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Literature, Religion, and the Sacred

*Religion and the Sacred in Italy's Literary Culture*¹

After dealing, in twenty-four years of publication, with authors, genres, women's studies, including women mystics, as well as such varied topics as anthropology, ethics, science, film, and cultural studies, *Annali d'italianistica* marks its *twenty-fifth year of academic publishing* with this issue devoted to the sacred and religion and their literary renderings throughout Italy's culture. Most obviously, this volume makes no attempt to investigate this extremely complex issue in its totality, an utterly impossible task; much more modestly, this issue's authors, while pursuing their investigations from different perspectives, focus on some of the issues and themes with which Italy's millenary literary culture has been concerned in regard to the sacred and religious phenomenon.

Many disciplines — primarily anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and theology — concern themselves with the universal phenomenon we refer to as the religious and the sacred. Historians, philosophers, anthropologists of religion, as well as literary critics, have claimed not only a connection between literature and religion; they have also emphasized the essential role of religion in the development of civilization and thus of all literary artifacts. In fact, since time immemorial humankind has experienced the sacred, and this experience has led humans to develop rituals and hence some form of religious beliefs and practice. A common and universal experience among all primitive societies, according to anthropologists, scholars of religion, and philosophers (Rudolph Otto, *The Sacred*; Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*), the sacred and the religious experience, first expressed through external rituals and verbal signs, created myths that became the object of the written word and the subject matter of literature. *It would be utterly impossible to imagine, not only civilization as we know it, but also any kind of civilization at all, if one were to exclude the all-pervasive influence of humankind's multimillenary religious and sacred experience.*

Here are some of the most fundamental manifestations of the sacred and

¹ I deal here with some of the issues I have also discussed in the essay entitled "Religion and Literature" (*Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*), from which I borrow a few sentences, and to which I refer for an outline of religious literature in Italy. On this topic see, in regard to Italian literature, Fallani; Getto; Petrocchi; *Archivio storico per la storia della pietà*. For a broader context: *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*; Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. For a Christian approach to literature, see Edwards; Boyle; Detweiler and Jasper.

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religious experience: the awareness of the mystery as something that goes beyond our human understanding; the desire of something that exceeds human expectations, such as salvation viewed as some form of life after our earthly existence; the awareness of fault that sets humans against the deity, one another, as well as against their own selves; the recognition of guilt, transgression, and/or evil; and the possibility of transformation, atonement, and redemption. These and many other interrelated notions have created myths, which for Cassirer combine “a theoretical element and an element of artistic creation” (75); for, whenever “we find man we find him in possession of the faculty of speech and under the influence of the myth-making function” (109). In the case of Italy’s literary culture, one deals primarily, although not exclusively, with Christian myths, presented in countless genres in Italian as well as, for several centuries, in Latin.

It bears recalling, in fact, that the Italian vernacular claims as one of its earliest written documents Saint Francis’s so-called *Cantico delle creature*: a hymn of paramount importance for its religious character, ethical content, and aesthetic value. Consecrated, as it were, by St. Francis, the relation between religion and literature in Italy’s literary culture is deeply rooted in the Bible, where one finds, not only religion’s most fundamental elements situated within an anthropological perspective, but also revealed religion’s transformation of the anthropological notion of the sacred with the appearance in history of God Incarnate, who was sent by the Father and who died on the cross for humankind’s Redemption. Thus such biblical themes as sin and death (ever present in literature since Adam and Eve’s disobedience), violence (also present since Cain’s murder of his innocent brother), and redemption, which enters history with Christ’s death on the cross, become pervasive throughout Italian literature.²

The works of some extremely influential twentieth-century theorists — Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Northrop Frye (1912-1991), and René Girard (1923-), just to name a few — have been highly influential, while shedding light on the presence of religious categories in world literature.

Speaking of the fragmented temporality characteristic of certain novels, Bakhtin sees in them an axis that he describes as essentially religious: “These temporal segments of episodes from everyday life are, therefore, arranged, as it were, perpendicular to the pivotal axis of the novel, which is the sequence guilt

² One cannot but lament, in Italian scholarship, the lack of research tools available, for instance, to scholars of English literature, such as *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Furthermore, most dictionaries or encyclopedias dealing with the Bible (e.g., *Vocabulaire biblique*; *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*; *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*) either do not exist in Italian or are translations of works written in other languages. The essay by Lingua in this volume, dealing with contemporary theological thought in Italy, bears out similar gaps that contemporary Italian theologians seek to fill.

→ punishment → redemption → purification → blessedness [...]” (128). Bakhtin also points out that a similar narrative pattern runs through what he calls “hagiographic examples,” in which “the factor of metamorphosis is foregrounded (a sinful life → crisis → redemption → sainthood).” Furthermore, “The everyday-plane adventure is given in the form of an exposure to a sinful life, or of a repentant confession ” (129). In brief, even a theorist who lived under a Marxist regime could not but investigate the rise of the novel from a religious perspective.³

Northrop Frye’s entire opus focuses on the pervasiveness of the Bible, from *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to *Fables of Identity* (1962), *The Great Code* (1982), and *Words with Power* (1990). In the beginning of the *Great Code* (1982), he describes his original plan to “make a fairly thorough inductive survey of Biblical imagery and narrative, followed by some explanation of how *these elements of the Bible had set up an imaginative framework — a mythological universe [...] — within which Western literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating*” (xi; my emph.).

Contemporary theorists dealing with the sacred help us understand phenomena that have always existed in humankind’s history but that seem to plague contemporary history more so than ever before; namely, violence, with its close connection with the sacred. Foremost among all such theorists is René Girard, who has investigated violence in its relationship with the sacred in numerous and fascinating works, primarily with his 1972 volume on *La Violence and le sacré*, translated in English in 1977. For Girard violence characterizes also vengeance and legal punishment, because “the relationship between [religious] sacrifice and violence has remained obscure” (25). As we all know, for Girard violence is at the basis of the sacred:

The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s effort to master them. Tempests, forests fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence — violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten humankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.

(*Violence and the Sacred* 31)

Among all these violent happenings affecting humankind, death ranks foremost in everybody’s experience: the death of others, on which one can reflect, and one’s own death, which we anticipate but on which no one will ever be able to say anything:

Death is nothing more than the worst form of violence that can befall a man. It is no less

³ I refer to Morson and Emerson’s study for further investigation on the religious motifs present in Bakhtin (see in the index the entry “Christ, Christianity and religion” 505).

reasonable, therefore, to lump together all the possible causes of death, pathological and otherwise, than it is to create a separate category for only one of them: sickness.

(Violence and the Sacred 32)

And yet, despite the overwhelming presence of violence,

Neither primitive nor modern man has yet succeeded in identifying the microbe responsible for the dread disease of violence.

(Violence and the Sacred 33)

At the same time, a proper understanding of the sacred and the religious phenomenon may help humans cope with the mysterious reality of violence in humankind's history.

Several essays, purposefully grouped at the beginning of this volume, illustrate the religious phenomenon's pervasiveness throughout Italy's literary culture from different perspectives, ranging from contemporary theology and philosophy to mystical and literary discourse and a bibliographic overview of recent studies on this topic. Thus **Graziano Lingua**, in "Le nuove frontiere della teologia cattolica italiana," analyzes recent theological contributions by Italian scholars, who have lately sought to align themselves with the most progressive theologians across the Alps. In "Gianni Vattimo and the Return of the Sacred," **Randall Styers** focuses on the contributions to the issue of the sacred by one of Italy's foremost contemporary philosophers. Moving between philosophy and theology, **Alessandro Carrera** explores how the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino seeks to resolve the contradiction inherent in Being by proposing the notion of "Joy," with its Augustinian, Hölderlinian, and Schillerian overtones. Focusing on language — namely, the medium shared by mystical as well as literary texts — **Cristina Mazzoni** illustrates how both the mystical and literary discourses have a problematic, self-conscious, and often conflicted relationship with language. In "La finezza percettiva di Mircea Eliade, lettore," **Andrea Menetti** shows how a major scholar of the sacred, Mircea Eliade, reads perceptively Giovanni Papini's autobiographical account of his conversion. In concluding the volume's introductory section, **Olimpia Pelosi** offers an ample overview of the many and complex interconnections between Italian literature and the sacred during the last two decades.

The volume's second section unfolds chronologically, dealing with the religious phenomenon as it emerges from the works of several authors. Appositely opening this section, the three essays on Dante illustrate the many ways in which Dante's poetic and philosophical genius appropriates the religious and sacred. Accordingly, **Peter S. Hawkins** focuses on what can be called the essence of Dante's poetic rendering of the sacred and religious phenomenon. He writes: "As one looks at his writing from start to finish, there seems to be a spiritual autobiography in the making — an extended drama of

conversion, falling away, and re-conversion that joins his *Vita nuova* to the exilic writing of the *Convivio* and *Commedia*.” In his “Ovid and Parody in Dante’s *Inferno*,” **Thomas E. Peterson** illustrates the way in which Dante rereads and reinterprets a poet of pagan antiquity, Ovid, who cast such a large shadow over the Middle Ages. According to this reading, Dante’s reverses several episodes of physical and spiritual metamorphosis in Ovid to critique the pagan view of transformation as the illusion of change and perpetual iteration of the same. At the same time, as **Erminia Ardissino** argues in her essay on “Parodie liturgiche nell’*Inferno*,” Dante appropriates also liturgical Christian practices to render a topsy-turvy world by means of what the author calls a “theological parody.”

The four essays that follow deal with four Renaissance writers who belong to diverse cultural and artistic traditions and respond differently to the religious phenomenon. **Kristin Phillips-Court**’s essay on Feo Belcari’s *sacra rappresentazione* on the Annunciation illustrates, among many things, a marked humanization of the human figure as religious subject — a humanizing perspectivism that incorporates humanist concerns into a sacred context and thus also a new way to view and represent the sacred. Focusing on Vittoria Colonna’s Petrarchist poetic work, **Fiora A. Bassanese** points out the extent to which the imagery surrounding Christ crucified pervades Colonna’s poetry even when she describes her love for her husband. Dealing primarily with the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, **Massimo Lollini** analyzes the “deification” of the Renaissance artist as a consequence of the encounter of Neoplatonic and Christian trends, which will ultimately usher in secular autobiography. Focusing on a woman mystic, Isabella Berinzaga, **Olimpia Pelosi** points out the exemplarity as well as singularity of this mystic, who describes herself as “spoliata di sé e d’ogni cosa”: a process of self-humiliation tantamount to self-sacrifice.

Finally, the volume’s last essays further probe the interconnections of literature and the sacred in twentieth-century literature. Focusing on Ugo Betti, **Gaetana Marrone** argues that a major concern of Bettian theatre has to do with transcendence outside mere Christian parameters. In dealing with Giovanni Guareschi *Mondo piccolo*, **Alan Perry** adopts a Christian hermeneutic to explore sacred themes in several of Don Camillo’s short stories, ultimately emphasizing the sacrality of human conscience vis-à-vis oneself, others, and God. In “Berto e la morte di Dio,” **Francesca Parmeggiani** focuses on Berto’s ethical concerns with the presence of evil, suffering, and the fear of death, with all their implications for human free will. In her essay on Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra*, **Daniela Cavallaro** sees in the female protagonist Vannina a spiritual Journey, which the author develops through encounters with the sacred, Christian motifs, even Dantesque echoes. The two final essays — by **Giancarlo Lombardi** and **Ernesto Livorni**, respectively — conclude the volume. Both essays — Lombardi’s analysis of Marco Bellocchio’s cinematic rendering and

Livorni's essay on Cain in Italian literature and culture — bear precisely on the all-pervasive presence of the Bible and the sacred even in twentieth-century culture.

Contemporary Culture: Sacred Religion vs. Religion of Capitalism

Contrary to the predictions of all those opposed to the supernatural and religious phenomenon, primarily since the Enlightenment and pos-Enlightenment epoch onwards, God is not dead. In fact the twentieth century witnesses not only agnostic and secular views, but also a rediscovery of Christianity and religious spirituality, as the volume's introductory essays bear out.

Indeed, the individual's need for sacred and religious values may be borne out precisely by the two opposing camps' conflictual co-existence. In this regard Mircea Eliade's reflections on the sacred and profane in modern times are revealing. According to him, for

those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany; however, nonreligious man *in the pure state* is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most desacralized of modern societies.

*(The Sacred and the Profane 204; Eliade's emph.)*⁴

At the same time, such writers as novelist Alberto Moravia (1907-90), who seeks to portray an utterly non-religious and profane experience, reveal nevertheless what Eliade calls "vestiges of the behavior of the religious man," since modern man "will not be truly free until he has killed the last god" (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 1959). Eliade's line of thinking at the end of *The Sacred and the Profane* is worth pursuing further. For him, all people are, so to speak, haunted by some kind of religion:

Strictly speaking, the great majority of the irreligious are not liberated from religious behavior, from theologies and mythologies. They sometimes stagger under a whole magico-religious paraphernalia, which, however, has degenerated to the point of caricature and hence is hard to recognize for what it is. The process of desacralization of human existence has sometimes arrived at hybrid forms of black magic and sheer travesty of religion.

(The Sacred and the Profane 205-06)

⁴ Quoting the French theologian Congar, Lollini, in note 14 of this volume's essay, outlines four categories that enable believers to view and transform human realities into transcendent, sacred realities, namely: Christ, God Incarnate; the Christian sacraments; all other signs, verbal and non-verbal, that allow believers to communicate with God; and finally a fourth category, which enables humans to consecrate the whole of human and earthly existence to God.

Eliade further points out that “the countless ‘little religions’ that proliferate in all modern cities [...] still belong to the sphere of religion [...]” (206). Much more symptomatically, even such ideologies as Marxism are imbued “by a whole Judaeo-Christian messianic ideology,” including “its eschatological content,” “the final battle between Good and Evil,” and the belief in “*an absolute end to history*” (206-07). Eliade goes on to identify “degenerated or camouflaged religious behavior”: “Examples are nudism or the movements for complete sexual freedom, ideologies in which we can discern traces of the ‘nostalgia for Eden,’ the desire to re-establish the paradisaic state before the Fall, when sin did not exist and there was no conflict between the pleasures of the flesh and conscience” (207). Eliade’s list of “degenerated or camouflaged religious behavior” goes on: rituals of military initiations, “modern techniques, such as psychoanalysis” (resembling “initiatory descents into hell”), and “a considerable number of modern man’s acts and gestures” (208). Eliade points out that modern man’s existence cannot be otherwise, for “profane man is the descendant of *homo religiosus* and he cannot wipe out his own history — that is, the behavior of his religious ancestors which has made him what he is today” (209).

For Eliade, even such a modern notion as “existential crisis” is highly symptomatic of the individual’s inner religious core, for “every existential crisis once again puts in question both the reality of the world and man’s presence in the world”; and yet, Eliade points out, every existential crisis is “religious” insofar as, “on the archaic levels of culture *being* and *the sacred* are one. [...] Religion, in fact, is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis” because religion “makes existence ‘open’ to values that are no longer contingent or particular [...]” (210).

Finally, in concluding his essay, Eliade remarks that what in the *homo religiosus* is conscious has become unconscious in the *homo irreligiosus*; at the same time, the former has the potential of discovering life’s innumerable symbols and deciphering them in order “to ensure or re-establish the equilibrium of the psyche” (211), for “religion ensures its [life’s] integrity” (213). Thus, for Eliade, humankind has experienced two falls: the first one is the fall described in the Judaeo-Christian holy books; the second one is the one the modern irreligious individual currently experiences. Consequently, whereas primordial man was able to discover “the traces of God” still visible in the world, even though the humans’ “sense of the religious descended to the level of the ‘divided consciousness,’” with the second fall man has “fallen even further, into the depths of the unconscious; it has been ‘forgotten’” (213).

A contemporary theorist who cannot be accused of an excessively positive bias on behalf of the religious phenomenon, Giorgio Agamben, further expands on some of the concepts developed by Eliade in the 1950s by appropriating a statement by Walter Benjamin, whom he quotes:

Il capitalismo come religione è il titolo di uno dei più penetranti frammenti postumi di

Benjamin. Secondo Benjamin, il capitalismo non rappresenta soltanto, come in Weber, una secolarizzazione della fede protestante, ma è esso stesso essenzialmente un fenomeno religioso, che si sviluppa in modo parassitario a partire dal Cristianesimo.

(Profanazioni 91)

Agamben then goes on to identify the fundamental tenets of this secular religion:

1. È una religione culturale, forse la più estrema e assoluta che sia mai esistita. Tutto in essa ha significato solo in riferimento al compimento di un culto, non rispetto a un dogma o a un'idea. 2. Questo culto è permanente [...]. Non è possibile distinguere, qui, tra giorni di festa e giorni lavorativi, ma vi è un unico, ininterrotto giorno di festa, in cui il lavoro coincide con la celebrazione del culto. 3. Il culto capitalista non è diretto alla redenzione o all'espiazione di una colpa, ma alla colpa stessa. "Il capitalismo è forse l'unico caso di un culto non espianante, ma colpevolizzante [...]. Una mostruosa coscienza colpevole che non conosce redenzione si trasforma in culto, non per espianare in questo la sua colpa ma per renderla universale [...] e per catturare alla fine Dio stesso nella colpa. [...] Dio non è morto, ma è stato incorporato nel destino dell'uomo" [quotation of Benjamin with no bibliographical reference by Agamben].

(Profanazioni 91-92)

Agamben's conclusive comments on Benjamin's fragment are frightening because of their apocalyptic tone:

Proprio perché tende con tutte le sue forze non alla redenzione, ma alla colpa, non alla speranza, ma alla disperazione, il capitalismo come religione non mira alla trasformazione del mondo, ma alla sua distruzione.

(Profanazioni 92)

For Agamben, two further aspects of what he calls the "sacerdozio del culto capitalista" are also Freudian theory, which concerns the individual's psyche, and, as to man's external conduct, commercial consumerism (92-96). The latter has its own temple, the museum, for the "museo occupa esattamente lo spazio e la funzione che un tempo erano riservati al Tempio come luogo sacro del sacrificio" (96).

In brief, not only is the sacred and the religious phenomenon always accompanied by its opposite, the secular and the profane; these two opposite phenomena, in fact, are needed to define each other's opposite field of interest, as Mircea Eliade fully elaborates (*The Sacred and the Profane*, especially 20-65).

Most regrettably, one can also configure the two opposite notions of the sacred and the profane as two hostile armies, two opposite battle fields, two "centuries" or eras at war, as it were, with each other. Giorgio Petrocchi elucidates this view most appropriately at the beginning of a fundamental essay on this topic:

[...] la religiosità e l'irreligiosità si alternano, s'intrecciano, si danno battaglia (e battaglie cruentissime), sono persino disposte a incontrarsi sul terreno neutro della storiografia, tace o si nasconde l'una all'altra, e turba l'indifferente come il credente, laicizzando questi ovvero spingendo quello a "confessare" tutta intera la propria convinzione.

(125)

Several essays in this volume of *Annali* bear out this alternating, imbricating, and battling between the sacred and the profane. Giorgio Petrocchi goes even further concerning the issue of the sacred, relating it not only to the sphere of scholarly interests but situating it almost within a very personal context, namely, one's belief in God:

Senza l'interrogativo della presenza o dell'assenza di Dio troppi movimenti culturali (o tutti?) non si chiariscono fino in fondo.

(125)

Petrocchi's statement is unobjectionable, for "l'interrogativo della presenza o dell'assenza di Dio" resides at the basis of every investigation on the sacred. At the same time, although a scholar's belief in God may not be seen as a *sine qua non* for the proper understanding of the religious phenomenon, every negative bias and closed-mindedness toward the religious phenomenon are tantamount to an a priori refusal of the sacred or its negative evaluation. As in so many other issues that touch the core of human life, however, the religious issue hardly allows for neutrality or indifference, which so often are tantamount to hostility and denial, thus making it impossible for the scholar to open fully the sacred character that may lie at the center of a human artifact.

In brief, the manifestation of the sacred, which in Italy's literary culture cannot but include Christian elements, not only remains a viable option for the religious writer; it may also be sought in the secular world of contemporary culture, even in the social and reformist courses pursued by leftist and atheist groups before and after World War II. The existential angst and the search for God that characterize twentieth-century literature find their models, for instance, in the novels of Grazia Deledda and the theatre of Ugo Betti and Diego Fabbri, whose frames of reference are Catholic. Poetry as a means of transcending the uncertainty and alienation of daily life is represented by Umberto Saba; Giuseppe Ungaretti; Clemente Rebora; and Margherita Guidacci, while the concerns with ethics, social justice, violence and war, and also a more openly religious standpoint, are explored by the likes of Giosuè Borsi, Giovanni Papini — particularly for his popular biography *Storia di Cristo* (1921), following his 1921 religious conversion — David Maria Turolto, and Mario Pomilio, among the many that could be quoted.

Ultimately, all of these aspects, which pervade contemporary Italian literature, may also be read in light of the presence of the religious and the sacred, which no longer manifest themselves as in medieval and Renaissance

times but in ways appropriate to our current epoch. In brief, in spite of an ever-present secular or profane tendency that develops particularly from the Enlightenment onwards, the pervasiveness of the religious phenomenon throughout Italy's literary culture can hardly be overemphasized. On the basis of the all-pervasive presence of the religious and the sacred in all human artifacts, one should not only refrain from excluding a religious (and ethical) approach to literature or at the very least some concerns with this phenomenon; in most instances, such an approach should be present, if not as a fundamental and principal approach, at least with some degree of awareness, and in conjunction with its most direct and close ally: an ethical approach to literature.

One must also bear in mind that ancient classical literature's presence in Italy's culture — an indebtedness often emphasized by non-religious scholars — has come down to us through the millenary Christian rewritings and interpretations of that classical heritage. Thus, in a fundamental work on *La città divisa*, Francesco Bruni states that this “confluenza tra la ragione classica e la fede cristiana [...] è il contributo italiano alla cultura occidentale” (15). In fact Bruni goes even further, pointing out, on the one hand, the bias against religion and Christianity among many practitioners of Italian letters and criticism and, on the other, the presence of the Christian and religious element in our literary culture:

Certo che *intendere la religione in termini puramente negativi elimina* dalla storia italiana, anche intellettuale e culturale, non solo ciò che è frutto della cultura religiosa, ma anche ciò che deriva dall'incontro del classicismo umanistico con il cristianesimo, e cioè *quasi tutto. Fatta questa sottrazione, resta molto poco.*

(*La città divisa* 14; my emph.)

Bruni's statement—“Fatta questa sottrazione, resta molto poco”—should be borne in mind by all practitioners of Italian letters. It is my hope that *Annali's* twenty-fifth volume may be able to contribute in some ways to this fundamental aspect of our profession as scholars and educators.

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