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Genova, Carlo

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## Young Activists in Catholic Groups. Meanings of Participation Across the Boundaries of the Religious Field

*Carlo Genova*

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### **1. Author information**

*Carlo Genova*

Department of Cultures Politics and Society, University of Turin, Italy

### **2. Author e-mail address**

*Carlo Genova*

E-mail: [carlo.genova@unito.it](mailto:carlo.genova@unito.it)

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# *Young Activists in Catholic Groups. Meanings of Participation Across the Boundaries of the Religious Field*

Carlo Genova\*

Corresponding author:  
Carlo Genova  
E-mail: carlo.genova@unito.it

## **Abstract**

Most research about young people and religion in the Western context underlines their growing distance from institutionalised forms of religious participation, and explains it as a consequence of the weakness of their religious frames, as well as of other factors that interfere with the translation of these frames into forms of action. At the basis of this interpretation there is the hypothesis that these forms of participation are means of actualisation of religious values on the basis of religious beliefs and worldviews. Referring to recent research about young activists in Catholic groups in Italy, the article shows instead that their individual frames of involvement are variegated, and largely go beyond the boundaries of the religious field: religious factors are often not even considered as fundamental for collective identification, which is also rooted in shared non-religious distinctive meanings, practices and lifestyles.

Keywords: youth, Catholicism, religious groups.

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of the article is to reflect upon youth participation in the religious field, on the basis of recent research about young activists in Catholic groups in Italy. In most of the surveys, participation in religious groups is considered as one of the main topics through which religious behaviour can be investigated, as well as one of the fundamental indicators of religiosity. And even from a

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\* Department of Cultures Politics and Society, University of Turin, Italy.

quantitative point of view, this form of participation is a relevant, although minority, phenomenon, considering that – in the Italian context, to which the article refers – it involves approximatively 5% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, little attention has been dedicated to the topic, at least from a sociological perspective, so the starting point is to identify the main distinctive traits of youth religiosity in present society, in order to consider the results of research against this background.

During the last twenty years several studies have shown that, in the Western context, although traditional forms of religious identification and religious action have declined among young people, this has not implied a generalised weakening of faith, religiosity and spirituality in their lives (Arnett, Jensen, 2002; Braskamp 2008; Koenig, McGue, Iacono, 2008; Miller, Dixon-Roman, 2011; Smith, Denton, 2005; Smith, Snell, 2009): religion still represents for many of them a core reference (Jung, Park, 2020), an important terrain of identity building, through which they situate themselves in their social and cultural contexts.

The point is that a growing portion of youth tend to question religiosity and spirituality, and to adopt on these terrains an exploratory approach (McNamara Barry, Nelson, Davarya, Urry, 2010; Palmisano, Pannofino, 2017); their faith and forms of action are thus more connected with personal sensitivities and creativity than with institutional dogmas and worship; and as a result they tend to construct personal sets of beliefs and practices instead of accepting those provided by their parents or by other “vertical” agencies of religious socialisation (Cusack, 2011; Horwath, Lees, Sidebotham, 2012; Madge, Hemming, 2017; Putnam, Campbell, 2010; Sherkat, 2014; Smith, Snell, 2009; Twenge et al., 2015; Uecker, Mayrl, Stroepe, 2016; Wuthnow, 2007).

In parallel, young people’s beliefs, affiliations and forms of participation in the religious field more and more often follow differentiated trajectories (Arnett, Jensen, 2002; Chan, Tsai, Fuligni, 2015; Lopez, Huynh, Fuligni, 2011); and the boundaries they identify among traditional religiosity, new forms of religiosity or spirituality, and the non-religious terrain are increasingly fuzzy (Gareau, Bullivant, Beyer, 2019). Self-construction, choice, and reflection thus emerge as the main keywords: it is the so-called “subjective turn” (Collins-Mayo, 2012), concerning both belief and action, and operating among both religiously involved and religiously indifferent individuals (Collins-Mayo, Dandelion, 2010; Giordan, 2010; Madge, Hemming, Stenson, 2014; Vincett, Dunlop, Sammet, Yendell, 2015; see also Francis, Robbins, Astley, 2005; Ziebertz, Kay, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Data from European Values Study 2017, nation: Italy, cases (youth, 18-34): 475.

Can these trends be observed even in the Italian context? As is well known, in Italy a single religious identity, Catholicism, was adopted by almost the entire population, and the pervasiveness of religion both on the social and the cultural levels was dominant. However, the most recent investigation into religiosity in Italy chose the word “uncertain” to summarise the present situation (Cipriani, 2020; Garelli, 2020), so evidently something has changed.

It is always sensitive in social studies to talk about the decline of religiosity because, even since the foundation of the sociology of religion, all major scholars have underlined this progressive weakening, at least in the Western context. However, considering today’s situation in Italy from a diachronic perspective, on the basis of the most traditional indicators this trend seems to be undeniable: comparing data from 1981 and 2017, it is possible to observe that belonging to a religious denomination decreased among adults from 96% to 82% (a 15% decline) and among youth from 89% to 69% (a 23% decline); weekly or more frequent attendance at religious services decreased among adults from 41% to 30% (a 26% decline) and among youth from 21% to 15% (a 30% decline); daily prayer outside religious services decreased among adults from 43% to 29% (a 29% decline) and among youth from 27% to 17% (a 38% decline); declarations of “being a religious person” decreased among adults from 89% to 80% (an 11% decline) and among youth from 77% to 67% (a 14% decline); declarations that “religion is important in life” decreased among adults from 35% to 25% (a 20% decline) and among youth from 25% to 15% (a 39% decline).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Data from European Values Study, nation: Italy, cases: youth (18-34) 1981=622 and 2017=475, adults (35 and over) 1981=723 and 2017=1802. As is well known, these trends are not distinctive only of the Italian context, and involve more in general at least the European context, in particular the Western area, where a general decrease can be observed in declarations of religiosity, in declarations of belonging to a specific religion, and especially in declarations of regular participation in religious rites and of regular (daily) prayer, and the same trends are confirmed also in the sector of the population to which the article refers, that is, Catholic youth (see data from European Social Survey 2002 and 2018 and from Pew Research Center (2017a and 2017b)). But the fact that similar tendencies can be observed even in the Italian context, where the connection with a religious tradition was stronger, is particularly relevant, and oriented the choice of focussing on this context for an in-depth analysis of participation in religious groups (on these processes in the Italian context see also Garelli (2020), where comparing present data with those in Cesareo et al. (1995) it is shown that – considering the whole population – non-believers increased from 18% to 24%, certain-believers declined from 51% to 39%, people who declare they belong to the Catholic religion shifted from 89% to 76%, people who declare they attend religious rites weekly moved from 31% to 22%, and people who declare they pray daily moved from 41% to 26%).

The weakening of religiosity in Italy is then clear, and it is particularly intense among youth: not by chance, one among the latest studies on faith and religion in this sector of the population (Garelli, 2016) is entitled “Little atheists are growing up”.

What’s more, although still 62% of young people declare themselves to be Catholic, among these 93% do not belong to any religious group, 64% attend rites less than once a month, 48% declare religion to be “not very” or “not at all” important in their lives, 42% have weak or no trust in the Church, 38% pray less than once a month, 18% declare God to be weakly or “not at all” important in their lives.<sup>3</sup> A widespread disconnection between belonging on the one hand and believing and behaving on the other is undeniable.

But the most interesting point is that, among Catholic youth a disconnection is observable also between believing and behaving, in two different directions. The first direction is widely known: among those who declare religion to be very important in their lives, 84% pray once a week or more often, but only 47% attend rites weekly or more often, and only 19% belong to a religious organisation; among those who declare God to be very important in their lives, 84% pray once a week or more often, but only 43% attend rites weekly or more often, and only 20% belong to a religious organisation; among those who declare profound confidence in the Church, 82% pray once a week or more often, but only 51% attend rites weekly or more often, and only 27% belong to a religious organisation.

The second direction of disconnection is more unexpected: among those who attend religious rites weekly or more often, only 52% declare religion to be very important, only 52% declare they are very religious, only 46% declare God to be very important in their lives, only 33% declare profound confidence in the Church; among those who declare they belong to a religious organisation, only 55% declare religion to be very important, only 65% declare God to be very important in their lives; among those who declare they pray once a week or more often, only 39% declare God to be very important in their lives, only 35% declare religion to be very important, only 31% declare profound confidence in the Church.

Given these data, the standard interpretation of religious participation seems to be called into question: traditional forms of action in the religious field

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<sup>3</sup> Data in this paragraph and the two subsequent paragraphs are from European Values Study 2017, nation=Italy, religious belonging=Catholic, cases=293. Further recent data about youth and religion in Italy, confirming this picture, can be found in Crea et al. (2014), Triani (2014), Garelli (2016), Baiocco et al. (2017), Barcaccia et al. (2017), Palmisano and Pannofino (2017) and Bignardi (2018). For a qualitative exploration of youth religiosity in Italy, see also Aiello (2020), Cocorullo (2020) and Costa (2020).

are usually considered as the actualisation of a set of values (concerning “how reality should be”) through their translation into specific aims and means (concerning “how reality can be changed”) on the basis of correspondent wider beliefs and worldviews (concerning “how reality is”). The problem is that, following this approach, the first direction of disconnection which has been previously highlighted could be interpreted as a missing translation of religious attitudes into correspondent forms of action, but the second direction is much more difficult to decipher.

Recalling the literature which has been previously mentioned, it is, however, possible to propose a different interpretative hypothesis: youth forms of action in the religious sphere could be rooted not only, or mainly, in religious worldviews, beliefs and values proposed by doctrine and institutions, but also, or even mainly, in personal sensitivities, which could largely go beyond the boundaries of the religious field. But if this hypothesis is right, how can collective forms of action in this field still exist? Upon what elements of collective identification can they be based? How can the groups manage the potential heterogeneity of the different individual drivers of participation? Can these forms of action still be considered as forms of religious participation?

To delve into this interpretative hypothesis, and try to begin to answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate in depth the meanings and the representations which are at the basis of young people’s action in the religious field. In this perspective, the subsequent sections of the article will present the results of a research which focussed on a specific phenomenon, that is youth engagement in religious groups, which has been chosen because it is quite traditional – so the religious factors should have stronger relevance as drivers of engagement, and is collective – and therefore the dialectic between individual meanings and collective perspectives on intervention should be more clearly visible.

## **2. Method**

The article is based upon research about the young activists of Catholic groups in Northern Italy. Twelve groups have been considered in the research, from the three main forms of these groups, respectively oriented towards spirituality, education and social intervention. The research was conducted through 36 qualitative interviews (18 female and 18 male; all 18-34 years old; 16 students, 17 workers, 2 student-workers, 1 unemployed) and focussed on eight main topics: individual biographical paths; individual meanings of participation; collective distinctive traits and lifestyles; collective activities; collective topics of



intervention and aims; organisational instruments and strategies; collective representations and narratives; networks of cooperation.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then processed through a qualitative content analysis approach (Boeije, 2010: chapters 5-6; Kuckartz, 2014: chapters 2-3). The first coding grid was developed from the original structure of thematic unities which were at the basis of the research. During this first reading this grid has been applied, and in parallel new emergent topics of interest have been added to the grid. A second coding was then conducted on all the interviews through this expanded grid, attributing a thematic code to every significant portion of the interview. Subsequently a third step of coding was developed, considering each thematic category separately and looking for the different positions with reference to this category which emerged from each interviewee, with the aim of elaborating an internal typology as an instrument of systematisation and synthesis. Finally, reading the different categories with a transversal approach, the analysis has aimed at identifying possible emergent patterns of co-occurrence among these positionings in the different categories.

For the aims of the article, the following sections will focus on three topics: collective perspectives of action, individual meanings of participation, elements of collective identification and cohesion.

### **3. Perspectives of action**

First of all, it can be useful to consider the representation given by the young activists of their groups' perspectives of action, on the basis of their description of present society, of collective goals and of strategies of intervention: these elements should provide a general interpretative frame through which to consider their engagement in these groups.

The most striking traits of these descriptions, however, are confusion and fragmentation, revealing the difficulty of the young interviewees in proposing a general synthetic portrait of this society, its main problems and the role of Catholic activism inside it (and this result is particularly challenging bearing in mind that, in past decades, this sort of "grand narratives" were the core frames of the activists' participation in the religious field). Today's society is thus presented as very complex, fragmented, ever-changing, and therefore difficult to grasp; most of the activists seem not to have a systematic narration about it, and tend to connect this lack with that complexity. Nevertheless, their fragmented pictures reveal some common traits, rooted in an overall critical judgement: in their eyes, present society is "corrupted", "superficial", "utilitarian", "egocentric", and "consumerist"; some interviewees are more radical, others more moderate; some are more specific, others vaguer; but no

mainly positive description emerges, and no structured narration about the main problems, their causes, guilty parties or possible strategies of action and solutions.

[Present society] is made up of extraordinary consumerism, everything is based upon who has the most beautiful clothes, who is most active. (Interview 3, F19, high school student).<sup>4</sup>

It's a very complex and variegated society. (Interview 20, F29, MA, psychologist).

It's a society in crisis. (Interview 31, M24, high school diploma, casual work)

It's an egocentric society. (Interview 24, F30, MA, teacher).

It's a utilitarian society. (Interview 32, M28, high school diploma, public employee).

It's absolutely negative and corrupted. (Interview 35, M19, high school student).

However, besides this fragmented and uncertain, but undoubtedly critical, image of present society as a whole, most of the young activists also refer to the presence within it of collectivities where different values, attitudes and sensitivities exist. It is not easy to understand the roots of this presence: sometimes it is identified in the cultural models characterising some social sectors, or more specific social contexts, or even groups and families, and then reproduced through processes of socialisation; but at other times a sort of “innate” individual sensitivity is brought into play as an explanation, although this reference remains vague and blurry. The groups the interviewees are involved in are often cited as examples of these sorts of exceptional contexts, where individuals with special sensitivities meet and develop them. Youth in general is instead not rarely described as the mirror par excellence of the ambivalence characterising present society: on the one hand many young people have absorbed the negative traits of this society, which on its part often stigmatises them and does not help them to express their potential; but on the other hand, precisely youth – being still less deeply connected with predominant sociocultural models – is often the most active sector of the population in developing critical views about this society and in acting to change it.

The activists' representations of the general goals of their groups must be then considered against this background, and could be synthesised in three main perspectives. First of all there is a religious and spiritual perspective, that is, giving to the members of the group, and more in general to the individuals who attend its activities, the opportunity to explore, express and deepen their faith. Several interviewees explicitly clarified that “proselytism” is not a goal of their

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<sup>4</sup> Each citation from interviews report: ID number, gender, age, degree, employment.

group, and often also added that considerable freedom is allowed with regard to faith; nevertheless, at the same time, “following the Christian message” and “giving other people the opportunity to meet it” are directions of action which have been frequently cited. The main idea is that the group makes available a social context where it is possible for the individuals to cultivate and enhance their religious and spiritual sensitivities.

Surely the main aim is to build a big community which is connected to the Church, but not just as ... the obligation of going one hour to Mass on Sunday morning, to listen to the priest's sermon, but to build a community [...] so that [...] who is there, present, [is] near you not only as a person but also in prayer. (Interview 3, F19, high school student).

The aim is to share the Word of the Lord, [...] to reflect upon our way of living, our faith, our experience as Christian citizens, day by day in our everyday relationships with other people. So at school, at the gym, or on a train, it is in all everyday experiences. This sharing is supported by the Word of the Lord which is read in that moment and adapted to our experience; it is shared and we engage [...] in applying a part of this Word. (Interview 24, F30, MA, teacher).

A second perspective is connected with goals of education of society, in particular of young generations, through the dissemination of interests, sensitivities, and even wider cultural models and values, which – in the eyes of the activists – are connected to their religious beliefs, but are also considered as valid, desirable, beyond these beliefs, that is, more in general as human principles. In this case, with its activities, the group no longer looks inside but outside its boundaries.

The main goal is the growth of children both in faith and as persons, also because they are quite young and therefore we always try to make them understand how they should behave [...] within a group, [...] or when they are with adults. (Interview 2, F18, high school student).

We want to raise the awareness of people, we want them to become aware of their possibility of doing concretely something for the surrounding reality, [...] of the fact that all of us, in our small way, one piece at time, little by little, we can really influence ... (Interview 33, M27, high school diploma, unemployed).

A third and final perspective of action is characterised by goals of social intervention. Again, the reference is outside the group, to society in general or some specific sectors of this society. This perspective, however, reveals

different declinations: it can be intended in a more political way, consisting in an attempt to influence decision-making bodies; or in a more civic way, through concrete and direct intervention on specific problems and sensitive situations; or, finally, in a more socio-cultural direction, consisting in the adoption and promotion of distinctive practices and lifestyles through which the wider social and cultural change doesn't derive from top-down decisions and interventions, but from the direct adoption of different ways of living by a growing number of individuals, even before the acquisition of correspondent worldviews, beliefs and values.

Our main goal is to involve young people in the world of politics and in the world of current events. The world of politics is not intended necessarily as ... to form a party, or something else, or run as a candidate [...]. But as to feel responsible for what is happening around us, and do something, even very simple, to be informed about what is happening and know how it works. Because unfortunately for too many young people, and not only the young, this is not the situation, [...] even because at school there is no education from this point of view. And at the same time, our other goal, is to try [...] to be able to start a debate, without limiting ourselves to one position, but with freedom and various opinions. (Interview 7, M20, high school diploma, university student).

[The aim is] to concretise what you believe in. [...] We are all moved by a common faith, by being Christians, so this makes you feel compelled [...] and also makes you feel the beauty of having a certain lifestyle and expending yourself to help other people, to improve the world around you, helping those who have no voice, those who are oppressed and marginalised, who are the ones who need it most. Let's say that it is trying to be as coherent and radical as possible, in a good way, with respect to what the evangelical message is, to what your faith is, to what gives a little meaning to your life and to what surrounds you. (Interview 19, M34, MA, medical doctor).

On the whole, the young activists' narrations about present society and their groups' perspectives of action are less and less structured and coherent than expected, revealing a weak presence of collective worldviews in their groups. But this trait doesn't emerge in their discourses as something problematic; it is rather somehow taken for granted, somehow justified and, actually, seems to be considered not very relevant for the "good health" of the group.

#### **4. Meanings of participation**

Since it can't be taken for granted that personal motivations of involvement in a group strictly correspond to its collective perspective of action, and considering the weakness and fragmentation of these perspectives which emerged during the interviews, it is now necessary to consider which meanings involvement in a religious group has for the young activists.

The first result of this analysis is certainly the complexity of the sets of meanings emergent from their narrations, to the point that it has not been easy to identify specific elements which are shared by most of the activists. Nevertheless, a typological synthesis of the individual frames can be attempted.

As was expected, at the basis of these forms of engagement there are religious meanings. Even on this level, however, participation in the group and its activities is connected with three different declensions: in the first, it is described as a way of cultivating faith, and the group is then a context where exploring, discussing and collectively living religious sensitivities take place; in the second, involvement in the group is a way of actualising faith, in particular through the development of activities with positive effects on the social context; in the third and last approach, it is a way of spreading faith, or more precisely of disseminating those representations, beliefs and values which are those of the individual and shared in the group.

I am studying Engineering, so I was in a strongly 'technical' context, where there was no space for religious questions, and I was looking for a Christian voice ... I was looking for a synthesis between the two aspects that are in me, and this was possible in \*\*\* because all the topics are addressed without omitting the spiritual aspect. (Interview 29, M24, BA, university student).

These religious meanings are somehow the reason for engagement which one most expected to be at the basis of youth involvement in a Catholic group. Actually, however, this is only one of the emergent set of meanings. Besides religious motivations there are in fact also reasons of social engagement, so that some young activists present their personal involvement in a religious group as a way of being actors of social improvement and social change. Three different approaches emerge in this sense. In the first, engagement in the group is narrated either as direct intervention in social problems, in aspects of present society which must be changed, or as action putting pressure on decision-making centres with regard to large-scale problems, with a more political approach. In the second perspective, personal engagement is oriented at sensitising wide sectors of the population about these problems and their potential solutions, with an approach which could be then defined as one of

cultural intervention. In the third approach, engagement in the group is intended as a way of disseminating good practices and lifestyles: more precisely, the group of the activists as a milieu gives the opportunity of imagining, experimenting and cultivating these practices and lifestyles; its public image, its public activity and its strategies of communication allow propagating them in the wider society.

Becoming more aware of the problems that exist at a social level, both here and at a macro level, in the world, I have been increasingly interested in the social sphere, in service, ... cooperation and so on, and I tried to find spaces where I could [...] give a little more coherence to my principles, a little more sense to what I believe in and therefore [...] I had different experiences. And perhaps one of the most significant was with a group, linked to the parish, [...] giving assistance to street girls, prostitutes, assistance of various kinds, but ... in any case ... human contact, we tried to supply a minimum of dignity through human contact. [...] I cooperated for some time with dormitories [...] for homeless people, [...] sometimes I went to the working-class kitchens, then I joined an activity more ... let's say cultural, a film club, always with \*\*\* and, since the youth formation path of \*\*\* gave me so much, when I was asked in my turn to be part of the formation team of this path, I threw myself into this thing. (Interview 19, M34, MA, medical doctor).

Finally, at the basis of the young activists' engagement there is a variegated set of self-oriented reasons. The group is thus described as a context in which they gain knowledge and skills and have new experiences, both because of its qualities as milieu and of the exceptional traits of its members. But it is also a context where the individual has opportunities to express and cultivate personal interests and sensitivities, as well as to see these sensitivities accepted, recognised and valued. And finally, involvement in the group can be connected with the opportunities it gives of building social networks, finding friends, and then cultivating interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps, thinking about it now, one explanation could be the need to feel myself useful and part of something. I've never been a very sociable guy and I've never had so many friends. I thought that this way I could make friends, or at least meet people, and learn to be a little more open with others. Later I discovered a new way of living life that made me more peaceful and that made me feel useful to myself and other people. (Interview 31, M24, high school diploma, casual work).

On the whole the set of meanings, of reasons, at the basis of youth activism in religious groups thus emerges as clearly multifaceted, and three further elements makes it even more complex: several among the different meanings

which have been described are usually co-present as reasons of engagement for each individual; the individual sets of meanings are strongly differentiated, so that it is very difficult to identify general profiles; in most cases, although the religious meanings are present, they cannot be considered as either universal or primary in these personal sets.

Coherently, although for many interviewees the present group of engagement is the first context of involvement, for those who changed one or two groups before the present one, these transitions are usually described as “fluid”, “natural”, not problematic, and at their basis there was some dissatisfaction with one of these different potential meanings of engagement, but with no one of them prevailing upon the others.

Finally, it is very interesting to observe that, despite the complexity of the personal sets of meanings which emerged during the interviews, this has never been commented on as a sensitive aspect, which could “make problems” either for the individual or for the group: as will be shown in the subsequent section, collective identification and cohesion have roots in other terrains.

## **5. Elements of collective identification**

In previous sections attention has been paid first to the young activists’ representation of their groups’ perspectives of action, and then to their narrations about personal reasons at the basis of their engagement in these groups. In order to consider in depth their frames of participation, however, a further element must be considered, that is, the informal elements of collective identification and mutual recognition which they describe as characterising their groups. Precisely these elements could, in fact, represent indirect indicators of the individual reasons of participation: on the one hand, it is not justified to form the hypothesis that the cohesion in the group, its collective identity, is necessarily rooted in its formal and public frames of intervention (worldviews, goals, strategies), in particular considering the weakness of these frames which has emerged in the first section of the analysis; on the other hand, bearing in mind the variety and fragmentation of individual meanings which have emerged in the second section of the analysis, other collective roots of cohesion and identification are expected to emerge.

Not surprisingly, one of the elements which have been most frequently cited by the interviewees as reference of identification is a frame of shared religious beliefs, that is, the Catholic faith. Nevertheless, deepening this topic, the picture becomes much more complex. In some cases belonging to the Catholic religion is described as almost compulsory to be involved in the group, and even the fact of being a practising Catholic for someone is, more or less

explicitly, a necessary prerequisite. But this approach is actually very rare. Most of the interviewees declared not only that religious practice is considered as something concerning only the individual, but also that, although non-believers would probably find difficulties in being involved in the group, they would be welcome in any case. Some interviewees asserted that some non-believers are indeed present in the group: maybe they sometimes experience a contradiction between their beliefs and the predominant discourses, but their presence is an opportunity, and not a problem, for the group. In parallel, several interviewees declared that, although a religious and spiritual sensitivity is a relevant element of mutual recognition, in practice the way in which this sensitivity is cultivated is strongly differentiated, so that even belonging to the Catholic religion “is not so relevant”, and few-but-significant interviewees declared that in their groups there are also agnostics, atheists and even some Muslims.

Given this complex situation with regard to religious beliefs and identities, and given the connection between Catholic identity and political positions which characterised the Italian context in the past, a further element of collective identification in the groups could be politics; actually, however, the situation with regard to political views turned out to be even more complex and fragmented. Following the interviewees’ narrations, none of the groups which have been considered in the research has an official political position, and personal political sensitivities of the young members are neither relevant nor a topic of debate in the group. Moreover, a general principle of individual freedom with regard to political positions is often explicitly asserted, sometimes intended as a value of reference, at other times as a consequence of the weak relevance attributed to politics (mainly understood as parliamentary dialectics), at yet other times as a strategic choice in order to avoid potential internal conflicts. Even in those few cases where a predominant political sensitivity is described as being present in the group, it turns out to be generic (described in most cases simply as “left-wing” or “centre-left”, with clear difficulties in going more in depth<sup>5</sup>), and it is also always presented as a matter of individual sensitivities and not a group’s official position.

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<sup>5</sup> This declared prevalence of left-wing positions should be investigated more in depth in order to be correctly interpreted. Some interviewees asserted that it characterises the “Catholic world” in general. Given that some of the groups which have been considered in the research are associations of social intervention, and given that this milieu is in Italy more connected with left-wing sensitivities, this could explain the general result. Actually, however, declarations about the prevalence of left or center-left positions have been made even in groups with an educational or spiritual approach, so further research is needed to interpret this aspect.



Neither religious nor political frames emerge then as fundamental – or even compulsory – references for being involved in the groups. Most of the collective activities have, in the activists' eyes, a Catholic matrix, but the set of values and goals which composes this matrix is described as valid even for non-believers, being more connected with "human" than "religious" principles, and being its religious declination simply one of the possible ways of interpreting it. Thus in several groups a relevant element of collective identification is rather represented by specific and concrete goals of intervention. But two further, much more unexpected, elements of collective identification are in most cases equally – or even more – important.

The first is made up of the concrete collective activities organised by the group: for some of the young activists these are a collective benchmark in themselves, quite independently from their aims. In these cases, the point is that, whereas the goals of the group are perceived as elements which are common with several other Catholic groups or non-religious voluntary associations, it is the specific "style of action" that is considered as distinctive of the group with respect to all the others, and that becomes consequently an element of collective identification.

The second element is those more informal, individual although collectively adopted, distinctive practices and sensitivities shared by the group. Several interviewees describe the style of life of their group's members as "normal" and "simple", with no distinguishing signs. Exploring this topic a bit more in depth, however, in many cases this "normality" turned out to be made up of specific attitudes, first of all connected with consumption: normality appears thus to be synonymous of sobriety, refusal of consumerism, so that attention to environmental sustainability, recycling, fair trade, ethical consumption, or even vegetarianism often emerge as common traits. In parallel, elements such as sensitivity towards social problems, interest in social work and volunteering, as well as a generic high level of sociability and appreciation of collective activities, are sometimes cited. Cultural traits such as tastes in music, books, movies, sport, leisure are instead more variegated, and only rarely represent relevant benchmarks.

Focussing on these distinctive everyday practices, it is particularly interesting that in some cases they are described as a form of concretisation of the general principles which are at the basis of the group's values and goals; but in several other cases this vertical connection seems to be less relevant, and the representation is more of a group of individuals who, horizontally, happen to share these practices and sensitivities, without an explicit connection with a collective project. Significantly, in many narrations, the sequence of the individual adoption of the aforementioned practices, the development of these sensitivities, and the moment of entry in the association, is very confused; it is

not clear whether sensitivities and practices are stimulated by the group, or are traits characterising the individuals; nor is it possible to say whether individual sensitivities precede the adoption of practices, or if the latter are adopted – joining the group – through processes of imitation, and those sensitivities emerge only subsequently.

Moreover, it must be noted that “diversity” and “variety” are two frequently recurring words in the description of the groups given by the young activists, and the presence of a marked heterogeneity of sensitivities and styles in the group is repeatedly underlined by several interviewees, both as a matter of fact and as a defended principle.

The last element of collective identification which emerged from the interviews is social relationships, interpersonal ties. For most of the activists the group in which they are engaged is also a group of friends, and is frequently described as a “community”; as a consequence, shared activities and times of meeting also often take place outside official activities. The main point is that, in the eyes of some interviewees, these interpersonal ties are not produced by the fact of sharing worldviews, values or beliefs; they are somehow autonomous, or at most simply rooted in the sharing of personal sensitivities.

Finally, reflecting upon all those situations where dialectics, disagreements and debates emerge in the group, most of the interviewees declared that two fundamental elements allow them to alleviate these tensions: awareness of general beliefs and goals on the one hand, but also strength of relationships on the other, with no clear prevalence of one of these two elements. General aims and beliefs, concrete everyday practices, social ties and friendship thus emerge, on the whole, more as elements of identification and cohesion of equal weight than factors which are organisable in a hierarchy of relevance.

## **6. Discussion**

At the beginning of this article, two main starting points about youth religiosity in Italy were presented: first, all the main traditional indicators of religious believing, behaving and belonging show a growing weakness of religiosity in this context over the last forty years; second, a disconnection between these three dimensions of religiosity is more and more widespread. Particularly on the basis of the second aspect, the standard interpretation of the different forms of action in the religious field as forms of actualisation of religious values on the basis of correspondent religious beliefs and worldviews was called into question. The article aimed thus at exploring different interpretive hypotheses investigating young activists’ engagement in Catholic groups.

Three main results emerged from the research. First: the meanings that involvement in these groups has for each activist are multiple and variegated; faith, social intervention, self-formation, self-expression and search for social relationships are the main factors of engagement; several of these factors are often co-present in the individual's sets of meanings and equally often religious meanings are not predominant. Second: the individuals involved in a group rarely share a unitary and structured religious narration, a collective frame of interpretation of reality and action; general official goals of the group can be religious and spiritual, but also educational, or of social intervention, and, again, the first ones are not necessarily predominant. Third: a religious frame is only rarely perceived by the members of the groups as the fundamental, or even necessary, element of collective identification; collective aims and activities as well as shared individual attitudes and practices, and even social ties, a sense of "we" which is not rooted in other previous elements, are often described as having an equally – or even more – relevant role for reciprocal recognition and cohesion.

These results show that the standard model is not efficient in interpreting young activists' involvement in Catholic groups in Italy. Several scholars in the last decade highlighted the intersection between processes of de-institutionalisation and personalisation of religiosity as characterising the Western context (see in particular Beck, 2010; Day, 2011; Turner, 2011: part II; Gorski et al., 2012; Giordan, Pace, 2014; Fuchs, Rüpke, 2015). This intersection is rooted in the disconnection between believing, belonging and behaving previously underlined by Davie (1990). Even among the young activists of the Catholic groups this processes were confirmed. Catholic beliefs and Catholic identity are relevant factors of participation, as well as of collective identification, but weaker than expected. More widely, both religious and non-religious elements emerged as core goals of their groups, as core factors of collective identification among the members of these groups, and as core reasons for their engagement. For some of the activists it seems possible even to talk about a form of "behaving without believing", given the weakness and fragmentation of their religious frames, with "belonging" referring more to the specific group of involvement than to the Catholic religion (on these aspects see Genova, 2012; Van de Poll, 2013; Kavanagh, 2016; Berzano, 2019). In addition, although some correspondence has been observed among groups' perspectives of action, elements of collective identification, and individual reasons for engagement, this correspondence was on the whole quite blurry and surely weaker than the standard model suggested.

But a further and quite surprising result has emerged. It could be expected that this misalignment between the religious connotation of the groups, their collective perspectives of action, and the individual frames of participation of

their members was considered by the young activists as a potential problem and a risk for the group. Actually this is not the case: although in the groups de-institutionalisation and personalisation of participation don't lead to individualisation, and this participation maintains collective form, however freedom and autonomy of the individuals are not only accepted, but even celebrated by the young activists. The complexity of the individual sets of reasons for participation is thus considered more a resource than a risk; and the possible misalignment among these reasons, the goals of the group, and elements of collective identification is considered as unavoidable but not particularly problematic. Finding a religious element shared by all the members of the group seems to be considered either unnecessary or impossible: these individuals are engaged in the same activities, and share the same practices (although attributing different personal meanings to them), and this is sufficient.

On the whole, involvement of the young activists in Catholic groups could be interpreted as an element of a wider set of practices and meanings that they share, and on the basis of which they feel they are involved in a common lifestyle (Berzano, Genova 2015), rather than only as a form of religious participation. Through one's lifestyles each of them expresses a position in the wider social and cultural context, and collectively they say, to themselves and to others, who they think they are, who they feel to be similar to, who they want to be different from. Religious practices and religious beliefs are some of the elements which constitute this lifestyle, but they are not necessarily either the only or the main ones (see Genova 2018).

These results beg several questions about processes of collective identity building in religious groups, relations of the groups with religious institutions and doctrines, and even about the possibility of continuing to interpret these forms of action as forms of religious participation, and above all as indicators of religiosity. In this sense, the results of the research seem to be potentially interesting even for reflection upon the relationship between youth and religion from a wider point of view. A recent trans-national and trans-cultural secondary research analysis of four forms of action in the religious field – prayer, collective rituals, pilgrimage and religious tourism – clearly showed that the individual meanings at the basis of all of them are heterogeneous, and only partly religious (Genova 2021). The research presented in this article has shown that religious worldviews, beliefs and values shared by the young activists of Catholic groups are too weak and unstructured to act as core meanings of participation, which largely go beyond the boundaries of religion. As a consequence, also the widespread interpretation of young people's distance from different forms of action in the religious field as an effect of the weakness of their religious worldviews, beliefs and values perhaps should be – at least partially – reconsidered: young people could be uninvolved in different forms of action in

the religious field because these forms do not sufficiently satisfy the complex desires and needs they feel and that could drive them to be active, and not only because of the weakness of religious worldviews, values and beliefs or other religious factors. Obviously these hints need to be investigated more in depth through research into the meanings connected with different forms of participation, as well as the different reasons for non-participation; but the results of the research presented in the article, and those of the other studies cited in this section, seem to suggest relevant directions these inquiries could take.

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