the secret. Upon paying Thaïs, Paphnutius is invited to lie on the woman's bed, but he hesitates, asking for a more secret place to hide this sinful union: «si est interius cubiculum, in ipsum eamus. Et cum duxisset eum per plura loca, ille semper dicebat, quod timeri videbat» ["if there is an inner chamber, let us go into it. And as she would lead him through several places, he would always say that it seemed to be fearful"] (Jacobus a Voragine 2007: 1167). The narrative space is thus doubled, in a kind of *mise-en-abyme*: no place is hidden enough if you wish to escape the gaze of God, for God is the one for whom secrecy does not exist. And it is precisely at the moment when the saint realizes that her secrets will be a truth for God, and that the moral falsity of her life cannot be sheltered under a lie, that the story completes the staging of the square of truthfulness with the description of Thaïs' conversion, that is, her discovery of Christian truth.

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Secondly, Jacobus de Voragine's narrative continues to function as a matrix of theatrical indications, for example when he describes the spectacular *autodafé* in which the saint burns, in the town's main square, all the wealth she had accumulated through prostitution «[...] illa collectis omnibus, quaecumque ex peccato lucrata fuerat, perlatisque in mediam civitatem populo spectante igne combussit [...]» ["[...] she gathered all that she had gained from sin, and having brought them to the center of the city, in the sight of the people, she burned them with fire [...]"] (*ibidem*). Similarly, the end of Thaïs' penance is told with a narrative rhythm that evokes staging: following Paphnutius' stern instructions, the saint remains in her cell for three years. She has only a little water and bread to survive, and is forced to dispose of her body's natural water in her own cell («quo jubes, pater, ut ex naturali meatu aquam meam effundam? Et ille: in cella, sicut digna es» ["Where do you command, father, that I pour out my water from the natural passage? And he [replied]: in the cell, as you deserve"] (*ivi*: 1168). Moreover, she is not allowed to pronounce the name of God in her prayers. These three years of mortification of body and spirit culminate in a vision: Paphnutius having asked Antony whether it was opportune to release Thaïs from her cell, the old abbot orders his disciples to spend an entire night in prayer vigil, so that God could reveal to them the reason for Paphnutius' arrival. The answer was received in a nocturnal vision.

All these details encourage us to identify, in the narrative structure that recounts Thaïs' conversion and redemption, the influence of a medieval dramatic mentality, which, starting from an earlier legend, enhances those elements that are more in harmony with the practice of mysteries and other popular spiritual representations in the Middle Ages. In the text we are going to analyze in greater depth, namely that of Ambrogio Leoni, this strong theatrical connotation remains, but at the same time it is inflected according to the criteria of post-Tridentine dramatic ideology.

*La Taide / convertita: / rappresentazione / spirituale. / Di Ambrogio Leoni Crocifero,* is a poem in free hexasyllables, composed like a theatrical text: five acts, containing, respectively, six, eight, seven, nine, and ten scenes, preceded by a prologue entitled «*l'angelo*» ["the angel"] and separated by four intermissions, «*della morte*» ["on death"], «*del giudicio finale*» ["on the last judgement"], «*delle pene infernali*» ["on infernal punishments"], «*della gloria dei beati*» ["on the glory of the blessed ones"]. I consulted a twelfth edition printed in Venice in 1600 by Gratioso Perchacino, which I found among the books preserved in the library of the *Accademia degli Intronati*, founded in Siena between 1525 and 1527. Significantly, the text of *La Taide convertita* was contained in an anthology of dramatic texts, including Ongaro's *Alceo*, Sforza d'Oddo's *Erofilomachia*, Settizonio's *Roselmina / favola / tragisatiricomica*, Lodovico Dolce's *Il ragazzo* and Giovan Battista Leoni's *La falsa / reputazione / della fortuna*.

It was quite a challenge to locate some information on Ambrogio Leoni, the author of the text, whose very frontispiece reveals that he was a 'crocifero', i.e. a member of the sinful Crosier order. First of all, he should not be confused with Ambrogio Leone, a much more famous figure, professor of medicine, historian and philosopher, about whom we have copious documentation. The

only literary historian to provide some details on Ambrogio Leoni is Giovanni Fantuzzi, in the fifth volume of his *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, printed in 1786 (Fantuzzi 1786). In turn, the Bolognese scholar refers to the third volume of Francesco Saverio Quadrio's *Della storia e della Ragione d'ogni Poesia* (Quadrio 1739-52, 3, 75). According to this author, Leoni's work was reprinted in Milan by Giambattista Bidelli, in 1621, in twelfths, and in Venice, by Lucio Spineda, in 1625, again in twelfths. It would seem, then, that Ambrogio Leoni lived in the early years of the seventeenth century. However, Fantuzzi claims to have seen an edition of *La Taide* dated 1559, and printed in quarto. If this is true, perhaps the text was written during the years of the Council of Trent. Yet it is not impossible that other editions of the same work appeared earlier.

In any case, the fact that it was reprinted at least three times, and that in 1617 Marcantonio Ricci da Cingoli published a prose version of it (*La Taide Convertita, Rappresentazione Spirituale d'Ambrogio Leoni Crocifero, ridotta di verso in Prosa da Marcantonio Ricci da Cingoli*. In Milano, per Jeronimo Bordone, 1617, in twelfths), might indicate that this spiritual representation had a fairly wide circulation.

As far as the author is concerned, the religious order of which he was a member, that of the Crosiers, was instituted by St. Cletus pope and martyr, and was suppressed by Pope Alexander VII on April 28, 1658. The Cruciferi of Bologna were 'Ospitalieri' and had their church and convent in the suburbs of Bologna, shortly after the Porta di Strada Maggiore. In August 1662, Pope Alexander VII decreed the transfer of the church, convent, and garden to the Jesuit-run Collegio de' Nobili of St. Francis Xavier. Subsequently, after the dismemberment of the Society of Jesus, the same properties passed to the Barnabite fathers. The destitution of the Crosiers order prevents us from knowing more about Ambrogio Leoni, as the history of his order is very incomplete in the seventeenth century. He was probably a member of the Bolognese aristocratic Leoni family.

Within the framework of these philological coordinates, I would now like to approach the text of *La Taide convertita* from two different angles: on the one hand, an extra-textual approach, aimed at identifying the status of sanctity after the Council of Trent; on the other, an intra-textual approach, which will analyze the figures of conversion in Leoni's work. As the text of this spiritual representation is extremely complex, both in terms of narrative plot — with its many complications in relation to the Gothic structure of the Golden Legend — and style, which is typically Baroque, I will only be able to focus on a single figure, which nevertheless plays a predominant role in the semiotic fabric of the work: that of the net. My interpretation is intended to emerge from the interaction between intra- and extra-textual data.

To introduce the discourse on holiness in the Catholic Reformation, no text seems more appropriate than the prologue that Giulio Cesare Valentino, translator from Spanish into Italian of the *Flos Sanctorum*, by Toledo theologian and preacher Alfonso de Villega (1534-1615) (Villega 1588), wrote for the second volume the work he translated, dedicated to the Old Testament saints and published in Venice in 1596 by Giovan Battista Ciotti (Villega 1596). In it, the Italian translator explains the theological and spiritual function of sanctity

by means of a curious comparison: the virtues of the saints are compared with those of eyeglasses (in the Baroque period, optics were often used as a source of metaphorical imagery). First, Giulio Cesare Valentino insists on the need to perfect the art of Christianity through the examples contained in the lives of the saints. He cites St. Augustine, according to whom humanity has two paths to God: writing and the creature. Next, he refers to a passage by Nicephorus Calixtus, who recounts that Saint Anthony, a hermit, when asked how he could live in the desert without books, replied, with Saint Paul, that the invisible things of God can be conjectured from visible things. Consequently, continues the translator, we read the lives of the saints because they are the living signs of divine perfection. Yet this formula could harbor an idolatrous attitude, to which Christian authors were much more sensitive after the harsh attacks unleashed by the Protestant Reformation on the Catholic cult of the saints. At the same time, the Council of Trent and the theologians of the Catholic Reformation produced a conceptual framework for ruling out any suspicion of heresy in hagiographic writing and reading. I quote from the prologue to the Italian edition of the *Flos sanctorum*:

Ma bisogna auuertire che si come quelli che adoperano gli occhiali, non se gli mettono per vederli, & fermare in essi la vista, ma perché passi oltre, & per mezzo di quelli mirare l'altre cose, così non dobbiamo [...] fermarci nelle creature, ma per loro mezzo inuestigare Dio, che fece simili operationi, in modo che dobbiamo servirci delle creature, come di occhiali, accioche dalla loro contemplatione passiamo alla contemplatione del Creatore, l'amiamo, & serviamo, & gli consegniamo i nostri cuori. I Santi sono occhiali, chiari, & Cristiani, hanno da seruirsi di mezzo per andare à Dio [...].[3] (Villega 1691, prologue)

The saints are spectacles: we need to use them to see God better, but without allowing our gaze to linger on the spectacles themselves. This image transposes the post-Tridentine theology of sanctity into metaphorical terms. The decree "*De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus*" ["On the invocation, veneration, and relics of the saints, and holy images"], whose contents Hubert Jedin has described in detail in his monumental history of the Council of Trent (Jedin 1935: 143-188, 404-429; Jedin 1975: 4, 2, 182 *et seq*.), approved at the end of the Council and expounded by the relation of the Bishop of Farmagosta on December 3, 1563 (Ehses 1924: 1098-1103), emphasized the desirability of using saints and their representations, both in hagiography and iconography, as models to be imitated, «quia Dei per sanctos miracula et salutaria exempla oculis fidelium subiiciuntur, ut pro iis Deo gratias agant, ad sanctorumque imitationem vitam moresque suos componant [...]» (Ehses 1924: 1078).

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[3]  "But we must be warned that just as those who use glasses do not wear them to see the glasses themselves, and to fix their sight on them, but so that they might look beyond, and through them behold other things, in the same way, we should not [...] stop at creatures, but through them investigate God, who performed similar operations, so that we must use creatures, like glasses, so that from their contemplation we may move to the contemplation of the Creator, love Him, & serve Him, & give Him our hearts. The Saints are clear glasses, & Christians, must use them as means to go to God [...]."

The concept of sanctity promoted by the Council of Trent is not new, but emphasizes the exemplary role of the saints in Christianity, thus welcoming, perhaps, some of the suggestions put forward by Melanchthon concerning the cult of the saints in his *Confessio Augustana* (Burschel 1995).

The texts, both verbal and visual, which, after the close of the Council of Trent and the dissemination of the principles affirmed by its theologians, represent sanctity, are profoundly influenced by this emphasis on the exemplarity of the saints. If we compare Ambrogio Leoni's *Taide convertita* with the Thaïs of the *Golden Legend*, the change is obvious. The saint is no longer the isolated protagonist of a heroic Christian story, but the center of a network of human relationships that includes several characters: the hermit monk Paphnutius, as well as Gabrina, Thaïs' servant, and two suitors, who bear the names, premonitory of their characters and fate (*nomina sunt consequentia rerum*), of Caparbio, which in Italian means "obstinate", and Candido, "candid". Leoni's *Taide* scene also features Caparbio and Candido's two servants, named Vafrino and Fedele respectively, plus a number of personifications of virtues or vices, such as "La Penitenza" ["penance"] or "La Voluttà" ["voluptuousness"]. A group of superterrestrial characters completes the list: an angel, Lucifer, the infernal spirits Asmodeo and Astarothe, and a group of demons and furies ("furie").

The plot of *La Taide* is too complex to be easily summed up in a few words. It must be emphasized, however, that this multiplication of characters is neither simply a Baroque caprice nor merely the fruit of a theatrical requirement but stems from a doubling of narrative enunciation that reproduces, by semiotic means, the theological principles promoted by the Council of Trent. Whereas the *Golden Legend* contained only one conversion, that of Thaïs, Leoni's *Taide* introduces both a second conversion, that of the suitor Candido, who renounces the carnal love of Thaïs to embrace a wholly spiritual life, and a failed conversion, that of the suitor Caparbio, who, consistent with his own name, persists in his criminal plans of seduction; at the end of the play, he is abducted by a group of enraged demons, who lead him into the depths of hell. In the semiotic terms disseminated by Umberto Eco (Eco 1979), this post-Tridentine spiritual representation includes in its narrative fabric the specular images of two types of model reader: those who, like Candido, will imitate Thaïs and follow her on the path to conversion, and those who, on the contrary, like Caparbio, will fail to profit from the example of the redeemed sinner and will doom themselves to damnation.

A close relationship between the theology of the Council and the literary representation of holiness can also be seen in the figures Ambrogio Leoni uses in his poem. One metaphorical image recurs obsessively, almost excessively for the contemporary reader: that of the net. A few quotations will suffice to exemplify such repetitiveness: Thaïs' soul is enveloped by amorous laces («amorosi lacci», 1, 1) or by human wrappings («avvolgimenti umani», *ibidem*). At the same time, when Caparbio refers to the monk Paphnutius, who takes his lover away from him, he defines him as a new Circe or Medea, who ensnares young girls in her occult nets («qual novella Circe, ò qual Medea / Hor queste, / hor quelle incaute giovinette / Ne le sue reti occultamente in-

trica», ["like a new Circe, or a Medea / Now these, / now those unsuspecting young girls / She secretly entangles in her nets"], 1,2). Likewise, Fedele advises his patron to free his heart from the ties of Love that knot it, that tighten it («O te beato, se provar potrai / Quanto lieto sia un cor, quanto felice, / Cui legame d'Amor né stringe, e annoda» ["O you blessed one, if you could experience / How joyful, how happy a heart can be, / To whom the bonds of Love neither tighten nor tie"], 2, 1); etc.

Metaphors relating to hunting and fishing are typical of Baroque aesthetics, but in Leoni's spiritual, edifying, and moralizing poetry, nets, laces, knots and wrappings acquire a specific value, which I would like to elucidate by reference to two different texts, one verbal, the other visual.

In the *Carmina Tridentina*, composed by Antonio Sebastiano Minturno in 1564 (Minturno 1564), just after the end of the Council of Trent, the Church is compared to an enormous net that catches the souls of the faithful and saves them from spiritual shipwreck. It is an image that goes back, naturally, to the Gospel metaphors of fishing, and gives the net a positive connotation. At the same time, in the numerous editions of Ripa's *Iconologia*, printed in Europe in several languages between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the net is the fundamental iconographic element in representations of the *Inganno*, of deception, as shown by the engraving that accompanies Ripa's iconological description (Ripa 1988, 1, 215-6). After more than a century, Raimondo di Sangro, the learned prince of Sansevero, remembered this iconography and, in the sumptuous mausoleum he had erected for his family in Naples, used it to represent the conversion of one of his ancestors (Cioffi 1994: 37-38). In a sculpture by Francesco Queirolo, a man freeing himself from a net becomes the symbol of "disinganno", the counterpoint to deception, which Ripa had associated with the net. Among the quotations carved into the open book lying at the foot of the statue, and indicated by the angel, is a verse from the Book of Nahum (1:13): «vincula tua dirumpam», "[For now will I break his yoke from off thee, and will burst thy bonds in sunder] (KJV)".

A comparison of these two texts reveals the way in which the figure of the net is employed by Ambrogio Leoni: it is at once a symbol of perdition and salvation, carnal humanity and divine spirituality, good and evil, vice and virtue, sin and redemption. This ambiguity is not accidental but finds its justification in the systems of representation that the Christian civilization, especially during the Reformation promoted by the Council of Trent, uses to describe, understand, and encourage spiritual upheavals. As I have tried to demonstrate (Leone 2004), conversion poses a problem of ineffability for both the self and those who represent it, be they hagiographers or painters, because it is expressed in an instant that is a paradoxical fusion of good and evil, absence and presence of faith. Consequently, this spiritual trigger is often rendered by ambiguous symbols, such as Saint Augustine's fig tree, Saint Magdalene's ointment, or Saint Paul's horse. Thaïs' net embodies the same semantic mechanism and, at a time when the Church emphasized both the first conversion of heretics, infidels, and atheists, but also the second conversion of sinners or simply lukewarm believers (Armogathe 1982), effectively represents the possibility of retaining the identity of the self even after the upheaval of conver-

sion.

The identity of the subject in the representation is a semiotic problem, a fact that encourages us to move on to the third part of the paper, dedicated to the problems of transposition of genre and medium.

## 3. Transposition

The theory of intra- and inter-semiotic translation and transposition is vast. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to a theory developed by the Italian semiologist Omar Calabrese, which classifies the different types of translation and transposition by considering them as stylistic phenomena (Calabrese 2000).

With regard to the identity of Saint Thaïs, her conversion and her sanctity across different genres, the permanence of a core of narrative elements (the sin of prostitution, the monk's disguise, the burning of riches, penance in the cell, the meeting between Paphnutius and Antony, the saint's liberation, her death), guarantees the transmission of the fundamental content of the story of the converted sinner from one writing style to another.

The question of transposition between different expressive substances (for example, from writing to painting) is much more complicated. Louis Marin, faced with the *Paysage avec sainte Thaïs libérée de sa cellule par Paphnutius*, painted by Philippe de Champaigne between 1654 and 1656, wonders about the possibility of correctly reading an image, when it condenses, in a single instant, a story that the written text spreads out over several years (Marin 1995):

> Comment savoir si Dieu a remis les péchés de la courtisane recluse dans sa cellule ? Comment connaître le véritable sens de l'arrivée de Paphnuce auprès de saint Antoine? Comment discerner les signes de Dieu ? Comment connaître ce qu'ils indiquent, ce qu'ils ordonnent ?[4] (*Ivi*: 68-69)

Louis Marin responds to these questions with a subtle hermeneutic bricolage, unfolding and deciphering the visual synthesis of the painted image to find an interpretive path hidden both in the folds of the landscape and in the way the depiction of Thaïs refers to the other landscapes in the same series: those of Saint Pelagia, Saint Mary the Egyptian, and Saint Mary Penitent. The four images divide the story of an ideal spiritual path into fragments of four moments of real life, through which the vicissitudes of conversion and sanctity are distributed.

Nevertheless, this fragmentation can be reconciled with the unity of a narrative because it is the transposition, through changes in figures and style, of a written story that is itself in turn translation, that of the *Vies des saints Pères des deserts*, translated into French by Arnaud d'Andilly and published in Paris in 1647 (Andilly 1647). Louis Marin has elucidated in exemplary fashion the links between this publishing venture and Port-Royal spirituality. For

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[4]  "How do we know that God has forgiven the sins of the recluse courtesan in her cell? How can we know the true meaning of Paphnutius' arrival at Saint Anthony's? How can we discern God's signs? How can we know what they indicate, what they command?"

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my part, I would like to emphasize that the relationship between Arnauld d'Andilly's writing and Philippe de Champaigne's painting is part of a wider tradition, in which the iconographic representation of Thaïs' sanctity is often linked to her hagiographic narrative. This profound link was established as early as the very first images dedicated to the saint, namely in the illustrated editions of the *Golden Legend*, printed in the fifteenth century: for example, in the *Legend* de la Zainers Gallery (fol. 22v), in Augsburg, printed in 1471 (Schramm 1922, 2, ill. 8; Bohm in LCI, 8, 428), a xylograph depicts Thaïs' conversion. Other hagiographic works reproduced, modified, and transmitted the saint's iconography: the *Buch der Heiligen Altväter*, printed in Augsburg in 1482 (fol. 307; Schramm 1922, 4, ill. 1017); the *Solitudo sive Vitae eremicolarum*, in Sadeler's edition, published in 1621, containing 86 engravings; the *Lebenschreibung der heiligen Altväter und derjenigen Frauenpersonen* [...], published in 1761.

In the migrations — from one style to another, from writing to painting — of the figures that represent Thaïs' sanctity, the theatrical dimension of her story and, above all, of her conversion, plays an eminent role, in that it creates a kind of hyphen between the time of narration and the space of visualization. This theatrical dimension also concerns the anthropological value of Thaïs' story, which is highlighted by Leoni's *La Taide*, but is further explored by Massenet's *Thaïs* from Anatole France. This value could be expressed as follows: Thaïs is a woman who sins by showing off her body. In some versions of her story, this sin even translates into a theatricalization of the saint's countenance: she is a mime, an actress, a woman who disguises herself and plays a role that does not correspond to the truth of her soul. At the same time, in literary and artistic representations of the saint, disguise and, more generally, theatricality become an instrument of salvation: the monk saves Thaïs' soul by disguising himself and, therefore, transforming himself, albeit for a very short time, into an actor. But at the more general level of representation (Leoni's "rappresentazione spirituale"), this same transformation affects the relationship between Christianity and spectacle: through the story of Thaïs, the Christian civilization attempts to reconcile itself with the concept of staging. As Silvia Corandini has shown in her essay *Teatro e spettacolo nel Seicento* (Corandini 1990: 52-79), the Catholic Reformation used theater and, more generally, theatricality as an instrument of persuasion and conversion: on the one hand, the theatricality of religious art (painting, sculpture, architecture) and rites (processions, canonizations, ceremonies); on the other, theater, which is embodied in all the new or renewed forms of sacred spectacle. The story of Thaïs justifies this new rhetoric and expresses it in narrative form.

When Anatole France retells the story of Thaïs, he transforms it profoundly, but retains and highlights, in the representation of her conversion, the anthropological and spiritual value of theater. I do not know if the French Nobel Prize winner read Ambrogio Leoni's *Taide*. He certainly could have. In the prologue to his *Puits de sainte Claire* (France 1895), he writes:

J'étais à Sienne au printemps. Occupé tout le jour à des recherches minutieuses dans les archives de la ville, j'allais me promener le soir. [...] Sur la voie blanche, dans ces nuits transparentes, la seule rencontre que je faisais était celle du R.P. Adone Doni, qui alors travaillait comme moi tout le jour dans l'ancienne Académie degli Intronati.[5] (*ivi*: 1)

France worked all day in the same library where I found Leoni's book. He might have read it (textual clues seem to confirm this, such as the importance of the net metaphor in France's *Thaïs*). In any case, theater, and especially puppet theater, with its enormous metaphysical potential, was a fundamental source of inspiration for France's *Thaïs*. His imagination was spurred by Signoret's puppet performances in Paris in 1888 (Bancquart 1984: 1325). Curiously, the creation of a literary work with many similarities to France's *Thaïs*, Flaubert's *Tentations de Saint Antoine*, was probably inspired by a puppet show, Père Lagrain's *Mystère de saint Antoine*, staged in his puppets' theater in Rouen (Dumesnil 1962: 81-3; Foucault 1995: 15). In the narrative fabric of France's Thaïs, the redemption of the theater and the glorification of the body as an instrument of spiritual salvation occurs much more vividly than in Leoni's *Taide*. In the French writer's interpretation, theater is the site of Thaïs' damnation (Paphnutius sees her for the first time when she plays the role of Polyxena in a tragic pantomime), but also the occasion for her sanctity. The flute, «semblable à celles dont jouent aux festins les filles de sa profession» ["similar to those played at feasts by the daughters of her profession"] (France 1943: 228), which she receives in her penitential cell from Albine, the convent's abbess, becomes an instrument for celebrating the Lord's praises all day long. Similarly, when Thaïs is released from her cell, not after three years, but after sixty days, not by Paphnutius' return, but by a door that opens spontaneously, for the rest of her life she employs «son art et même sa beauté à l'édification de ses sœurs» ["her art and even her beauty for the edification of her sisters"] (*ivi*: 229). She portrays before them «les actions des femmes fortes et des vierges sages de l'Écriture» ["the deeds of the strong women and wise virgins of Scripture"] (*ibidem*). She imitates Esther, Deborah, Judith, Mary, sister of Lazarus, and Mary, mother of Jesus. In a few words, she acts.

## 4. Conclusions

In the brief and necessarily incomplete excursus I have just presented on the sanctity of Thaïs and its literary and artistic representations, from the Middle Ages to modern interpretations, I wanted to highlight in particular the role this vast tradition has played in Christian civilization, especially in relation to the spiritual semantics of conversion and the theological conception of theater. These two elements are inextricably linked, for when Thaïs leaves

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[5]  "I was in Siena in the spring. Busy all day with meticulous research in the city archives, I went for walks in the evening. [...] On the white road, in those transparent nights, the only encounter I had was with R.P. Adone Doni, who then worked like me all day in the ancient Accademia degli Intronati".

her cell, it is not only the saint who is redeemed, but also the idea of sacred representation.

The present article has focused on the complex portrayals of Saint Thaïs, exploring her representation through various mediums and the evolution of her narrative post the Council of Trent. By examining the historical accuracy of Saint Thaïs, the development of her depictions, a semiotic analysis of genre transposition, and her significance in the context of faith and conversion, the study has brought to light the profound interconnections between religious beliefs and cultural expressions. This thorough investigation not only offers a nuanced understanding of Saint Thaïs' legacy but also prompts a broader contemplation of the semiotic value of saints, underscoring how their representations mediate between spirituality and societal narratives.

Crucially, the relationship between sanctity and theatricality emerges as a key theme, suggesting that the sacred and the performative are not mutually exclusive but rather deeply intertwined aspects of religious experience. The theatricality inherent in the stories of saints like Thaïs — where the dramatic unfolding of conversion and penance plays out — serves as a powerful vehicle for conveying spiritual truths and the transformative potential of faith. This blend of sanctity and spectacle underscores the role of narrative and representation in fostering a deeper engagement with the divine, highlighting the capacity of religious stories to encapsulate and express complex theological ideas and human experiences. Through this lens, the article articulates a compelling argument for reevaluating the role of theatricality in religious narratives, positing it as an essential element in the articulation of sanctity and its resonance within the broader cultural and historical context.

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# Saintly Animals
## A Semiotic Perspective on Changing Models of Sanctity and Personhood

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**Abstract**
This paper exposes the results of a research that focuses on the changing thresholds of the notions of sanctity and personhood in Catholic culture, with an emphasis on the contemporary age. In particular, it explores the relationship between saints and animals, thus identifying three main categories, involving an increasing degree of agency attributed to the animals. The first kind of relationship consists in the association of an animal to a saintly character: in this correlation, the animal mainly works as a figure of the saint. The second is the representation of animals with a narrative role in the life story of the saint: in this case, animals play an active part in the story, often as Helpers. The third concerns the representation of animals themselves as saints. This third case is particularly interesting, because animals are not limited to ancillary roles in relation to a human protagonist, but become themselves the protagonists and embody exemplary models, proposed to the imitation of human beings in reason of their moral superiority. These narratives are representative of the fact that in our age the thresholds of the concept of sanctity are shifting under various and relevant aspects. The representations of animals as saints, the growingly shared conviction about their right to be considered as persons, the fact that some individual animals are considered exemplary characters embodying a particular idea of sanctity, are all clear examples of a worldview admitting that moral models and personhood can be found even outside the borders of the human form of life.

**Key Words**
Sanctity; Personhood; Models; Animals; Agency.

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## 1. Introduction

In the Christian-Catholic tradition, animals are connected to saints and, more in general, to the concept of sanctity in several respects. In this paper, I will explore different facets of this relationship, mainly on the basis of the criterion constituted by the kind and degree of agency attributed to animals. Even though my attention is focused in particular on today's culture, taking into account the historical background is necessary to understand the contemporary context.[1] The root of this enquiry can be found in the research carried out in the framework of the project NeMoSanctI.[2] This research has often focused on controversial saints and on the borders of the concept of sanctity itself, which shift across time. If saints are exemplary figures representing the highest ideal of person conceived by the culture in question, then it is evident that the study of the variations in the concepts of sanctity as well as of personhood provide useful touchstones to define how this culture conceives the human being in their relationship with their neighbor and more in general with the other living beings.[3] In this framework, the study of how humans perceive their relationship with animals is of great importance. Indeed, at least in the so-called Western world, animals have often been considered as mirrors that allow humans to get a better understanding of themselves, because they provide an effective term of comparison thus being a source of inspiration for the moral discourse (Paravicini Bagliani 2017: X).

In what follows, I will identify three main kinds of relationship between saints and animals, involving an increasing degree of agency attributed to the latter as such. The first consists in the association of an animal to a saintly character: in this kind of relationship, the animal mainly works as a figure of the saint. The second is the representation of animals with a narrative role in the life story of the saint: in this case, animals act, they play an active role in the story, often as Helpers. The third concerns the representation of animals themselves as saints. This third case is particularly relevant for the present purpose, in that animals are not limited to ancillary roles in relation to a human protagonist, but become themselves the protagonists and embody exemplary models, proposed to the imitation of human beings in reason of their moral superiority. The representations of animals as saints can be found both inside and outside the borders of institutional religion, and often constitute an efficacious bridge between the latter and the broader popular and/or secularized culture.

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[1]    In the field of semiotics, an overview of the hagiographic themes involving saints and animals has been proposed by Gian Paolo Caprettini (1974), in his essay about Saint Francis and the wolf, but Caprettini's attention is centered on the Middle Ages.

[2]    This paper is part of the NeMoSanctI project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 757314 <nemosancti.eu>).

[3]    For further reflection about the relationship between the notions of personhood and sanctity, cf. Ponzo and Vissio (2021; 2022).

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## 2. Saints as animals

A first relationship between saints and animals, attributing no proper agency to the latter but also entailing a strong identification between the human person and the animal, can be found in the allegorical representations. Umberto Eco (2017: 162, my translation) considers bestiaries among the kinds of texts that most represent the Medieval «universal allegorism», which provides a fabled interpretation of reality, overcoming its appearance to seek for what it could *suggest*. In this framework, animals are considered as «*signs* of a divine language. [...] What they are and what they do become the figure of something else. The lion means the Resurrection by erasing its footprints, the elephant by trying to lift up its fallen companion...» (Eco 2017: 222). Animals are thus "forced" to be figures of something that exceeds their knowledge and their real acts: «They are not observed in their actual behaviors, but in the presumed ones, and they do not do what they do, but what the bestiary imposes them to do, so that they can express, through their behavior, something of which they do not know anything» (Eco 2017: 222).

A similar figurative function can be detected in the allegorical representation of some saints as animals. In the iconography of the evangelists, for example, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are often represented respectively as a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. The roots of this representation can be found in Ezekiel, who in a vision sees four beings with four faces: «Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle» (Ez 1, 10). The same figure is mentioned in the Revelation (4, 6-7): «In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle». Subsequently, the Fathers of the Church, starting from Irenaeus, identified the four Evangelists with these symbolical figures, and this identification gave rise to the rich teriomorphic iconography of the Evangelists. Another example is provided by the iconographic representation of Jesus as a pelican, due to the association of the legend according to which the pelican feeds its chicks with the blood of its breast with the themes of the sacrifice of Jesus and of the Eucharist.[4] Based on the same principle, in the sacred art Jesus is often represented as a lamb, symbolizing his innocence and, again, his sacrifice. The fortune of these representations continues to our days: specimens of both the teriomorphic iconography of the Evangelists and the theme of the Agnus Dei can easily be found for instance in churches built in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In some cases, the allegorical identification is not all-encompassing and total, so that the relationship between the saint and the animal can be described

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[4]  I wish to thank Massimo Leone who, in a personal communication, brought this relevant example to my attention.

not as an allegory but rather as a simile. For instance, in some Medieval texts, due to the harshness of their life in the wilderness, hermits are described as very similar to beasts: Saint Alban thus *looks like* a dark and monstrous beast to some knights, while Saint John Chrisostom is *mistaken for* a bear, and as such enchained and brought to the city (cf. Caprettini 1974: 25).

In other cases, the inclusion of an animal in the iconic representation of a saint is a fundamental attribute that allows the identification of the saint. Thus, for instance, Saint Anthony is often associated with a pig, while St. Roch with a dog: the sole *presence* of the animal next to them makes their character easily recognizable.[5] Even though the reason for the association often resides in an episode of the saints' life that is somehow evoked by the presence of the animals, in portraits the animals mainly work as *figures* of the saints. This iconographic tradition associating a saint and their emblematic animal has ancient origins, but is still alive today. A good example is provided by the holy cards which still feature this semiotic dynamics between the human and the animal characters, even in their more recent digital evolutions.[6]

## 3. Saints and animals

A second kind of relationship between saints and animals is that of friendship. In this case, animals are attributed agency. Sometimes, animals initially play the actantial role of Opponents, but then they make a pact of mutual protection with the saint and his human community, thus reversing their role in that of Helper. The episode of Saint Francis and the wolf constitutes the most famous example of this kind of relationship (cf. Caprettini 1974), which is however quite frequent. In other cases, animals look for the help of the saint. There are many animals, for instance, that saints shelter or save from hunting (see e.g. Roche 1948, 1954). In other occasions, on the contrary, saints are helped and rescued by generous animals, such as the dog who is reported to have saved Saint Roch from starving by bringing him his daily bread during his illness. In other cases, animals just seek the companionship of the saint, and vice-versa, in an exchange characterized by love, empathy and an extraordinary capacity to communicate. Examples of this kind are Saint Claire's cat, «Sora Gattuccia», who «lived and died exemplarily, according to the Poor Clare's rule, leaving a dear and nice memory of herself» (Rossetti 2011: 67), but also Saint Filippo Neri's and Saint Giovanni Bosco's dogs, Capriccio and Il Grigio (Rossetti 2011: 104-121; Roche 1948, 1954).

In all these cases, animals keep their non-human nature, but at the same time they are represented as participating in the exceptional nature of the saint by showing marked behavior. Just like saints are exceptional persons

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[5]  See for instance the animals listed in the iconographic dictionary of the saints (Furia 2020).

[6]  Digital and augmented versions of the holy cards can be found on the Internet (just to mention two examples: <https://www.skylabstudios.it/holy-card-i-santini-interattivi-di-watican/>; <https://www.santodelgiorno.it/>), but also on the web apps devoted to saints (see in this respect Ponzo 2023).

because they practice Christian virtues to an extraordinary degree of perfection, so their animal friends are often outstanding individuals in the practice of the virtues that this culture considers as the best virtues that animals can achieve, such as mildness, generosity, fidelity, and empathy. We cannot say that in these cases animals are considered as persons, but at least they are attributed moral virtues and understanding that in many cases exceed the ones displayed by human beings, who are often selfish, blind and indifferent to spiritual truths and centered on earthly interests and goods. Moreover, in the discourse of the saints involved in this kind of friendship with animals, the latter often are considered as *peers* to humans, so that their subjectivity and their personhood, their right to live a decent life and to be respected are fully recognized. This is evident for instance in the franciscan discourse, in which animals and the other elements of the creation are connected to the human person by a bond of brotherhood and sisterhood. This idea is particularly developed in today's catholic culture, in the so-called "ecological" discourse implemented at least since the 1970 by the Church but significantly developed and definitively brought to the public attention by Pope Francis.[7]

## 4. Animals as saints

In other cases, animals themselves are considered, represented, and in some cases even venerated as saints. This of course entails the attribution of agency to animals, to a degree that often exceeds the human capacity and moral quality of action.

The representation of animals as saints is often connected to the theme of martyrdom. In consideration of the above-mentioned high degree of agency attributed to animals, the role of victim and the passivity that are quite frequently associated with the basic narrative program of martyrdom may seem paradoxical. This paradox is however only apparent. The meaning of martyrdom as the general culture conceives it today originates from the first centuries of the Christian history and culture, and, in the framework of Catholicism, it was progressively codified as a specific case for sainthood in the jurisprudence regulating the canonization process. Nevertheless, at least in the late modernity and contemporary culture, the term and the figures of martyrdom have overcome the borders of institutional religion and their traditional religious meaning and have entered other contexts of the culture.[8] What is particularly relevant for the present purpose is that contemporary culture displays a quite articulated martyrological discourse concerning animals. In this discourse, which is gaining more and more importance in our semiosphere, animals are considered as persons as far as they should be recognized basic rights, which are unfortunately often still underestimated in the contemporary social and

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[7]  Cf. in particular the 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato si'*, in which Pope Francis proposes an idea of «integral ecology» (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>). For semiotic reflections on Pope Francis' communication, see Lorusso and Peverini (2017), Marrone (2024: 215-218).

[8]  On this subject, see Ponzo (2018).

economical systems.[9] This martyrological discourse tends to attack the idea of animals as totally Other and to show that suffering, sorrow and pain make humans and animals equal.[10] At the same time, these representations tend to depict animals as passive – or rather helpless and innocent – victims of human violence.

In the Catholic codification, however, martyrdom entails a voluntary – and therefore *actively accepted* even though not deliberately provoked[11] – self-sacrifice based on faith. The standard narrative program associated with martyrdom presents indeed two standard thematic roles: on one hand, the martyr, a subject acting according to Christian values and accepting to lose their life in order to bear testimony and defend their faith; on the other, a persecutor killing the martyr precisely "in odium fidei", namely because of their faith (cf. Ponzo and Rai 2019). The martyrdom of animals in the mainstream contemporary animalist discourse does not display this narrative program: animals are not properly Subjects in the Greimasian sense, because they do not act in order to realize some values, but are simply victims killed by human agents acting in the name of purely material values. Therefore, in this kind of secular discourse defending animals' rights, animals represented as martyrs are actually deprived of agency, which is however a fundamental characteristic of the religious idea of martyrdom. As a consequence, we can say that the use of martyrological themes and figures has in this case a rhetorical nature: it can be thought of as a sort of hyperbolic application of the religious idea of martyrdom: this rhetorical discourse uses the figure of the martyr by applying it to animals which are however reduced to the status of non-subjects, because they are deprived of agency.

There is however a further kind of representation of animals as saints, in which, on the contrary, animals are attributed an agency which equates or overcomes that attributed to human beings and represent the most perfect level of personhood and sanctity, demonstrating a clear superiority over human beings. This idea is quite widespread in contemporary culture, but has actually ancient roots.

In fact, the most known example of an animal represented as a saint is the greyhound Guinefort, the dog of a 13-century knight. According to the legend, this man one day went hunting, and left Guinefort in his castle to protect his baby. But when he returned home, the man found the cradle overturned and empty. Thinking that the dog had killed the baby, the knight slew Guinefort. Then, he heard the baby crying and found him safe and sound, next to a dead viper showing the traces of the dog's bites. When he understood that Guinefort had saved the baby's life, regretfully he buried the dog in a tomb, which

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[9]  For a semiotic discussion about the delicate issues concerning the juridical recognition of animals' rights and the relative debates, cf. Bassano (2019).

[10]  Ventura Bordenca (2018), for instance, has provided an efficacious semiotic analysis of this theme in advertising multimodal texts.

[11]  On this subject, cf. Rai (2018).

soon became a shrine visited by pilgrims, especially mothers with sick children in search of a grace.[12] The cult of Saint Guinefort knew a wide diffusion in Europe. Despite the numerous attempts of the Catholic Church to abolish it, the veneration for the saint greyhound survived until the 20th century, when the Church definitively rejected it together with many others connected to legends based on insufficient historical evidence (cf. Ponzo and Marino 2021).[13]

The history of the worship of the saint dog demonstrates that in the Middle Ages and in the modernity this culture – especially in its popular manifestations – admitted that sanctity is not an exclusive quality of human beings, but can also interest animals, despite the old theological debate about the animals having or not a soul. In the case of Saint Guinefort, the virtue of the animal (its generosity and fidelity) are surely a central feature, which is also demonstrated by the appellative of "martyr dog" due to the unjust Sanction of the knight killing the dog, but the thaumaturgic aspect is also relevant.

Even though it was banned from martyrologies, this figure still remains part of the culture in question, which displays traces of the persistence of the curiosity, admiration and interest (if not real veneration) raised by the figure of Saint Guinefort even in our times. Contemporary culture tends however to reinterpret the story and the character of Saint Guinefort according to its sensibility. It is particularly interesting to note that the Medieval iconography tended to represent saint Guinefort in an anthropomorphic shape, namely as a character with the muzzle of a dog, but dressed up like a clerk and with an upright human posture. On the contrary, contemporary culture mainly represents this figure as a proper dog, with few conventional attributes evoking its sanctity, such as the nimbus. This could indicate that this culture does not feel a strong need to humanize animals to recognize their sanctity and personhood, but rather tends to broaden these ideas so as to include animals as such, without trying to underplay the differences between humans and non-humans. Moreover, the rediscovery of Saint Guinefort tends to get rid of the thaumaturgic component, in favor of the more successful discourse about the fact that animals are touchstones to evaluate the morality of human beings.

The same ideas are evident for instance in the Italian narrative literature featuring religious themes and representing animals. The most relevant animal is perhaps the dog, due to its close cohabitation with humans.[14] Indeed, there are several dogs represented as saints in Italian literature. One of the more interesting examples is Dino Buzzati's tale «Il cane che ha visto Dio»

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[12] This story has variants in different cultures. On Guinefort's cult, see Schmitt (1979).

[13] For instance on the Internet: <https://www.thegreyhoundsaint.com/>; <http://www.ilrumoredellutto.com/?s=guinefort>.

[14] Cf. Anselmi (2010). Eco (2017: 202) also devotes special attention to the dog: when he looks into the history of the ideas about animal languages from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages, due to the width of the matter, he chooses to focus on the dog only, recognized by many thinkers as the animal with the highest degree of intelligence. A further proof of the close relationship between dogs and sanctity is the fact that dogs often appear as attributes of the saints: the iconographic dictionary of saints by Furia (2020) associates the dog to 14 saints.

(The dog who saw God), in the collection *La Boutique del mistero*, first published in 1968.

This tale, which is probably reminiscent of Saint Roch's legend, narrates the story of Galeone, the dog of a hermit. The latter survives in the wilderness, ignored by the people of the nearby village and fed by his dog, who daily goes to the village and brings him bread. The two seem to be frequently visited by the deity in the form of luminous rays that are well visible from the village. After the death of the hermit, on a cold winter night, the dog starts living in the village. The villagers, however, despising religion and living according to a mean and hypocritical conduct, feel uneasy with the dog, who seems to be present and to observe them every time they act immorally. The villagers feel as the "saint" dog, with its silent presence, is judging them; in the night, they fear that its phosphorescent eyes bring their sins to light, and so they are ashamed, angry, and worried:

… They are afraid of a dog, not of being bitten, they are simply afraid that the dog will judge them badly. […] It was slavery. Even at night you couldn't breathe. What a burden, the presence of God for those who do not desire it. And God was not here an uncertain fairy tale, he did not sit in the church among candles and incense, but went up and down the houses, carried, so to speak, by a dog. A tiny piece of the Creator, the slightest breath, had penetrated Galeone, and through Galeone's eyes he saw, judged, and counted.[15]

Even though the inhabitants of the village detest the dog, each one, in secret, starts hypocritically to feed and flatter the animal. When the dog dies, its body is brought back by all the villagers in procession to the hermit's shelter, but there the community discovers the skeleton of a dog that died next to the hermit's, thus making the mystery of the presence of Galeone even more disquieting. When they come back to the village, despite an apparent relief for the death of this supernatural dog, the villagers are upset, and they do not come back to the old habits, since in the meantime the silent gaze of the animal had led them to change their behavior and become better.

In this case, the dog undoubtedly represents a higher degree of perfection, and he takes up the actantial role of Sender, since he apparently sanctions the actions of the human beings in force of its spiritual and moral superiority, which are also connected to its being closer to the deity, which it, as the tale's title suggests, has "seen" together with the holy hermit.

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[15] In order to give the reader the possibility to appreciate the original language of the quoted passages from literary works, I provide my translation into English but also the original text in the footnotes. «… hanno paura di un cane, non di essere addentati, semplicemente hanno paura che il cane li giudichi male. […] Era una schiavitù. Neanche di notte si riusciva a respirare. Che peso, la presenza di Dio per chi non la desidera. E Dio non era qui una favola incerta, non se ne stava appartato in chiesa fra ceri e incenso, ma girava su e giù per le case, trasportato, per dir così, da un cane. Un pezzettino piccolissimo di Creatore, un minimo fiato, era penetrato in Galeone, e attraverso gli occhi di Galeone vedeva, giudicava, segnava in conto» (Buzzati 1991: 94).

Other works of contemporary Italian literature make a less explicit reference to the religious imagery, but nonetheless describe animals, and in particular dogs, as saints or at least as examples of positive virtues, such as innocence, purity, or at least vitality, triggering the human beings they love to express their affection, and to be better persons. This feature is present in a number of literary works, for instance in Radi (1993) and Matteucci (2016), but is particularly well developed and expressed by Carlo Coccioli, in *Requiem per un cane* (Requiem for a dog). This novel, written in first person, has a strong autobiographical connotation, and expresses the author's sorrow and grief for the death of his beloved dog Fiorello, a white poodle. The following two passages are representative of this sensibility:

Yet I am convinced, and will not cease to be, that my dead dog was a splendid form of life: grave, noble, loving, and pure. I am convinced, and I will not cease to be, that few purities in this world, without knowing it yearning for innocence, equal that which is seen in the meek and sweet eyes of an animal.[16]

[Fiorello] did not give up for a moment that incredible dignity of his: the secret realm of his innocence, the purity. He has given me more than most human beings. To the extent that he gave me kindness, he did not distance me from my fellows, but drew me closer to them. And he taught me [...] a way of living in balance with the essential: a limpid embodiment of nature, my dog communicated to me more spirit of love, paradoxically, than the wise men of this world with whom, living or dead, I have been and am in contact.[17]

Another author particularly relevant for the present purpose is Anna Maria Ortese, journalist and novelist, very active in writing in defense of the animals' rights. Ortese's thought in this respect is based on the idea that animals are *persons*. Indeed, she claims:

I consider Animals to be Small Persons, 'different' brothers of man, creatures with a f a c e [sic.], beautiful and good eyes that express a thought, and a *closed* sensibility, but of the same value as human sensibility and thought, only they express it outside of reason, for which we are known, and incense each other.[18]

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[16]   «Tuttavia son convinto, e non smetterò d'esserlo, che il mio cane morto era una forma splendida della vita: grave, nobile, amorosa, e pura. Son convinto, e non smetterò d'esserlo, che poche purezze in questo mondo, senza saperlo anelante all'innocenza, eguagliano quella che si scorge nei mansueti e soavi occhi d'un animale» (Coccioli 1977: 7).

[17]   «[Fiorello] Non rinunciò un istante a quell'incredibile dignità sua: il segreto reame della sua innocenza, la purezza. M'ha dato più che la maggioranza degli esseri umani. Nella misura in cui mi trasmise benevolenza, non m'allontanò dai miei simili: m'avvicinò ad essi. E m'ha insegnato [...] un modo di vivere in equilibrio con l'essenziale: limpida incarnazione della natura, il mio cane mi comunicò più spirito d'amore, paradossalmente, che i savi di questo mondo con cui, vivi o morti, sono stato e sono in contatto» (Coccioli 1977: 10).

[18]   «Ritengo gli Animali Piccole Persone, fratelli 'diversi' dell'uomo, creature con una f a c c i a, occhi belli e buoni che esprimono un pensiero, e una sensibilità *chiusa*, ma dello stesso valore della sensibilità e il pensiero umano, soltanto lo esprimono al di fuori del raziocinio, per cui noi andiamo noti, e ci incensiamo tra noi» (Ortese 2016: 114).

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The fact of having a face, instead of a "muzzle" is a key feature in the definition of the animals as persons. A same argument, based on etymology, semantics, and philosophy reinterpreted from a semiotic perspective, is proposed by Massimo Leone (2022: 1297), according to which «human animals constitute their visages because they destitute the visages of non-human animals into muzzles»: admitting that animals have a face too (not just a mouth, representing instincts and aggressiveness, but also a gaze, and a language) is intrinsically connected to the fact of recognizing them as subjects and persons, which is a conviction that has to fight against a long lasting and widespread prejudice. Leone indeed concludes that «A new myth of liberation is, therefore, required: one in which Abraham not only substitutes his son Isaac with a ram but then also realizes, unlike in the original biblical tale, that this ram […] shows not a muzzle but a face, and that this face is above all two eyes, and a gaze, and a cry from the depth of being silently affirming: I am not only being, I am language, please respond to me. Please spare me. Please let me live» (Leone 2022: 1297).

In light of this sensibility, it does not appear surprising that in Ortese's discourse animals are quite often represented in martyrological terms. In this author's imagery, the moral wretchedness of humans becomes patent in comparison to the virtues of the animals, unjustly considered and treated as objects. Animals are therefore represented as embodying a sort of universal sanctity, denied and destroyed by humans:

We have become, with time and progress and all the pride of a greedy and unnatural life, real demons, we seem to have come out of the total denial of that holiness – weak or strong – which understands the language of life wherever it speaks, groans or recommends itself. Life is good. Trees and beasts are good, they are creatures, perfect works. Only those—children, old people, women—who receive the friendship and affection of a dog because they are kind, know what a dog, or who, really is. A dog is an angel. His little mind knows only worship.[19]

The parallelism between angels and animals is by the way a relevant theme in theology. From a hierarchic perspective, humans are placed between animals and angels: the firsts are of course in an inferior position compared to angels, but at the same time they have a symmetrical role. Moreover, the hagiographic tradition features angelical apparition in the form of animals.[20]

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[19]  «Siamo diventati, col tempo e il progresso e tutto l'orgoglio di un vivere avido e innaturale, dei veri demoni, sembriamo usciti dalla negazione totale di quella santità – debole o forte che sia – che intende il linguaggio della vita dovunque parli, gema o si raccomandi. La vita è buona. Alberi e bestie sono buoni, sono creature, opere perfette. Solo coloro – bambini vecchi anche donne – che ricevono – perché gentili – l'amicizia e l'affetto di un cane, sanno cosa – o chi – sia veramente un cane. Un cane è un angelo. La sua piccola mente conosce solo l'adorazione» (Ortese 2016: 178).

[20]  For a recent overview and reformulation of this theme, cf. Stanzione and Raimondo (2021). It should however be considered that, in Catholic tradition, animals can also provide a manifestation or an embodiment to evil spirits. It is notorious the Evangelical episode in which, obeying to Jesus' order, demons take possession of a herd of pigs that throw themselves from a cliff. Very frequent in the sacred iconography is the killing of the snake as the embodiment of the devil. This iconography of the snake as a sign of the devil and of the evil to be fought, of course reminiscent of the biblical episode of Adam and Eve, characterizes the representation of many saints, cf. Furia (2020: 125-126).

## 5. Conclusion

Models of sanctity undergo continuous changes, especially in the contemporary age, in which the Church has promoted an inclusive policy of canonization, entailing an exponential multiplication of saints and consequently of models of perfection that they embody. Relevant innovations are for instance the integration of a growing number of lay people among saints, but also the introduction in 2017 of a new case for canonization in addition to the traditional ones (mainly martyrdom and heroicity of virtues), namely the "offering of life", consisting in sacrificing one's life in favor of someone else for a reason that can be ascribed to Christian charity (cf. Ponzo 2023). This opening of Catholic culture is paralleled by a growing tendency to use figures, themes and iconographic models traditionally associated with the representation of saints in the religious context outside the borders of the institutional religion, in the so-called secular culture. All these innovations can be interpreted as signs of the fact that in our age the thresholds of the concept of sanctity are shifting under various and relevant aspects. The representations of animals as saints, the growingly shared conviction about their right to be considered as persons, the fact that some individual animals are considered exemplary characters embodying a particular idea of sanctity, are all clear examples of this kind of perspective.

Taking the cue from of the theories problematizing the relationship between nature and culture as a key topic for zoosemiotics,[21] we can observe that in the culture under consideration different discourses about animals and sainthood coexist. These discourses entail different perspectives on the status of animals (here I focused on the differences in the kind and degree of agency), but find a common feature in the fact that they challenge a static definition of the border between nature and culture, animal and human, as well as the fact of considering the Catholic culture as a whole as "naturalistic".[22] If this component is surely present, and even dominant, the discourses we analyzed show that different perspectives are present as well in this complex and multifaceted culture. Indeed, the discourses about animals and/as saints postulate a moral similarity between humans and animals, as far as some virtues are concerned. In other words, in the axiology of this culture, there is a core of important values – that we can identify with moral virtues, such as fidelity, generosity, etc. – that are recognized to be the prerogative not only of human beings, but of some animals too.[23] This perspective is interesting from a semiotic point of view: if human sciences and zoosemiotics have mainly tried to define the differences (and similarities) between humans and animals in cognitive, physiological, linguistic and even pathemic terms, the culture under consideration offers an alternative perspective, namely a moral one. The

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[21]  Cf. in particular Sebeok (1990), Martinelli (2010), Marrone and Mangano (2018).

[22]  I use this term in the sense proposed by Descola (2005). On the western (and Catholic) tendency to naturalism, see Marrone (2024: 215-218).

[23]  Parallely, in this tradition, other animals are considered to embody and allegorically represent vices as well.

discourses about the morality of animals and humans constitute today a fertile ground for semiotic research, also because this perspective allows the comparative study of further ideas of moral perfection. For instance, a similar comparison appears very diffused in science-fiction narratives, in which the moral quality of non-human forms of life both forms a continuum with respect to the human one and serves as a touchstone to evaluate the latter.[24] It is perhaps not surprising that traces of an imaginary representing artificial forms of life with hagiographic traits can be found in different discourses circulating even in mainstream culture.[25] The study of these emerging representations surely provides a parallel that sheds new light on the reevaluation of animals, contributing to frame the latter in a highly dynamic context, characterized by rapid change and broadness of views.

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[24]    See in this regard Bernardelli (2024).

[25]    Some examples of iconographic hybridization of technological and religious imagery about saints can be found on the Internet, among which: <https://www.brothers-brick.com/2017/12/23/robot-saints-go-marching/>; <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/santo-il-robot-che-aiuta-a-pregaregabriele-trovato>.

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# About Normative Sanctities and Dissident Spiritualities

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**Abstract**
This work provides an overview into the semiotic study of Spanish mysticism (Golden Age), and distinguishes between normative mysticism, characterized by adherence to established canon and literary tradition, and another one, which deviates from the norm, particularly in the context of mysticism in New Spain. The paper discusses the case of *beatas*, women who were often at odds with ecclesiastical authorities due to their unconventional experiences and practices. These spiritual anomalies that germinated since that century grew exponentially towards the 20th century, so much that today religious practices and spiritualities in Mexico often seem to be made "à la carte", some even associated with criminal lifestyles. These lines expose the challenges faced by a semiotician, especially one inclined towards structural semiotics, in analyzing religious manifestations and emphasize some methodological and interdisciplinary problems.

**Key Words**
Semiotics; Mysticism; Norm; Abnormal; Religion.

**Contents**
1. Introduction
2. The mysticism and its regulation
3. Semiotization of normative mysticism (mystical discourse)
4. Abnormal mysticism (discursive "disengagements" and mixed-mysticisms)
5. Marginal spiritualities and "à la carte"
6. Conclusions
Bibliography

## 1. Introduction

The work I present below is a passage through my line of research and the results it has yielded at different times over almost twenty years. For a long time, I devoted myself to the semiotic study of the written texts of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross to unravel and propose a Spanish mystical discourse that, after many trials and obstacles, became standardized and typical in Hispanic culture, that is, it was shaped as a model of religiosity (Solís 2016). From this type of discourse, I was able to contrast others – from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth – that followed accurately the canon or presented some singular variants or seemed to present certain "anomalies" and go against the norm (Solís 2008).

Now, within my general interests in religion, I was inevitably confronted with its contemporary manifestations, more specifically those that emerged from the second half of the twentieth century. In the culture to which I belong, the Mexican culture, new religiosities – many of them evidently syncretic – and novel spiritualities began to emerge, some of them even associated with criminal lifestyles (Solís 2021).

The challenges that a semiotician – particularly one of a structural inclination – must face in the analysis of significant manifestations from the religious domain, are of different natures. The first one is, in my opinion, the approach to signs, symbols, texts, and practices that give the most meaning to human existence and have become, in turn, the object of study of zeal disciplines with a long tradition. What can a semiotician say before the depth of exegetical treatises? How to argue from a science of language before theological dissertations? The complications are, then, of a methodological and interdisciplinary nature, or better yet, in the "alliance" between two disciplines or epistemes (Darrault-Harris 2007: 38). And although these are some difficulties, they are also advantages, they are a handhold for the researcher, because what better than to take advantage of the delimitation and previous work.

However, it is less difficult to return to and remain within the traditional texts already delimited and even studied, but when faced with singular, novel, different or "mixed" religiosities or spiritualities, which also manifest themselves not only "on paper", the challenge for a semiotician is also greater.

So, in the following lines and to the extent space allows me, I will return to some of the results of the works I have referred to above, to present some ideas of how semiotics can contribute to the study of models of religiosity and how it also allows us to recognize the variants and even the marked oppositions to these models.

## 2. Mysticism and its regulation

Among the different Eastern and Western mysticisms, it is the Spanish of the Golden Age that has become typical, not only because of its expressions but also because it has become an authentic science of saying, as De Certeau has considered in his emblematic work on the subject (1993). In other words,

we can find not only testimonies or poems but also didactic texts, explanations and even manuals.

By definition, mysticism is an extraordinary experience, the experience of being facing – or with – something or someone that surpasses the physical world and all understanding (LeLoup 1994), a transcendent entity which for theistic religions is the divinity. The mystical experience is indescribable – and for that reason *secret* – , an experience of union between man and God, thrilling and ecstatic, which is generally accompanied by other "graces" such as the "glossolalia" studied in our scientific environment by Nathalie Dubleu-mortier (1997) and Ivan Darrault-Harris (2023), and levitation, a subject that has been analyzed in detail by Jenny Ponzo (2023).

We can affirm that not all mysticism is religious (if we think of non-deist spiritualities and especially if we pay attention to the Latin roots of *religare* and *religens*)[1] and not every religious is a mystic, just as not all mystics have achieved sanctity (even if they have been recognized as Servants of God, Venerables and even Blessed). In the case of Teresa and John everything is fulfilled. Because they are recognized as mystics, saints, and doctors of the church, by their experiences, their acts and ... their texts.

The mystical experience is, then, unexplained; however, it has been written. Over the many texts that describe the mystical experience, we can find a very particular way of expression, with some lexical forms, rhetorical figures, and a singular narrative, some affective or passional states, and a particularly interesting state called by the experts on the subject, the theopathic state, which is not only the socialization of the experience, but the passage to the act in favor of a community, expressed as evangelization, missions (Bastide 1996: 112). This is the ultimate expression of the "heroic virtues" aimed at beatification and sanctity.

For a language scientist and even more for a semiotician "by their texts you will recognize them", and this was surely well known also to those in charge of examining, regulating, sanctioning, or prohibiting the growing religious textual network in the sixteenth century. Thus, we know that Teresa of Avila paid special attention to her experience and the description of it, for example in *The book of her life* (2006: 31), she uses some rhetorical strategies aimed at convincing her readers about the validity and orthodoxy of her writing, all this under the supervision of Pedro de Alcántara, her confessor and spiritual guide, and we know that John of the Cross – in a meta discursive exercise – wrote the *comments* or *warnings* explaining the meaning and function of his poetic texts and arguing in their defense in front of the Holy Office.

Francisco de Osuna, in his turn, has recommended in *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* not to fall into error of interpretation and to take care of any expression of spirituality. And of course, in the same way the normative entities and different mechanisms of examination and analysis (qualifiers, commissioners, examiners) and apparatuses such as the Inquisition.

Now, if we affirm, as Paul Ricoeur (1992: 52) did, that the different spirit-

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[1] *Religare* as human disposition and attitude of re-uniting with the divinity. *Religens* as "duties to the gods", also organization of a community that shares an attitude toward the sacred.

ualities are expressed in different ways and that we can access them through their language and texts, it is evident that semiotics – and in our case, structural semiotics – can be very useful. In my case it was useful to identify, differentiate, understand and explain mysticism in terms of practice and significant experience from its modes of verbal expression – for this reason my restriction at that time to its written texts.

## 3. Semiotization of normative mysticism (mystical discourse)

Based on Ricoeur's suggestions and the observation of a textual *corpus* – paradigmatic, representative, and homogeneous – , I have proposed a general model of mystical discourse. As I said above, the mystical discourse presents a general narrative of three sequential stages. The first one I called the stage of negation – which coincides with asceticism –, in this first sequence the mystic, or subject in semiotic terms, tries to separate himself gradually from social life, from material possessions, from bodily desires or pleasures, from memory, understanding and will, either by depriving them of value, inverting values, or even destroying that value. To the second stage I gave the name of affective states, because in this stage the mystic, upon encountering the divinity and later separating from it, experiences ecstasy, ambivalent love and melancholy. Finally, the third stage is that of reincorporation or theopathic state of which I spoke briefly before.

The mystical discourse also comes from a religious tradition (the Song of Songs, the Pauline letters, medieval mysticism and spirituality manuals) and a literary tradition (popular and cultured pastoral poetry) which is reflected in the metrics, the lexicon (amatory, bucolic, from the emblematic tradition, from the field of hunting), the rhetorical figures (enumeration, antithesis, oxymoron, parallelisms) and the syntactic constructions. The texts of the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century are written in prose (didactic or descriptive) or verse. In the first case, they present a singular "withdrawal" or identification between explicit author, explicit narrator and character. One of the best forms of this "withdrawal" is the autobiography. In the second case, that is, in poetic texts, there is a direct style.

A good example of how this "norm" crossed the religious and literary tradition until the twentieth century is Concepción Urquiza – Mexican poetess of the early twentieth century – , who presents in her poems not only the subjects, the constructions, and the vocabulary of mysticism, but even she follows a dialogue with it. As we see, some of Urquiza's verses are a response to those of John of the Cross.

| Juan de la Cruz | Concepción Urquiza |
|---|---|
| ¿Por qué, pues has llagado<br>aqueste corazón, no le sanaste?<br>Y, pues me le has robado,<br>¿por qué así le dejaste<br>y no tomas **el robo que robaste**? | No devuelvas **el robo que robaste**;<br>  guarda el amor que con amor venciste,<br>y el corazón que con dolor ganaste. |
| Debajo del manzano,<br>allí conmigo fuiste desposada,<br>allí te di la mano,<br>y fuiste reparada<br>donde **tu madre fuera violada**. | Te espero en el recinto misterioso<br>donde en dolor **mi madre me engendrara**. |

## 4. Abnormal mysticism (discursive "disengagements" and mixed mysticisms)

In a second time in my research and in an exercise to understand the incidence and textual differences and meaning between standard mysticism and the variations of mysticism in America, I reviewed an extensive *corpus* of texts and their respective studies. What I found is that mysticism in New Spain is manifested in two ways: one that follows the established canon loyally, another one (original and unique), in contrast, totally out of step with the established canon.[2]

We can find conventual texts that, although they introduce some slight nuances, are faithful to the norm, that is, they are very similar to the texts of the mystics from the Spanish Golden Century – beyond their literary or stylistic value –. This is not strange if we consider that these texts were the pillow book for the religious of the new Spain and that, in all cases, they were written at the request of the ecclesiastical authorities. However, the texts that did incur in "anomalies" were usually written by the so-called *beatas* and precisely for that reason were a problem, at least for the Mexican Holy Office.

And it is just because of the marginal character of these women – which have their antecedents in the medieval Beguines of the twelfth century – and their practices, the relative freedom they possess, their distance from the watchful eye of the clergy, and their non-institutional ways of manifesting their experiences that they are a threat to the ecclesiastical authority with whom they have had strong conflicts since their beginnings.

The case of these *beatas* is just between the normative mysticism (emerged from the peninsular culture of the sixteenth century) and the abnormal phenomena that will be exposed below. A *beata* is a woman who does not belong to the religious institution and she is neither part of daily lay life, nor professed, nor married, and if she is, she is chaste. In New Spain, in addition, that women were creole or *mestizas* (a mixed race), neither peninsular Spanish, nor indigenous.

Many of these *beatas* were investigated by the Inquisition, tried, and punished for the religious "anomalies" they presented. They were accused of being *alumbradas* or *ilusas* and jailed for fake or heresy, and for their excesses.

Teresa of Avila, who did not ignore this phenomenon, introduced two terms to refer to false ecstasy: *rabiamiento* and *abobamiento* (instead of *arrobamiento* and *embebimiento*).[3] These terms refer to a single type of experience considered false or dangerous, but in fact, for each stage of the path of mysticism, for each affective state and for each "grace" there is a false equivalent. Thus, asceticism is opposed to the annihilation of the body, love to lust, melancholy which comes from the "flower of blood" is opposed to that which

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[2]    As was also pointed out, from another theoretical perspective, by Lavin and Loreto (2002, 2006), Rubial García (2006) and Zayas (2017).

[3]    The *arrobamiento* is the ecstasy and the *embebimiento* is one of the effects, that is being dedicated and full of God. On the other side, *rabiamiento* refers to rage and *abobamiento* refers to foolishness.

has its origin in the "dregs of blood", the theopathic state to the apathy (the religious acedia, which can lead to sin); visions are opposed to obsessions and body postures to contortions.

Let's look at the example of Josefa de san Luis Beltrán, a *Beata* born in Puebla city, Mexico. By her are preserved five hundred seventy-three pages under a large title, in english something like *The fourty-five stations cleaned up by Don Joseph Bruñón de Vértiz from the drafts he wrote of what he heard by Josefa in her raptures.*[4] According to Bruñón, who was the *beatas*'s notary, he transcribed what he witnessed for two and a half years of Josefa's religious and ecstatic experiences. She revised and corrected the writings until she was satisfied. Several times, Josefa in her raptures has produced in (or from) her body different voices that simulated a dialogue between different entities (in one of them, for example, the devil and Jesus Christ). During those public ecstasis, Josefa also used a series of strategies to stage her experience, making use of gestures and body movements and interacting with the audience, making them participants in her dialogue scene.

From the forty-five stations I focused on the 4th, precisely the one that presents a dialogue between Josefa herself, Jesus Christ and the devil. A first problem I faced is the fact that in this text there is no narrator's voice, what appears is a direct dialogue, which also simulates oral discourse. We are, in the same way, "contaminated" by the information that Bruñón offers us: he has written what he has witnessed: Josefa's body inhabited by other voices that interact with her and create the dialogue that Bruñón himself writes. We are faced, then, not only with difficulties of the text and the story it presents, but also with a conflict of levels of semiotic pertinence, since the fact that Josefa has made an enunciation in act, immersed in a predicative scene, and Bruñón has tried to describe this act in writing, places us in different situations, different signifying manifestations, in short, different texts.

Thus, we can see that: 1. Josefa's speech is not a first-hand source, it is presented as a mediatized text. 2. Josefa's discourse manifests itself – before the written version – verbally and corporeally, and different voices came from different actors but in the same body. 3. In the case of Josefa, a great importance is given to the corporal staging. 4. Josefa is inhabited by Jesus and by the devil. 5. Josefa not only externalizes her experience but makes it public.[5]

Then, Josefa does not follow the model of Spanish mysticism but introduces foreign elements that seem to belong to another discursive system that may well be that of demonic possession (De Certeau 2005).

We could affirm, then, that it is a frontier discourse, but it is so for other reasons as well, since Josefa's discourse is born of extra-conventual life, outside of any ecclesiastical institution; for this reason, it becomes a phenomenon of marginal, non-institutional character, which resulted in a threat and a constant conflict with the ecclesiastical authority.

Finally, Josefa de San Luis Beltrán was charged in 1649 as an *alumbrada*, thanks, perhaps, to the presence of Bruñón and twelve other men who fol-

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[4]   Archivo General de la Nación (general archive of the nation), volume 1503, Inquisition.

[5]   Unlike Teresa of Avila, who tried to hold ecstasies because she was "very sorry" that they happened to her in public.

lowed her as apostles. However, due to the characteristics of the experiences of this *beata*, I dare say she could have been judged as illusory and deluded.[6]

Another notable case of "abnormality" or false mysticism is that of Ana de Zayas. This laywoman, despite her apparent orthodoxy and impeccable behavior, was investigated by the Inquisition due to her written texts, because in them, she showed marks of a Neoplatonism connected with the *alumbrismo* an *dexamiento*.[7] Ana wrote with absolute freedom, and sought, under an air of superiority, to indoctrinate even members of the clergy. The best example of this woman's writing is the "Danza moral o juego de maroma" (something like "the moral dancing or the game of somersault").

This text of 126 verses, although it respects the themes and some figures of mysticism (the rapture, the *imitatio Christi*), presents a multiplicity of mixtures at different levels, from the prosodic (free verse) to the thematic (the virtues, the dance, the temptation).

The poem was written by Ana from a vision during a rapture and describes the dance of the virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance) to the sound and rhythm of the "angaripola", a dance of doubtful origin (probably African).

The most particular thing in this poem is the appearance of a word that was decisive in Ana's judgment: the word "dexarse", as we see below:

Ay, le, le
y yo les diré por qué
pues Dios me dice en la D
ay
dexarse en manos de Dios.[8]

This word, condensed in meaning, is not pertinent and leads us into another sphere of meaning, precisely the heterodox sphere, particularly that of heresy and the way of life of the so-called "dejados".

One small word could, then, make the difference, as Juan de Cazalla knew in his *Lumbre del alma* which, in contrast to John of the Cross with his *Llama de amor*, could not avoid the suspicion from the Spanish Holy Office.

This is what happened to Ana de Zayas, or was it rather the hint «To preach virtues and exercise vices is to have lost / the good sense, because it is impossible that none pay attention / to the eloquent doctrine in view of the licentious life» addressed to Fray Alonso de Jesús, to whom Ana dedicates the poem?

Now, we can see that alternative or dissident spiritualities and religions emerged since the sixteenth century in New Spain, now Mexico, associated

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[6]  Caro Baroja offers us an extensive and detailed study on the differences and nuances of each spirituality in his major work (Caro Baroja 1985).

[7]  As pointed out by Zayas (2017), sometimes the same term, such as *alumbrado*, was used indistinctly and it is necessary a more detailed typification and a rigorous analysis of the texts that were labeled as heterodox and to understand that these signs of heterodoxy are not in all cases a spirituality of lesser value.

[8]  Ay, le, le / and I´ll tell you why / because God tells me in D/ ah, be left in God's hands.

in those early centuries and thanks to the caste system, to frontier lifestyles, mixed or *mestizas* forms or fully marginal expressions.[9]

## 5. Marginal spiritualities and "à la carte"

As we well know, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, a strong trend towards secularization and the emergence of new religious movements began in our West, some of Christian or Protestant origin, but others very distant from the different instituted religions, especially from those with Abrahamic tradition. Champion (1997) describes the birth of either parallel religions or "religions à la carte", the latter for me are rather de-institutionalized and mixed spiritualities, although with vestiges of the institution, that respond to individual or minority group needs.

Mexico was no exception, because it also followed both parallel spiritualities and "à la carte". After the Cristero War (1926-1929) – from which cults, symbols and saints reaffirmed Catholicism – the phenomenon of religiosities or spiritualities that were partially or totally opposed to Catholicism reemerged. Thus, for example, in those years, catholic figures such as José Sánchez del Río,[10] faithful to the model of the catholic martyr, was opposed to José Fidencio Constantino[11] (Niño Fidencio), in whose rituals and beliefs pre-Hispanic and Catholic components were mixed.

Of the multiple possibilities, I approached since 2018, almost by chance, spiritualities arising from or associated with delinquency and organized crime, that is, to a way of life that in principle is marginal and peripheral to the rest of a culture, because of its character of illegality but that, in the case of Mexico, found its most powerful form in drug trafficking, becoming central and transverse. We could think that, to subjects marginalized by society and institutions, or who perform illicit or illegal acts, correspond deities of the same nature.

Nowadays, within the various criminal groups, we find cults such as Santa Muerte (Lady of Holy Death), the "santón" Jesús Malverde, the "Angelito Negro" (little black Angel) and Juan Soldado (John the Soldier). Some of these cults, due to the number of their members, have tried to "regulate" and "institute" themselves, such is the case of the cult of Santa Muerte, which in 1999 tried in a "covert" way to be registered as a religion, but the government found some irregularities and denied it formal recognition.

Now, regarding these spiritualities, some more distant from the religious institution than others, some more syncretic than others, several questions can be asked: how are they manifested and registered? Do their discursive

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[9] We know that in Spain there were many cases of varied heterodox spiritualities, many of them associated with the nascent Protestantism, Judaism or Islam or, in other cases, forms of syncretism with other ancient philosophies.

[10] Cristero from Michoacan who was tortured and executed by the military at the age of 14, beatified in 2005 and canonized in 2016.

[11] Healer from the North of Mexico. According to popular knowledge, President Plutarco Elías Calles, head of the war against the Catholics, was one of his patients.

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and textual structures are similar in any way to the models to which I have referred? Are their experiences similar to canonical religious experiences, and do they include the mystical experience, a subject that has occupied me incessantly? And, finally, how far or how close are they to the religions we know?

The first point to be questioned is the definition of religion (from its *religens* and *raligare* roots), since in most of these spiritualities there is a rather lax duty to the divinity[12] and in other cases the link (re-ligare) to God is not such, even though many of its figures are in the place of divinity.[13] The greatest difficulty is found in ambivalent cults, as in the case of the Templars of Michoacán.[14]

One obstacle in observing these manifestations of spirituality is the fact that there are very few primary sources, although there are extensive studies and fictional narratives (in which these popular spiritualities appear surrounded by quotations from philosophers, foreignisms and an unlikely cosmopolitan atmosphere). We found few testimonies, because the zeal of the proselytes of these cults does not allow much approach because they belong to the domain of what Lomnitz (2023) calls "negative sovereignty" (which is opposed to the predominant morality) and "illicit economies", consequently rejected and persecuted. Thus, a first difference with the texts to which I referred at the beginning of this work is that, from the "à la carte" spiritualities, there is no eagerness to explain the experiences nor a systematization by those who have lived them.

Despite these difficulties, the semiotician can rely on these texts – unwritten and sometimes non-verbal – to approach the understanding of these spiritualities. In the case we will focus on now, I have resorted to the survey of some testimonies that have been made from anthropology, that is, I stick to a certain convention and to the disciplinary choice that others have already made. I refer to the case of the cult of Santa Muerte, which seems to be an echo of pre-Hispanic cults forbidden during the Colony (the figure with which it is presented), plus some Afro-descendant rituals (offerings) and a clear syncretism with Catholicism (the rosary, processions, novena, the mass and altars).

As in religious mysticism, Santa Muerte[15] devotees have visions or witness miraculous apparitions, and it is they themselves who evaluate whether that experience is sacred or otherwise (Perdigón 2008: 81); therefore, there is no "authority" evaluating the experience.

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[12]  For example, in the devotion to Santa Muerte, devotees can even personalize the figures that represent her and ask for all kinds of things, but not stop worshipping her.

[13]  The devotees of the Angelito Negro (Little Black Angel) are very clear about the opposition between God and the Devil and know why and how they bind themselves to the latter, who is not God but possesses certain power. In the case of Santa Muerte, some devotees ask God's permission to worship her and get away from Him.

[14]  Spiritual movement founded by Nazario Moreno "San Nazario" (1970-2014), leader of the cartel La Familia Michoacana, which is governed by precepts similar to those of Catholicism.

[15]  The first records of this cult as such come from the second half of the 20th century in Catemaco, Veracruz. Some authors believe that the origin is in the state of Hidalgo. As I have mentioned, its antecedent is found in some colonial beliefs and practices, such as that of the "good death". Currently, the cult of Santa Muerte has spread to several cities in Mexico, Guatemala, Paraguay, Argentina and the United States (especially in California). Despite its territorial extension and the growing number of followers, the leaders of Catholicism condemned this cult in 2016.

In an anonymous small fanzine that circulates popularly, Santa Muerte is described as: «A spiritual entity created by God himself, for the benefit of the human being, also considered by some mystics, shamans and healers of our country as an intermediary between God almighty and the human being.»

We can observe that the experience of God is mediated by this "spiritual entity" that, having been created by God, becomes one more of the "creatures" but of a spiritual nature, therefore it is not a state but an anthropomorphic figure, evaluated by mystics, shamans and healers, actors that appear undifferentiated in these lines.

The experience that some proselytes have had of Santa Muerte is narrated as follows:[16]

At first I was afraid, but I did my research and started coming to the Santa Muerte rosaries. I feel calm every time I come. I leave everything outside. Since I enter the sanctuary I only listen to her songs, her rosary; I am happy when I leave and even my headache goes away. Many people have seen the Saint, but I have not had the joy. But when I sing her songs I feel that she approaches me and touches me; it makes my skin crawl, it is something very beautiful, it is like being in a bubble, in a cloud.

In this short paragraph, we see elements typical of Catholicism such as the practice of the rosary, the sanctuary and the effect on the worshpper. The singularity of this text is found in the last lines, in the moment of the encounter between the devotee and Santa Muerte since it is a sensitive experience in which touch and the bodily reaction it provokes predominate. It is not the ecstasy of mysticism, in which body and soul are invaded by pleasure, nor the visions described by Teresa of Avila of an intellectual nature, in which the "eyes of the soul" participate.[17]

Another testimony tells us:

People who are extrasensory perceive energies, for example, I have felt the Santa and my blood pressure has dropped, my body has become cold as if I were dead; I bristle, it makes me itch, as if ants were walking on my skin, as if my back was being blown. Those are also the classic issues of when you were next to an entity that is traveling, an energy of someone who has just died; a tense cold environment, the energy goes on the rampage.

The bodily effects of feeling Santa Muerte are: low blood pressure, cold body, stinging and shivering (bristling), very different from the effects that mystics like Teresa of Avila describe: a very great and soft delight, a pleasurable faintness.[18] Some other testimonies claim to have seen Santa Muerte as

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[16] https://www.vice.com/es/article/aeje5e/testimonios-de-seguidores-de-la-santa-muerte

[17] Augustine of Hippo ( Book XII of *Genesis to the letter*) and John of the Cross (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, chapter two) made a differentiation between natural and supernatural visions, which could be corporeal, imaginary and intellectual. The last ones, the intellectual ones, were the truly divine ones, while the corporeal and imaginary ones were dangerous because the Devil could take advantage of them for trickery.

[18] Teresa of Avila describes in detail the effects of the ecstasy or encounter of the soul with God

shadows («I saw clearly that it was the shadow of a person») while Teresa of Avila describes in her visions having seen the light without seeing it.

To be able to delimit the cult of Santa Muerte accurately, to differentiate well the elements of diverse traditions that are mixed and to understand the spiritual experience of its followers, we should have a more extensive corpus, more "fixed", less "evanescent". In spite of these obstacles, we can now make some provisional hypotheses about the meaning of this belief, and we can also realize its remoteness – greater than that of the texts of the seventeenth-century blessed women – from the standard texts of the religious mystics.

## 6. Conclusions

Finally, I could say that the problems I have faced in the analysis of religious texts have been, first, of an interdisciplinary nature, because it is difficult to dialogue with these other points of view of long tradition. However, the security provided by these studies are an axis and a north for the vision of the semiotician. In addition, studying texts written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave me a temporal and cultural distance that allowed me a good distance to observe them.

The texts to which I referred towards the end of my paper, those of spiritualities within the criminal world, present not only problems of a methodological nature, but also call into question my ethos as a researcher. Not only I am confronted with texts of other expressive substances and in continuous expansion and transversality, but also with texts that are non-canonical and precisely linked to organized crime. Although understanding and explaining is not justifying.

Now, what is the usefulness of a semiotic analysis of the texts I have presented? Semiotic analysis is useful to understand the modes of expression of religiosity or spirituality, the effect of meaning that the texts produce, and to envisage their enunciators and even to the forms of life that sustain them. To differentiate how close or distant the various religions or spiritualities are to each other, which ones stick to the instituted religions and, even, to observe how a single religion is transformed through time. The semiotic glace gives us, as Floch (1990: 3-14) said: «more understanding, more differentiation, and more pertinence» of the meaning of religion.

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# The Mirror, the Self(ie) and the New Sacred
## Bodies, Objects and Figures of the Contemporary "Cult of the Self"

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**Abstract**
This paper investigates the "cult of the Self" pervading contemporary mediatised cultures, adopting a semiotic approach. More specifically, it draws on the analysis of the fictional case of *Ionismo*, ironically represented by director Alessandro Aronadio in the movie *Just Believe* (orig. *IO C'È*, 2018), to shed new light on the figure of the "influencer" (focusing in particular on the emblematic case of Chiara Ferragni), which has become fundamental in contemporary mediascapes. Thus it problematises the *bodies*, as well as the *sacred objects*, and more generally the *figures*, of today's cult of the Self, with specific reference to the "generative model" suggested by *Just Believe*, as well as to the understanding of the sacred in the "postsecular" era.

**Key Words**
Cult; Self; Media; Influencer; Semiotics

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## 1. Introduction: Postsecularism, Selfism and Social Media

In a 2021 article published on "The New York Times", provocatively entitled *The Empty Religions of Instagram*, Leigh Stein wrote:

> Twenty-two percent of millennials are not affiliated with a specific religion. We are known as religious "nones." The Pew Research Center found that the number of nones in the population as a whole increased nine percentage points from 2009 to 2019. The main reasons that nones are unaffiliated are that they question religious teachings, or they don't like the church's stance on social issues. But are we truly nonreligious, or are our belief systems too bespoke to appear on a list of major religions […]? […] Our new belief system is a blend of left-wing political orthodoxy, intersectional feminism, self-optimization, therapy, wellness, astrology and Dolly Parton.[1] And we've found a different kind of clergy: personal growth influencers. (Stein 2021)

In fact, the global decline of traditional religions seems to proceed at a rather rapid pace, with an increasing number of people identifying themselves as "nonreligious".[2] However, as remarked by Stein and supported by various scholars (see, for instance, Taylor 2007), rather than disappearing, the sacred and spiritual dimension has been "relocated" in the social and individual sphere. As a result, we have entered a new era, which has been labelled *postsecular*,[3] since it is marked by a «condition of conscious contemporarily/co-existence of religious and secular worldviews» (Stoeckl 2011: 3), entailing a permanent tension between them.

Such a tension is particularly evident at the level of the religious experience (to which Stoeckl refers by adopting the expression «phenomenological postsecular», *ivi*: 5), which has become highly personal, individualistic and spontaneous. It is in this respect that Charles Taylor (2007) introduced the idea of the "buffered" self, intended as the «possibility […] of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind» (*ivi*: 38) typical of the «secular age» (as the title of his book recites), as opposed to the «"porous" self of the earlier enchanted world» (*ibid.*), in which transcendent forces could shape people's lives (cf. Taylor 2008).

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[1]   American singer-songwriter and actress, she has always been considered a trendsetter. She is also known for the "Dolly Parton Challenge", which spread on social media as a result of her 2020 viral four-frame post displaying various faces of her personality, including «her LinkedIn vibe, her Facebook side, her Instagram swagger, and her Tinder sass» (Zapata 2020).

[2]   See in particular the results of the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Studies 2007 and 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>, to which Stein herself makes reference in the above-mentioned article, as well as those of the World Value Survey, conducted between 2007 and 2019, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

[3]   The use, meaning and validity of the concept of "postsecular" has been highly debated, since its first formulation by Jürgen Habermas (2008, 2011) to the widespread idea of the "post(-)secular" as a denial, and an overcoming, of the theory of secularization. We adopt here the definition provided by Stoeckl (2011; cf. Stoeckl, Rosati and Holton 2012) as it favours a tensive view (i.e. postsecularism as a condition of permanent tension) over the idea of a succession (before-after, regime-change).

Within this framework, various forms of "Selfism",[4] intended as a particular "worship of the Self", have increasingly imposed themselves, strengthening a trend already initiated in the 20th century, but also resulting in new transformations, which have increasingly raised concern and criticism in various fields, from religious thinking to scholarly reflection (especially as related to philosophy and psychology).

Drawing on these considerations, this paper intends to investigate the "cult of the Self" pervading contemporary mediatised cultures, adopting a semiotic approach. More specifically, it draws on the analysis of the fictional case of *Ionismo* (Italian for "Selfism"), ironically represented by director Alessandro Aronadio in the movie *Just Believe* (original title *IO C'È*, 2018), to shed new light on the figure of the *influencer*, which has become fundamental in contemporary mediascapes and cultures. Thus it problematises the *bodies*, as well as the *sacred objects*, and more generally the *figures*, of today's secularised cult of the Self, with specific reference to the "generative model" suggested by *Just Believe* and the understanding of the sacred in the postsecular era.

## 2. *Just Believe*: The Generative Path of Selfism

In order to save his B&B from bankruptcy, Massimo Alberti (personified by actor Edoardo Leo) decides to transform it in a place of worship, where to host his «guests» – as opposed to his former «customers» –, in exchange for tax-free donations – instead of the taxed payments he used to collect. Rejected by the representatives of all the main religious communities in the city, he founds his own cult: *Ionismo* (Italian for "Selfism"), namely «the first religion that puts the Self [*IO*, instead of *Dio*, "God"] at the centre of the universe» (MYmovies 2018, our translation).

But how can one establish a new, credible cult? This is precisely the question that Massimo tries to answer with the help of his sister Adriana (Margherita Buy), an accountant, and the writer and intellectual Marco Cilio (Giuseppe Battiston). They do so adopting what we could define a "structuralist" perspective, that is to say, by identifying and scrutinising the main "units" of the most traditional religious systems (i.e. Judaism, Christianism – more specifically Catholicism – and Islam) and shaping their new cult through an operation of *bricolage* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1990),[5] in the declared aim to make it *differ* from them. Thus, for instance, when they have to define «who is God for [them]» (Marco, 26' 20" – 26' 22"), Adriana says: «this thing about the entity above us, looking at us, judging us and then punishing us [...] always scared me a lot» (26' 52" – 26' 58"). Massimo agrees, further

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[4]  Officially introduced by Paul Vitz in his book *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* [1977] (1994), the term is here considered in its general and literal sense, as a growing "cult of the Self", without any particular reference to the psychological sphere or specific authors or doctrines.

[5]  As it clearly emerges when, during the initial brainstorming involving the three characters, Marco says: «To invent a religion, we must first understand how a religion works. [...] We'll take a little here, a little there. We'll make a mix, possibly in good taste, but a mix» (25' 18" – 25' 57"). The English translation of this and other citations from the movie is taken from the English subtitles.

insisting on the idea that everybody can be God: «I want to decide, ok? Each of us is God, one democratic thing at least» (27' 06" – 27' 11"). Marco finally intervenes to legitimise this idea and further elaborate on it, hence defining the fundamental basis of Selfism:

> Even in the roughness, there's something interesting here, in the reasoning. This idea, for example, to make someone else decide how I should behave, is a little out of fashion, a little ancient. [...] Because you are your own God. [...] I... God [orig. Io... Dio]. Short, agile, quick. These times need synthesis, tweets. (27' 12" – 27' 54")

A further difference distancing Selfism from traditional religions therefore emerges, as the idea of an immanent God (i.e. the Self in the «here and now», not a transcendence entity in an otherworldly dimension or in the afterlife) opens the way to a peculiar conception of life and the cosmos: «This life, here and now, is heaven. Or hell, depending on how you live it» (Marco, 29' 45" – 29' 55"). As a consequence, moreover, *Ionismo* does not entail any strict interdiction or commandment, rather opting for "suggestions": «Also this whole thing about commandments, right? I'm sorry, but no! We'll give suggestions. "It would be better if"» (Massimo, 28' 54" – 28' 02").

The emphasis put on the Self is also crucial in defining the sacred object of the new cult: the *mirror* (fig. 1, first frame), which is praised precisely for its ability to «well [...] reflect the image of God» (Massimo, 28' 05" – 28' 07"). This aspect is particularly emphasised in the scene representing the very first collective function of Selfism, when Marco Cilio welcomes a few potential disciples (see fig. 1, second and third frames):

> You [pointing to the camera and then immediately to the newcomers around him, with a marked – visual and verbal – *embrayage*, or "engagement", directly calling to his listeners, both at the intra- and extradiegetic level]. You are God. And so are you. Each of us has the power to create and the power to destroy. Come and look at yourself in the mirror. Come and admire the image of the God you are [while turning to the mirror, and looking at his reflected image]. Every wrinkle, scar, stain, even the dark circles compose the path that we must follow to reach our own fullness. To love oneself means to own the world. So, remember: You will have no other God besides yourself. [...] "Come to me" [always looking at himself into the mirror]. "I come to you" [while hugging the mirror/his reflected Self]. (36' 58" – 38' 07")

Rather sceptical at first, the newcomers then progressively embrace Selfism, precisely as a result of the "reflecting" power – both *of* one's Self, and *on* one's Self – of such a sacred object. A crucial moment, in this sense, is represented by Milos' conversion: initially, as shown in fig. 1 (fourth frame), the man approaches the mirror with mocking laughter (and, probably, words[6]), but everything changes when he looks at the mirror, and "sees" himself (or, better, his Self) into it.

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[6]   In fact, while laughing, he mumbles something in Croatian, but the subtitles do not clarify the meaning of what he says.

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Figure 1. Frames from the movie *Just Believe* (Aronadio 2018).

Drawing on a conception of conversion as an act of communication (in the sense described by Leone 2007), therefore, we could describe Milos' "change of direction" (as the etymology[7] of the term suggests) as a "paradoxical" experience, based on the coexistence of both difference and similarity, otherness and identity, change and continuity (cf. Leone 2002). In this sense, the mirror plays a crucial role, since – according to what Lotman (1988) highlighted in his famous essay on the semiotics of mirrors and specularity[8] – it both reflects and inverts the man's image, thus functioning as an instrument of sameness and difference at the same time, namely as a "threshold" device (cf. Eco 1985: 12). In fact, as Milos clarifies shortly after, talking to himself (while always looking at his reflected image, see fig. 1, fifth frame), what he saw in the mirror was both equal and different from himself, which prefigured a possibility of redemption and transformation, making him become «a new man; a better one; even more handsome, […] ready to start over» (39' 58" – 40' 33").

This highlights a crucial aspect: the mirror does not simply gather information about what it reflects, but also "selects" (Scheibe 1979) and "virtualises"

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[7] The word *conversion* derives from the Latin *converti* or *se convertere*, originally meaning «to move from one place to another», «to turn towards someone or something», «to change direction» or «road» (Pianigiani 2023, our translation).

[8] Given their significance, mirrors have been largely investigated from different points of view, from classical philosophy (see, for instance, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, or Augustine of Hippo's *Soliloquies*) to more recent works in psychology (see in particular Sheibe 1979; cf. Gregory 1997), iconology (see Baltrušaitis 1981, 1990) and semiotics (see in particular Eco 1983, 1985; De Michiel e Galassi 1997; Lotman 1988, 1989; Levin 1997; Sonesson 2003, 2015; Bacchini 2017; Lobaccaro and Bacaro 2021; for a general overview, see Gramigna 2023). We recall here exclusively the aspects of major interest with respect to the analysis of the figure of the mirror in Selfism, as represented in the movie by Aronadio. These are also crucial for the understanding of the "mirror-like technology" (Gramigna 2023: 58) widely used by influencers, i.e. the selfie, whose analogies and differences with mirrors are considered in paragraph 3.2.

(Eco 1983) it, therefore acquiring «the power to add and/or subtract from the [reflected] object» (Smith 1981: 78). In Milos' case, it is particularly the virtualising and additive functions that emerge. Subverting the idea of the reflected image as a dysphoric structure (as described by Lotman 1988), the conversion scene represented by Aronadio confers a marked euphoric characterisation on the mirror, pointing to its potential of prefiguring a possible (positive) overturning of what it reflects.

Such dynamics in turn attribute particular importance to the corporeal dimension, and more specifically to the believer's "lived", or "experienced" body – intended in a phenomenological perspective, as opposed to the simple object of an external look, that is, a "material" and "objective" body (see in particular Husserl 1913; Merleau-Ponty 1945). In this sense, the emphasis put on the absence of any dress code («in our religion everyone dresses like the hell they like», Massimo, 26' 14" – 26' 19"), in opposition to the requirements and interdictions of traditional religions, is particularly relevant. The Selfist's body, in other terms, is seen as the incarnation of a *perspective principle*, that is to say, of the dimension of the Subject's values, which is centred on the mechanisms of desire and the modality of "wanting" (cf. Greimas 1966; Ferraro [2015] 2020), and therefore leads to change and variability. This comes to subsume the *Sender-level* – i.e. the dimension of shared, collective value investments, system of norms and principles, which is rather aimed at maintaining a certain balance within the considered system (*ibid.*) –, further reinforcing the crucial idea that, in Selfism, everyone is God, and therefore his/her own Sender.[9]

However, as the movie shows, despite Massimo's attempts to avoid it, the community of Selfists progressively ascribe the role of Sender to him, interestingly addressing him as their «Maestro», repeatedly seeking his advice and instructions, and even recognising him as a «saint» performing miracles[10] in the end. Accordingly, the focus of attention moves from the mirror (i.e. the image of one's Self) to a gigantic portrait of Massimo severely looking at the believers, standing between two smaller mirrors in the background – which do not represent sacred objects any longer, but simple ornaments, as their position does not actually allow people to look at themselves, rather directing their gaze to the man's central figure (as it is evident in the very last frame of the movie, see fig. 2).

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9    In this sense, the words pronounced by another character, Teodoro, always in front of the sacred mirror (see fig. 1, sixth frame), are particularly relevant: «Teodoro [while pointing his finger to his own image reflected in the mirror], for many years you have put yourself in the hands of priests, healers, charlatans. But that's enough. These [referring to his hands, which he raises] are the hands you have to rely on, Teodoro. You are your own God!» (44' 10" – 44' 28").

10    As Teresa, a young woman with a severe disease, says to Massimo, after having "miraculously" recovered from it without undergoing the surgery suggested to her by doctors: «I knew it, you are a saint» (1h 30' 41" – 1h 30' 44").

Figure 2. Final frame from the movie *Just Believe* (Aronadio 2018).

### 3. From Cinema to Social Media: The Influencer

The dynamics ironically depicted by *Just Believe* interestingly recall some aspects of contemporary mediatised cultures. In fact, references to the sphere of social media are recurrent in the movie, from the initial "tweetable" slogan used to describe Selfism («Io… Dio», cf. *supra*) to the final description of Massimo as an "influencer" by Marco, who replies to the man's complaints about the fact that everyone treats him like their Sender (in Greimassian terms), by saying: «You have to understand, they are your *followers*.[11] You are a guiding light to them, you are the centre, that's what you are» (49' 44" – 44' 49").

The aim of the following paragraphs is precisely to investigate such connections, providing insights on the "cult of the Self" pervading contemporary mediatised cultures. To this purpose, we will examine the figure of the influencer in light of the elements highlighted above, initially recalling some general aspects, based on the rich literature on this topic, and subsequently focusing on the analysis of the emblematic case of Chiara Ferragni.[12]

3.1. Influencers: Social Media, Endorsement and Personal Narration

Today's influencers can be defined as «a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the

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[11]   With the English expression used also in Italian, as it is common when dealing with social media.

[12]   After this paper was submitted, the so-called "pandoro-gate" (i.e. a scandal linked to the advertising of an Italian brand of pandoro involving Ferragni) exploded, with evident impact on the influencer's image and popularity (with the loss of around 200.000 followers), as well as on her communication (with her unexpected disappearance from social media for 20 days, then her progressive reappearance, and the introduction of some taboo topics, including the scandal itself and her family issues). While certainly relevant, such changes do not currently seem to affect the general dynamics resulting from what is analysed in the following pages. On the contrary, they appear to have contributed to making them more evident.

use of other social media» (Freberg et al. 2011: 90). Hence, two main traits characterising these figures emerge: the use of social media; and the ability to influence the audience of these media, promoting (i.e. «endorsing») particular lifestyles, products and attitudes in various fields, from fashion to food, from technology to politics, from sports to entertainment (cf. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020; Borchers 2021).[13]

The definition provided by Abidin (2015) also adds a further, relevant aspect: «influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who [have] accumulate[d] a relatively large following on blogs and social media *through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles*» (our emphasis). In fact, as Kristian Bankov highlighted, «the influencer achieves all this with narrative. A good influencer is a good storyteller» (Bankov 2021: 50). It is precisely such a "narration", or "storytelling", together with the discursive strategies that characterise it, that suggests a parallelism with the case of Selfism as portrayed by Aronadio.

The analysis of a particularly emblematic case study, developed in the following paragraph, will allow us to further explore this parallelism, finally leading to some general conclusions on the contemporary "cult of the Self" and the understanding of the sacred in the postsecular era.

## 3.2. Chiara Ferragni, the "Proto-Selfist"

Born in Cremona in 1987, Chiara Ferragni is a well-known influencer at the international level, and the most popular in Italy (with more than 29 million followers on Instagram). Her career began in 2009 with the weblog TheBlondeSalad.com, whose first post, dated October 12, recited:

HERE I AM!

Here we are at the first independent blog driven by needs of communication and personalization.

After years spent on Flickr and other different web communities I felt like I had to move on and create a space for my own.

The name is "The Blonde Salad" because this blog is gonna be a salad of myself. The ingredients will be those which have always characterized me: fashion, photography, travel and lifestyle.

I hope that this step forward could involve you even more 😊

C.F.[14] (<https://www.theblondesalad.com/en/chiara-ferragni/here-i-am/>)

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[13]   As related to these aspects, influencers have been investigated by various scholars and experts, leading to an extensive literature ranging from marketing (see in particular Martínez-López et al. 2020, Yesiloglu and Costello 2020, Álvarez-Monzoncillo 2022) and the study of trust-building processes (see in particular Bankov 2021; Almahdi, Alsayed and Alabbas 2022; Nuji et al. 2023) to the analysis of such figures from the point of view of sociocultural dynamics, philosophical and ethical implications, and communication strategies (see in particular Borchers 2021; Watkins 2021; Hund 2023; Kozinets, Gretzel and Gambetti 2023; Sudnick 2023). For the purposes of our research, we are going to focus primarily on the communicative dimension, dealing with a particularly relevant case study, which is analysed in the next paragraph.

[14]   English translation present in the post, after the Italian version of the text.

A perspective principle is evident since the very beginning of the text, and is further reinforced throughout it. The title of the post, «HERE I AM!», breaks in directly introducing the voice of the enunciator (whose identity is revealed by her name, reported in capital letters and with a final exclamation point just above the date and the title itself, to recall a "shouting" effect,[15] as well as by her initials, which close the message like a signature), with an *embrayage* that is indeed recurrent in the post, with reiterated first-person pronouns and adjectives (e.g. «I», «my own», «myself», «me»). Even when the subject is impersonal, as it happens in the first sentence (which refers to the blog itself), moreover, the text is immediately related to its author, and more specifically to her «needs of communication and personalization».

The focus on the Self has in fact been a dominant trait in Ferragni's communication, leading to the refusal of any external imposition (or "commandment") and taboo (exactly as we observed in the case of *Ionismo*). This is particularly evident in the image that accompanies the above-mentioned post: a close-up picture of the influencer reveals her naked body, with her breasts covered by her hair and one of her hands, which holds a Barbie doll (also naked), shown in the act of combing her hair. A sort of duplication of the Subject is therefore visually suggested, ironically recalling the common stereotype of the "blonde doll", and revealing what has been later confirmed as a crucial element of Ferragni's communicative acts (reaching up to her appearance in the 2023 Sanremo Festival): the refusal of any dress code and, more precisely, the *exposure*[16] (i.e. nakedness) of her body as a means of empowerment and affirmation of her Self.

Going back to the blog and its first post, a further aspect, which is also based on an *embrayage*, deserves particular attention: the second person is used in the end to get the enunciatee, or reader, «involve[d]» (as the text itself remarks), responding precisely to the need expressed in the beginning. Thus the post extends beyond the mere dimension of the Subject, manifestly aiming at the Sender-level through such a «hope[d]» involvement. In fact, as a result of her activity – on the weblog before, and on social media (and especially Instagram) after –, Ferragni soon obtained a wide recognition, with an increasing number of "contracts", both in the economic sense – with a series of financial agreements with major brands in the world and the acknowledgment of her success by leading institutions such as Harvard University – and a Greimassian perspective – reaching up to millions of "followers".

But let us take a closer look at how the influencer has developed a particular identity and relation with her followers on social media, and why these elements can be related to the idea of Selfism we described when analysing the movie directed by Aronadio.

First of all, as mentioned above, it is important to recall that, in this case too, the refusal of any obligation is powerfully encouraged, especially as related to the corporeal dimension, which represents Ferragni's privileged means

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[15] As it is common in online communication (see in particular Crystal 2001).

[16] I.e. adopting the terms introduced by Fontanille (1989), the convergence of the influencer's "wanting-to-inform" and the audience's "not-being-able-not-to-observe"; for a further discussion of nakedness as related to these dynamics, see in particular Stano (2023: 99-113).

of (Self-)expression. Her body, in fact, is a crucial element of her posts, thanks to a sacred object that, while reflecting her image (like the mirror used in *Ionismo*), does not return it to herself, but rather to an external gaze, that of her followers (as it happens in the closing scene of *Just Believe*, when the attention moves from the mirror to Massimo's portrait): the *smartphone*. Even when a mirror is used, it is for a *selfie* (according to the stylemes of the so-called "mirror selfie"), that is to say, to show one's reflection to others, rather than to oneself.[17] For this reason, the use of the smartphone is always paired with that of social media, which actualise the influencer's need for sharing, communication and involvement. A series of other media (such as cinema, television, etc.) are also largely adopted for this purpose, allowing Ferragni to further enhance her ability to reach people. What is more, they are often used to try to project an aura of "authenticity" and "truthfulness" onto her messages, by means of a *referential strategy*[18] (cf. Floch 1990) – e.g. by recurring to particular formats and languages, as it can be observed in the docufilm *Chiara Ferragni – Unposted* (Amoruso 2019), or in the docuseries *The Ferragnez* (Imperato, 2021-2023) – and the "promise" to show her «truest» and «more intimate side» – as maintained by the trailer of the movie[19] – «without filters» – as claimed by the official description of the series.[20]

As a result, Ferragni is celebrated as a sort of "deity", and more precisely as an immanent goddess, present in the here and now, ordinary and yet extraordinary, whose main precept is «Believe in your dreams, your spirit and yourself».[21] What is more, she has been explicitly related to more traditional deities on various occasions: in 2018, for instance, on the occasion of the influencer's wedding with the Italian singer Fedez, Andrea Chisesi, an artist from Noto, Sicily, represented her as a crowned Madonna, holding her son Leone (depicted as Jesus),[22] in an artwork (fig. 3, first image) that was later reported for blasphemy by the Codacons (Coordination of associations for environmental protection and user and consumer rights). Similar representations, also criticised for blasphemy and offense to religious sentiment, were produced in 2020 by Francesco Vezzoli, who represented Chiara Ferragni as the *Madonna with Child* (fig. 3, second image) by Sassoferrato (Giovanni Battista Salvi), and in 2021 by Arianna Spalletti, who got inspiration from William-Adolphe

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[17]  In fact, while, as mentioned above, selfies can in some respect be considered a «mirror-like technology» (Gramigna 2023: 58), since they provide «digital self-portraits of the subject[s taking them]» (*ibid.*), they evidently differ from mirrors in their "orientation", being primarily directed at an external gaze, rather than to self-reflection.

[18]  Drawing on Floch (1990), we can define the main traits of such a referential strategy as based on a disengaged and informative style (e.g. linear diachronic development, inclusion of interviews and "witnesses", etc.), suggesting viewers that they are told the "truth" about the subject of the communication (in this case, the influencer herself).

[19]  Available at the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1jzXzNQcxk> (our translation).

[20]  On Amazon Prime, available at the link <https://www.primevideo.com/-/it/detail/The-Ferragnez/0LPLPFRZL2COYZ6T5WWRBO55WJ> (our translation).

[21]  As declared in her post on Instagram (@chiaraferragni) dated 28 August 2016, available at the link <https://www.instagram.com/p/BJoOoO9A22a/?taken-by=chiaraferragni>.

[22]  A representation of Fedez as the Archangel Michael also accompanied these two figures.

Figure 3. Artworks representing Chiara Ferragni as a Madonna (from left to right: Chisesi 2018; Vezzoli 2020; initial frame from Spalletta 2021).

Bouguereau's *La Vierge au lys* (1899) for her animated work representing the influencer and her son (fig. 3, last image).[23]

Another interesting case in this respect is a post by the Uffizi Galleries[24] in Florence describing Ferragni as «a sort of contemporary *divinity* in the era of social media», who «embodies a role model for millions of followers», and whose «*myth* and story [… is] supported by *faithful* fans» (our emphasis). In the image included in the post (fig. 4), the influencer stands in front of the popular painting *The birth of Venus* by Botticelli, with an evident visual parallelism between the two figures, which is further confirmed by the verbal text:

[…] The female ideal of a blonde-haired woman with diaphanous skin is a very common beauty model in the Renaissance. Masterfully expressed by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli in The birth of Venus maybe portraying the face of one of his contemporary, Simonetta Vespucci. A beautiful noble woman, of Genoese origin, beloved by Giuliano de' Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent; she was so worshiped by Sandro Botticelli that she became his muse.

Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers – a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media – [*sic*]

The myth and the story of Chiara Ferragni, argued by harsh critics and supported by faithful fans, is a real sociological phenomenon that involves millions of supporter worldwide and it can undoubtedly be considered a snap-shot of our time.

However, no substitution seems to take place in this case. On the contrary, the presence of two clearly distinct planes (with Botticelli's Venus in the background, enclosed within the frame of the painting, and Ferragni in the foreground, covering part of it) highlights the discontinuity between these two figures:[25] the former is a transcendent divinity, which forms part of a system

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23   See the post by @aris.artg, Instagram, 20 April 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN4 2lzPoXIg/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=b4ffaec8-7a24-48b8-beb2-f90773b7c62f>.

24   @uffizigalleries, Instagram, 17 July 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu_l3JIvFn/?. hl=en>. Both the Italian and the English versions of the text are present in the post.

25   A similar configuration also characterised the picture that was shot for the cover of *Vogue* Hong Kong, shared by Ferragni herself on her Instagram account (21 October 2020, <https://

Figure 4. Chiara Ferragni and Botticelli's Venus (post by @uffizigalleries, 17 July 2020).

of gods who govern the world of men but do not belong to it; the latter rather represents an immanent and earthly goddess, namely the tangible manifestation of a cult of the Self that does not look at any otherworldly deity, but finds full fulfilment in the here and now[26] – just as the new cult founded by Massimo in *Just Believe* invites its believers to do.

## 4. Conclusion

Both the fictional case of *Ionismo* and the cult of the Self promoted by Chiara Ferragni seem to reflect the idea of an "immanent frame", or order, as described by Charles Taylor (2007). According to the author of *A Secular Age*, in fact, we live in a disenchanted world, where supernatural beings are considered close to impossible; everything important is this-worldly, explicable on its own terms, and each human is charged with finding her or his own way of being human, that is to say, their own individual path. This is precisely the foundation of the cult founded by Massimo, according to which the «Self is God» and what counts is the here and now, not the idea of any otherworldly reality or life. And this is precisely the motto spread and incarnated by Chiara Ferragni, who has developed her identity and communication on the basic ideas that one has to believe in oneself (i.e. one's Self), even when others do not.

However, as the analysis showed, this does not implicate the complete vanishing of the Sender-level – but rather its reconfiguration. Nor it entails a total disappearance of the sacred – but rather a new understanding of it. In fact, as we highlighted, while excluding any form of otherworldly transcendence from his new cult, and repeatedly affirming the importance of embracing a

www.instagram.com/p/CGmUXcJBx5Z/?hl=en>).

[26]   A condition that, as the pandoro-gate scandal showed, is ephemeral and precarious.

perspective dimension, Massimo Alberti becomes, against his will, some sort of divinity, or at least a saint, and a prophet to be "followed" (i.e. a Sender), in the eyes of Selfists. Similarly, despite promoting entirely earthly and self-oriented values, Chiara Ferragni is associated with divine figures such as the Madonna or Venus in a previously unseen combination of traditional sacredness and secular glamour, precisely in view of her capacity to involve and influence people (i.e. to establish herself as their Sender).

It is in this sense that the contemporary cult of the Self, whether imagined by cinema or realised by social media, seems to invite us to embrace a new conception of the sacred, based on the acknowledgment of its coexistence and complementarity with the profane dimension: a *secular* – or, better, *postsecular sacred*, which finds its foundation in itself rather than in transcendental entities or worlds and which, being historically and culturally conditioned, varies depending on the context (cf. Filoramo 2022). This, in turn, has interesting consequences as related to the link between the perspective level on which Selfism is based and the Sender-dimension: as it emerged from the analysis, the "sacralisation" processes at work in both cases, exactly as those recalled by a more traditional conception of the sacred, allow people and groups to experience objects, symbols and feelings as expressions of a foundational (immanent, yet sacred) entity that legitimises their experience and practices. Thus, the new forms of the postsecular sacred acquire a particular power over the individuals who identify with them, functioning as powerful factors of action and social cohesion – that is to say, as a real, and unavoidable, Sender.

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# In the Place of Sanctity
## Religious Eminence in Jewish Tradition

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**Abstract**

The concept of holiness is among the religious innovations brought by Christianity. In Hebrew there is a word (kadòsh) that normally translates as holy, but its usage is noticeably different, as it applies mostly to deities or entities such as the Land of Israel or the Jewish people and rarely to people. The paper aims to investigate whether some other categories of the Jewish tradition, such as the prophet, the sage (khakhàm), the pious (Hassìd), the righteous (tzaddìk) can be considered in some ways similar to the Christian definition of holiness. But differences are greater than similarities.

**Key Words**

Sanctity; Prophecy; Sage, Tzaddìk[1]; Kadòsh; Jewish Culture.

**Contents**

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[1]  The transcription of the Hebrew words in this article follows simplified criteria to facilitate pronunciation even for non-experts.

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## 1. The meaning of k-d-sh

The Hebrew word for holy (kadòsh) is an adjective derived from a verbal root k-d-sh that primarily means "to separate", "to reserve", "to distinguish", and hence "to sanctify". From this three-letter root, according to the rules of the Hebrew language, many words derive, including the verb kidesh, the adjective kodesh, the noun kadosh, the derived nouns kedushà, kadesh, kiddush, which will be examined in the next lines. All maintain the meaning fundamental of sacredness and difference. It is worth first noting that in Hebrew there is no important lexical difference between "holy" and "sacred" nor between "holy" and "saint". As we will see, the word coming from this root covers all three of these semantic areas.

This "separated" quality is probably the basic meaning of the Hebrew word kadosh. Much like the English word "distinguished," which can mean both "separate" and "special," kadosh begins by meaning "separate" and ends by meaning "special" or "sacred," "holy," "elevated" (Gilman, 1990: 229)

The word kadosh has a similar etymology to the concepts of separation, distance, and difference found in the words sacer, sanctus, and hagios, as analyzed by Emile Benveniste (1976 II: 429-441). However, in Hebrew language and tradition[2], this relation to spatial and qualitative opposition is clearer and more present than in Greek and Latin where it became increasingly obscured. Following Rashi's[3] commentary on Talmud b. Sotah 22, the meaning of kòdesh as "separate" is very close to another word of considerable importance for the history of Christianity and Judaism: indeed Pharisee, or parush in Hebrew,

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[2] As I have explained extensively elsewhere (for example Volli 2012, 2019), my work focuses according to the semiotic disciplinary methodology on the attempt to understand the semantic structures of what I define as "Jewish tradition", i.e. the self-understanding of the textual production of the Jewish people, which begins with the books of the Torah and finds its memento of normative definition in the Talmud, then continuing with various phases of further production until today. Obviously these materials are characterized by a historical dynamic and by exchanges with other traditions, which philology usefully reconstructs. But from my point of view it is important to take note of the fact that it is a continuous corpus, which has lived for at least three millennia and which understands itself as unitary. It would certainly be interesting to reconstruct in detail how the oldest part of this corpus was formed, whether it comes from different sources and why these were written. For two centuries this has been the scientific program of a discipline that is more theological than historical or philological, called "biblical studies". But the results that the various authors of this discipline have proposed are so variable and not very cumulative that we must now admit the scientific failure of this project, its impracticability. In any case, from a semiotic point of view, it is much more interesting to analyze the corpus from below, starting from its stabilization, according to the synchronic methodology that applies to most texts. Above all because the Jewish tradition continually reinterprets itself, and always self-understands starting from its unity. This is certainly unwelcome to those who, according to the ideology of "supersessionism", claim to detach the texts of the Jewish tradition from their matrix and from the culture that produced them, with the presumption of understanding them "better than those who wrote them", according to the conviction of Schleiermacher and before him of almost all Christian and Islamic hermeneutics. The remainder of this article, like my other works on this topic, uses this methodology.

[3] Rashi, is the acronym if Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (Troyes 1040-1105) is the most authoritative commentator on the Torah and Talmud.

means "separate", "different", or even "hermit". The Pharisees were known for their strict adherence to the laws of the oral and written Torah, which set them apart from others. This similarity allows us to focus on a religious concept that is widespread in Judaism: the path to holiness goes in the direction of separation from common behavior due to strict adherence to the rules of the Torah and tradition

The term kadòsh is used in various contexts, such as marriage when the newlyweds declare in a ceremony called Kiddushin their commitment (literally consecration) to each other; martyrdom (which is called keddushàt Hashèm or "sanctification of the [divine] Name"); places and buildings intended for liturgical use, and the "land of holiness" (Eretz haKòdesh, i.e., Israel, which is often referred to by Western sources as the 'Holy Land'). The Hebrew language is called "The Holy Language" (Lashòn HaKòdesh); the Holy Temple in Jerusalem is called Beit Hamikdàsh ("the holy house"), and Jerusalem Ir Ha-Kodesh ("City of the Holy"). Three liturgical actions come from this root: Kiddùsh, which is the sanctification of the Shabbàt or a festival with a blessing over wine; Kaddìsh, the sanctification of the Divine Name which is used as a sort of liturgical punctuation of all religious services, but also after each Torah study and even as mourner's prayer; and Kedushàh which is a responsive section of the main Jewish prayer, the Amidàh. Additionally, it is used to describe the "spirit of holiness" (rùach hakòdesh). This locution means "divine presence and assistance" and has a different meaning in Jewish tradition than in Christian theology, where, as "Holy Spirit", it refers to the third "Person" of the Trinity.

In Jewish language, kadòsh primarily is applied to the deity himself, who starting from the Talmud often is called haKadòsh barùch hu ("the blessed Holy One"). The angelic choir invokes Him three times with this adjective (kadòsh, kadòsh, kadòsh) according to Isaiah 6:3. This phrase is prominently featured in Jewish liturgy in the Kadushah and later was also adopted in Christian liturgies under the name trisagion.[4]

In Leviticus, there is a famous intimation to holiness and separation addressed to the entire people of Israel: "Be holy/separate because I am holy/separate" (kedoshìm tihiù ki kadòsh anì). This underlies the entire understanding of Jewish ethics and is a collective obligation concerning the people. Therefor Israel is sometimes referred to as the "holy people" (Goi Kadòsh) and Jewish communities are typically defined with this adjective, by using the phrases Kehiláh Kadìsh, Khal Kadòsh, or Edàh Hakedoshàh.

However, the adjective kadosh is rarely applied to individual human beings. No Biblical figure is customarily referred to by this title, including Abraham (who is instead called avìnu, meaning "our father"), Moses (rabbènu, meaning "our teacher"), and even the prophets. In the Talmudic sphere, the title kadosh is attributed only to Rabbi Yehudah haNassì, a second-century sage to whom the compilation of the Mishna is attributed; this title was given to him for the merit of his demureness, as recounted in Talmud b. Shabbat 118b, and no other prominent figures in ancient Jewish thought and spiritual life such as Rabbi Akivá, Maimonides, Rashi, or the Baal Shem Tov is called

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4   For an analysis of this derivation, see Flusser (1963).

this way. The most well-known exception is very late: Arì hakadòsh is the name by which Yitzhak Luria, an important teacher, mystic, and kabbalist who lived in Galilee in the 16th century, is often referred to. Following this innovation, a few other later rabbis were also given the title Hakadosh ("the saint one") as Alshìch HaKadòsh, Isaiah Horowitz (Shelàh HaKadòsh), the Arizàl HaKadòsh, and Chaim ibn Attar (Ohr HaChàim HaKadòsh). They were all distinguished spiritual masters and scholars of the last centuries but are not well known today.

## 2. Is there such a thing as sanctity in the Jewish tradition?

In conclusion, this small lexical analysis shows us that the root k-d-sh corresponds more to the semantic core of English "holy" than of English "saint"/"sanctity". The Hebrew language does not know this distinction, which is not evident even in the classical and neo-Latin languages. Sometimes it happens that k-d-sh also covers in Hebrew the meanings that are expressed by the English saint/sanctity; but in general these are not equivalent linguistic entities and even in the case of people it cannot be thought that the expression of the concept of personal sanctity in Hebrew is equivalent to the use of kadòsh. We will now inquire whether there is a Jewish equivalent to Christian sanctity. However, from a semiotic point of view it is important to note that there may not be a direct correlation between the concepts that define the workings of one social system and those of another, even if they are expressed by words that are generally used to translate each other, such as "saint" and kadosh. Believing in the universality or factuality of the scientific metalanguage we use, or worse, thinking of our common language as it were a universal metalanguage, is a questionable ethnocentric or "etic" (vs. "emic") attitude, as anthropologists would call it (Headland, Pike, Harris 1990). From a semiotic perspective this can be considered "illusion of the signifier". For instance, there is no concept of "dogma" or "faith" among peoples such as the Nambikwara or Inuit, or ancient Jews. It has been demonstrated that the concept of "religion" is not applicable to the social organization and spiritual world of most ancient cultures, including Greco-Roman and Jewish societies. For further information on this topic, I refer to Ngombri (2015), Dubuisson (2020), and Barton & Boyarin (2016), who have extensively discussed the relevant literature.

The concept of religion as a distinct aspect of individual life, separate from politics, economics, and science, is a relatively new phenomenon in European history. This idea has been projected onto other cultures and even backwards in time, creating the impression that religion is an inherent and essential part of our world. However, upon closer historical examination, this appearance proves to be a superficial veneer that quickly fades. (Ciappina 2023, my transl.)[5]

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[5] "L'idea della religione come una dimensione della vita individuale separata dalla politica, dall'economia e dalla scienza è una evoluzione recente nella storia europea, che è stata proiettata su culture «altre» e indietro nel tempo, con il risultato che ora la religione appare una parte naturale e necessaria del nostro mondo. Questa parvenza, tuttavia, si rivela una verniciatura sorprendentemente sottile che scolora sotto un'attenta disamina storica."

The same can be said about the word "saint", which is still closely tied to the ecclesiastical institution, even in current definitions, particularly when used as a noun. See, for example, the opening section of the definition in the Italian dictionary edited by De Mauro (<https://dizionario.internazionale.it/parola/santo> my transl.):6

1a. adj., which is worthy of religious veneration:[...].

1b. adj., s.m., who, who is holy; spec., who, who has been canonized by the Church: cult of saints, the holy martyrs

1c. [...]

1d. adj., who is endowed with holiness: a holy prophet | spiritually united with God because he lives in his grace: the holy souls of heaven

And the Treccani Encyclopedia (<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/santo/> my transl,)7

In Catholic theology, sanctity is the complex of moral perfections and the spiritual state of one who possesses them. In an absolute, transcendental way, sanctity is proper to God and is not distinct from His very essence; in a more limited sense, the attribute is applied to the Mother of God and further, in varying degrees, to persons who have reproduced in some way the divine perfection of Christ or who have modeled their lives after His. In Christian ethics, all believers are called to the practice of a holiness of life, although not all of them attain it to the same degree.

In the Catholic Church and other churches outside the Reformation tradition, in a broad sense, all those who belong to Christ's mystical body, all those who are children of God because they supernaturally share in his own life, are saints; in this sense, we speak of the communion of saints; in a narrower sense, those who, after earthly life, enjoy the beatific vision are saints In a specific sense then, saints are those who are invoked and venerated with public worship, called by theologians worship of dulia. The exercise of said worship, however, is permissible only on condition that it is permitted or approved by the Church; therefore, in this sense, those who are declared by the Church to be such are saints.

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**6** "1a. agg., che è degno di venerazione religiosa:[...]
1b. agg., s.m., che, chi è santo; spec., che, chi è stato canonizzato dalla Chiesa: culto dei santi, i santi martiri 1c. [...] 1d. agg., che è dotato di santità: un santo profeta | unito spiritualmente a Dio perché vive nella sua grazia: le anime sante del paradiso"

**7** "Nella teologia cattolica, santità è il complesso delle perfezioni morali e lo stato spirituale di chi le possiede. In maniera assoluta, trascendentale, la santità è propria di Dio e non è distinta dalla sua stessa essenza; in senso più limitato, l'attributo è applicato alla Madre di Dio e inoltre, in grado diverso, alle persone che hanno riprodotto in qualche modo la perfezione divina del Cristo o che hanno modellato la loro vita alla sua. Nell'etica cristiana, tutti i credenti sono chiamati alla pratica di una santità di vita, anche se non tutti vi pervengono al medesimo grado.
Nella Chiesa cattolica e nelle altre Chiese estranee alla tradizione della Riforma, in senso ampio, sono s. tutti coloro che appartengono al corpo mistico di Cristo, tutti coloro che sono figli di Dio perché soprannaturalmente partecipi della sua stessa vita; in questo senso, si parla della comunione dei s.; in senso più ristretto, sono s. coloro che, dopo la vita terrena, fruiscono della visione beatifica. In senso specifico poi, sono s. coloro che vengono invocati e venerati con culto pubblico, detto dai teologi culto di dulia. L'esercizio di detto culto è però lecito soltanto a condizione che sia permesso o approvato dalla Chiesa; pertanto, in questo senso, sono s. coloro che vengono dalla Chiesa dichiarati tali."

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In the Jewish world, there are no official list of saints, no procedures for proclaiming sanctity, or authorities capable of doing so. Furthermore, there is no definition of same "complex of perfections" that would allow one to attain the exceptional human state that we might understand, roughly, as the generic (non-ecclesiastical) meaning of the word "sanctity". This lack of formalization of different aspects of religious life is common in ancient cultures. Often within these cultures one finds a liturgical life made up of "mysteries" (Buckert 1987), to indicate among other things that the rules that govern many ceremonies that today we would call religious, the qualities of their participants, the forms and objects of the rites, the divinities that are worshiped in this context are kept secret and made known only to the "initiated".

From this point of view, however, Jewish culture is a notable exception, because not only does it have no "mysterious" liturgy or "initiation", but it is evident its vocation to meticulously and explicitly regulate liturgical and ethical behavior, to define in detail the categories of people and objects relevant to worship and spiritual life, in short to grammaticalize (Lotman 1990) the whole of society. And there is no explicit and well-defined category in the Jewish world that can be compared to Christian sanctity. There are only characters and roles that are generally interpreted as particularly deserving or exceptional, but there are no rules for admission nor is there a particular otherworldly destiny for them different from that of other human beings who deserve the "future world" (literally "the world that comes" olàm ha-bà"). The categories of this exceptionality in Jewish history differ from other cultures, also because the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures clearly implies that no human being can truly be considered "perfect". Also, for this reason there are no Jewish "saints": cultural heroes such as Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, not to mention their "historical" successors, are always looked at in a more realistic than hagiographic way, as people with merits but also faults and defects. The categories of religious exceptionalism in Judaism also present a notable historical dynamic, as we will now see.

## 3. The categories of religious exceptionalism

After the time of the patriarchs, whose direct relation with the rùach hakòdesh is implied in the narrative of the book of Genesis, when we are told that their descendants multiplied and established themselves as a people in Egypt, the highest recognized religious status in the Biblical narrative became that of the neviim ("prophets", people who spoke in the name of divinity), including Moses and some of the "judges" or provisional tribal rulers such as Samuel. This is the first religious role that is appropriate to compare with Christian sanctity. However, prophets not necessarily are described as morally superior or flawless people. For instance: Moses, guilty of murder and disrespect for the instructions received from God (once); Jonah, who refuted the mission given to him by God; and Elijah, who tested God to challenge the priests of Baal, are considered by tradition to have committed serious mistakes. Additionally, the Bible sometimes (for instance 1Sam: 10) features groups of neviim who used to sing and dance for

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God while in a trance, but who did not possess any special qualities beyond this state of possession.

The Torah also establishes another figure of religious exceptionalism known as the nazìr (Nazirite, i.e. consecrated), a position which, however, should not be confused with sanctity. This figure is described in the Book of Numbers (6:1-21) and further specified in a treatise of the Mishna, whose name is precisely Nazir, which is commented in more detail in a treatise of the Babylonian Talmud and one of the Jerusalem Talmud with the same name. A nazir is someone who takes a vow (or receives it at birth) to abstain from any product derived from the vine, to avoid becoming ritually impure, and abstain from cutting their hair. This vow applies for a period defined by the individual, which can last up to a lifetime. Samson is an example of someone who took this vow from birth. However, being a nazir does not necessarily mean that one's behavior is morally commendable or close to divinity, as for example the case of Samson shows. The nazir just fulfills a vow by adhering to the detailed rules. After he finishes and ritually cuts his hair, he is subject to a sacrifice of atonement, as if his vow itself involved some guilt towards one's own body.

According to tradition, Hebrew prophecy ends after the rebuilding of the Temple in the fifth century BCE. Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi are considered the last prophets (see, for example, Tosefta Sotah 3:3; Talmud b Yoma 9b; Sanhedrin 11a. Sotah 48b). The transition to a new form of religious virtue is exemplified by Ezra, who arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon in 458 BCE to rebuild Jewish life. Ezra is a descendant from High Priests and is considered by some sources to be still a prophet (he is identified with Malachi, see for instance Talmud b. Megillah 15a), but is primarily known as a scribe or sophèr. Although the Gospels will judge this qualification negatively, it is highly valued in all the Jewish tradition. The scribe is not simply a copyist, but also an intellectual expert in the Law, a link in its chain of transmission, and a custodian of the holiest text in Jewish life: the Torah. Ezra is the first to be qualified in this way:

> He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, given by the Lord God of Israel. The king of Persia, Darius, acceded to his every request because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. Ezra devoted himself wholeheartedly to studying the law of the Lord, practicing it, and teaching Israel law and Torah. (Ezra 7:6-10; transl. JPS 1985)

This passage also mentions later his knowledge of divine wisdom [khokhmàh]. Therefore Ezra is considered qualified to lead the people and make important decisions, such as preventing and dissolving mixed marriages, restoring Jewish festivals, and spreading the text of the Torah. Wisdom (khokhmah) is traditionally considered a divine attribute, one of the ten sefiròt (divine forms or emanations) later described in the Kabbalàh. Therefore, someone who is knowledgeable in this wisdom, in a clear and rational manner, called khakhàm from the same lexical root, is considered superior to the prophets. Ezra is the first sage (khakhàm) to be legitimized as a lawgiver and ruler precisely on the basis of his knowledge of the law. His model of leadership would inspire thenceforth. The idea that the study of Torah is the su-

preme religious virtue, which supersedes all others (as stated later in Talmud Megillah 16b), is a decisive innovation that began with the life of Ezra. It lies at the heart of the Talmud and extends to present-day Judaism. This is therefore the second religious role somehow comparable to Christian sanctity. Typically, a khakhàm (sage) in Judaism does not engage in asceticism, mystical experiences, or miracles, although there are sages in the Talmud who possess these characteristics. Instead, his life is dedicated to studying the Torah in order to teach and practice it. The sage is considered the religious figure in Judaism closest to sanctity, rather than the hermit, mystic, martyr, or good person. According to tradition, it is better to perform a good deed because it is prescribed rather than simply out of a good heart. Therefore, the wise man is superior to any religious enthusiast because he consciously does what must be done. Ethical and religious intellectualism is a fundamental characteristic of Judaism.

Two important concepts of Jewish ethics must be considered to further elaborate. The first is defined in rabbinic sources as gemilùt hasadìm, which can be translated as acts of piety, works of charity, acts of loving kindness, or works of mercy. According to the Mishnaic treatise Pirké Avot, which is the oldest and most authoritative source of Jewish ethics, Shimon the Righteous, one of the last members of the Great Assembly, said (1: 2) that the world rests on three things: on the law, on divine service, and on the gemilùt hassadìm. According to rabbinic tradition, the study of Torah is considered the prerequisite for all virtues, including generosity and benevolence. Therefore, in addition to laws and precepts, the khakhàm is obligated to exhibit these qualities.

The Talmud mentions the second fundamental concept of lifnìm mishuràt hadìn which specifies the obligation to go "beyond the line of law". The good Jew, especially the khakhàm, must paradoxically do more than he is strictly obliged to do. An anecdote from the Talmud Bava Metzia 83a (transl. r. Steinsaltz) illustrates this concept.

> [Because their negligence] porters broke a barrel of wine belonging to Rabbah bar bar Channah [a Talmud sage], and he took their garments as compensation. They complained to the court of Rav [another important sage], who ordered Rabbah to return their robes. Rabbah protested: "Is this the law [which on the contrary allows such compensation for damages]?" Rav responds, "Yes, [because, as it is said Proverbs 2:20]: "you must walk the path of the good." Rabbah returns their robes, but the men still protest, claiming that they are poor and hungry after working all day and deserve payment for their labor. Rav orders Rabbah to pay them, Rabbah asks again, "Is this the law [that actually denies payment for unfinished work like this]?" [Rav] replies: "Yes, [because, as the same verse continues], you must maintain the path of the righteous [tzadikìm]."

This last word [tzadikìm] is important in our discourse, and we will have to revisit it later.

In addition to the figure of the khakhàm (sage), there are two other ideal models of religious life that are formed successively in Jewish tradition (and they can integrate each other and the khakhàm) and can somehow be compared to Christian sanctity: the hassìd (pious) and the tzaddìk (the righteous,

of which we have just found a mention in the text of Proverbs).

Hassid has a semantic reference similar to "pious", "devout", or "religious". It is associated with a divine attribute (sefiràh) namely Hesed or grace. It has been attributed to several pious movements in Israel's history. Three are worth mentioning here:

a. The "Hasideans" (Hasidìm ha-Rishonim) (Kempen 1988, Grabbe 2020), a religious movement that appeared at the beginning of the age of the Maccabees (mid-2nd century BCE). Allied with Mattathias in armed resistance to the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Hasideans were a community of staunch assertors of the Torah with ascetic tendencies. According to Josephus Flavius, around 150 BCE, the Hasideans differentiated into Pharisees and Essenes.

b. The Jewish religious movement, Hassidé Ashkenàz ("Pious of Germany"), also known as medieval Hassidism, was widespread in the Rhineland during the 12th and 13th centuries. It was initiated by the Kalonymus family of Lucca. The movement was known for its strict observance of asceticism and mystical doctrines. Their primary text was the Sèfer hassidìm. The movement disappeared following the massacres of Rhenish Jews by the Crusaders.

c. What is called also today Hassidic movement (Lamm 1999), was founded by the Baal Shem Tov (rav Israel ben Eliezer) in the 18th century in Poland and Ukraine, became the most significant religious movement of Judaism in Eastern Europe. It is still important today, particularly in Israel and the USA, despite Communist persecution and Nazi extermination during the Shoah. The movement was organized into numerous "courts" around a local rabbi. It is not possible to discuss the various customs, habits, political and religious positions of this very pluralistic and fragmented religious reality here. However, it is important to note that they practice a religion of the heart (deveqùt, "adherence" to the divine) and constitute a rather large popular group. They are often stereotypically referred to as "ultra-Orthodox" in the press, despite their differentiation. But the popularity of a movement does not necessarily imply a uniform level of culture, morality, or virtue among its adherents. Therefore, even the most recent Hassidim, popularized by Martin Buber and much literature, as well as recent TV series, certainly cannot be identified as a whole to the Catholic figure of saints due to their group nature and the diverse populations that follow them.

Nevertheless, the figure of the tzaddìk (Dresner 1977), who is the most important role within these groups, may be somehow comparable to that of a saint. This term, tzaddìk, literally means "righteous", and not "saint" as noted above. According to Maimonides, a tzaddìk is just "he whose merits surpass his wrongs."However, in Jewish tradition, it has historically been used in a very expansive manner. It is a title traditionally given to some Biblical characters, primarily Joseph, but not to the other patriarchs, Moses, or the kings. Tzèdek ("Justice") comes from the same linguistic root. This corresponds to an ethical instance in the Toràh that is emphasized in the frequently quoted phrase tzèdek tzèdek tirdòf which means "justice, justice you shall seek!" (Deut. 16:20). However, the concepts of Hebrew tzédek and English "justice" do not wholly align. Tzedakàh, the action term derived from tzédek, does not mean what we call justice, but rather refers to the practice of charity or

almsgiving. Thus, justice encompasses not only law-abidingness and fairness, but also social generosity. The notion of tzaddik is particularly significant in Hassidism, where it designates the spiritual leader of a hasidic group, while his disciples are called Hassidìm. Tzaddikim are often attributed with miracles, therapeutic powers, and metaphysical knowledge, as well as a personal relationship with the divine sphere. Because of these characteristics, tzaddikìm can be perhaps compared to the Catholic saints.

## 4. Conclusion

I conclude this brief historical-linguistic illustration here. In Judaism, there is no single concept of sainthood, fixed title, list of saints, or procedure for proclaiming them. There is a perception of a number of particularly religiously enlightened figures capable of influencing even today, possibly even after their death, the most committed religious practices, but no fixed threshold qualifying them.

One final caveat. In the Jewish tradition there are somewhere traces of euhemerism, which is the cultural process of transforming eminent personalities into semi-divine creatures, especially on the religious level. For example, the prophet Elijah is credited with numerous miracles, with ascension into Heaven without passing through death, and with a number of appearances throughout history, even with the role of announcing the arrival of the Messiah. Also Talmudic characters such as Rabbi Eliezer and Shimon Ben Trochaic are attributed with impressive miracles. There is a well known Talmudic narrative (Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 59b), where Rabbi Eliezer uses miracles to try and win a theoretical argument. After losing it, he curses his opponents, causing their death. Shimon Ben Yochai, the pseudo-epigraphic author of the Zohar, takes refuge with his son Rabbi Elazar for thirteen years in a cave to escape the Romans (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 33b). When he emerges, he is so strong and angry that he burns the entire landscape around him with his gaze. A pilgrimage to Mount Meron in Galilee is still celebrated in honor of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. Similarly, modern figures such as Isaac Luria, or the great Tzaddikim of the Hassidic movement, Israel Ben Eliezer (the Baal Shem Tov), and Nachman of Brazlaw are also attributed with miracles and mystical elevations to the divine, and pilgrimages are made to pay tribute to them. This is especially true for Nachman of Brazlaw, who is honored until now with massive pilgrimages to his grave at Uman in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, these aspects are merely part of the popular halo of Judaism. While these sages are highly respected by religious Jews and considered a spiritual treasure to draw upon, they do not serve as the object of official worship or faith. The mentioned rabbis are particularly significant for their religious thought and action. It would be inappropriate to consider them literaly as saints in the Catholic sense. In the Jewish tradition, there is no sanctity but holiness, which is seen as a path that never ends, as Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir famously stated in the Talmud (Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 20b, transl. r. Steinsaltz):

Torah study leads to care in the performance of mitzvot. Care in the performance

of mitzvot leads to diligence in their observance. Diligence leads to cleanliness of the soul. Cleanliness of the soul leads to abstention from all evil. Abstention from evil leads to purity and the elimination of all base desires. Purity leads to piety. Piety leads to humility. Humility leads to fear of sin. Fear of sin leads to holiness. Holiness leads to the Divine Spirit. The Divine Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead. And piety is greater than all of them, as it is stated: "Then You did speak in a vision to Your pious ones" (Psalms 89:20).

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