Published in Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science 47, issue 2, 207-219, 2013
which should be used for any reference to this work 

# Religion as Dialogical Resource: A Socio-cultural Approach

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**Abstract** William James proposed a psychological study of religion examining people's religious experiences, and to see in what sense these were good for them. The recent developments of psychology of religion moved far from that initial proposition. In this paper, we propose a sociocultural perspective to religion that renews with that initial stance. After recalling Vygtotsky's core ideas, we suggest that religion, as cultural and symbolic system, participates to the orchestration of human activities and sense-making. Such orchestration works both from within the person, through internalized values and ideas, and from without, through the person's interactions with others, discourses, cultural objects etc. This leads us to consider religions as supporting various forms of dialogical dynamics—intra-psychological dialogues, interpersonal with present, absent or imaginary others, as well as inter-group dialogues—which we illustrate with empirical vignettes. The example of religious tensions in the Balkans in the 90's highlights how much the historical-cultural embeddedness of these dynamics can also lead to the end of dialogicality, and therefore, sense-making

**Keywords** Religion · Sociocultural · Dialogical · Symbolic resource · Serbia

Psychology of religion has been marked by William James' book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902/2002) published at the beginning of 20th Century. In this pivotal book James defined religious experiences as "feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend

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themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider divine" (James 1902/2002, p. 29–30). James stressed that he did not deal with religious institutions but people's religious experiences - deep, profound, experiences of feeling related to something divine, rather than acts embedded in religious customs or formal ceremonies,. Consistently, on a methodological plane, James decided to ground his study on "those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men words of articulate and self-conscious men" (James 1902/2002, p. 8). Altogether, James' proposition followed his pragmatist stance: as a psychologist, he was not interested in what religious ideas were made of, or whether they were true or good. Rather, he wished to examine what consequences religious experiences had for people's lives:

> Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. *She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private tact*—if that should seem a likely place to find him. Her only test of probable truth *is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted*. (James 1904, p. 12).

James proposition was barely followed in the development of psychology and especially, psychology of religion. In this paper, we start by recalling the mainstream approach to religion in psychology. We then propose an alternative route, that of sociocultural psychology. We therefore present some of Vygotsky's basic ideas to introduce the idea that religions, like cultural systems, can be seen as sets of cultural elements orchestrating human experience, feelings, thinking, acting as well as relationships within and between communities. From such stance, religions offer many partners as well as mediation tools for real and imaginary dialogues. Hence, following James proposition, we examine a series of vignettes in which individuals or groups *use* religious resources or experiences in order to achieve something significant to them.

## Where Psychology of Religion has Gone Astray

Since the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century, together with the rest of the mainstream psychology, psychological studies of religiosity took a direction very different to the one proposed by James. The majority of psychological empirical studies of religiosity were based on the use of various scales and questionnaires in the psychometric tradition of seeking for different personal and social correlates of scale scores. Hill and Hood (1999) reviewed 125 different scales, and classified them into two broad categories: scales measuring *dispositional* religiousness and scales measuring *functional* religiousness. In the first category they placed scales assessing general religiousness, religious commitment, religious development, and religious history. The second category includes subscales concerning participation in social and private practices, religious support, religious coping, beliefs and values, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, religious techniques for regulation of relationships, and religious experience. The mere fact that 125 different scales were developed by

various studies can be seen as reflecting psychologists' disconnection from personal religious experience as object of study, to which they prefer decontextualized self reports through set of general statements (for example, "do you find that you get comfort and strength from religion?"). Two reviews of psychology of religion published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* in the 80's (Gorsuch 1988) and 20 years later (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003) reveal a shift in empirical studies, from that correlation paradigm toward an experimental paradigm—the latter incorporating the former in the mainstream psychology. This situation has led several authors to express their dissatisfaction with the first century of psychological studies of religiosity and related phenomena, as for example:

> I believe that the psychology of religion has made embarrassingly little progress since its inception a century ago. Countless data have been collected, measures developed, and constructs proposed, but the movement has been almost entirely circular rather than progressive. (Kirkpatrick 2005a, p. 101).

Many authors also regret the fragmentation of these studies, reflecting a deeper issue in psychology (see Yurevich 2009). In order to progress in the understanding of religion from a psychological perspective, Kirkpatrick (2005b) proposes an evolutionary psy-chology approach as integrative framework for social and natural approaches to religion. Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) called for multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm, and Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) asked for integrating different approaches. In this paper, we contribute to a current attempt to propose a sociocultural approach to religion (see also Belzen 2010; Cresswell, Towards a pragmatic cultural psychology of religion that includes meaning and experience, unpublished; Zittoun, Religious traditions for innovation: uses of symbolic resources in life trajectories, unpublished).

## A Sociocultural Approach to Psychology

Lev Vygotsky belongs to the founders of psychology together with Freud, Wundt, James, etc., by providing key assumptions for a distinctive way of understanding and studying psychological phenomena. Vygotsky's approach can be introduced through few assumptions constituting the foundation of a social-cultural-historical psychology (Vygotsky 1934/1986).

The first assumption is concerned with two kinds of mental functions. Vygotsky distinguished lower mental function (LMF) and higher mental function (HMF). LMFs are biologically enrooted and regulated, and they are results of human evolution. Consequently LMFs are universal and similar across different cultural and social communities. Moreover, Vygotsky claimed that human beings are also similar to their closest animal biological relatives (for example, apes) in respect to LMFs. On the other side, HMFs are specific human functions. They are mediated by socio-cultural artefacts (see more on mediation later in the text), and consequently they are socio-cultural by their origin. They are developed within interaction with others, by using symbolic resources and participation in socio-culturally structured activities and practices. Therefore, HMFs are specific for each social and cultural community. Moreover, HMFs evolve throughout history, because the socio-cultural artefacts that mediate them also change. In other words, two members of the same cultural community who live in

different historical eras can be very different depending on the scope of the historical change in socio/cultural artefacts to which they have access.

The second assumption is related to the link between the social and the individual in the development of HMFs. Here Vygotsky's famous general genetic (in the sense of "developmental") law of development of HMF:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (Vygotsky 1978, p. 57).

According to the general genetic law we are (re)becoming ourselves through relationship with others and by participating in the activities of socio-cultural communities to which we belong and participate in. This assumption defines an unusual relationship between the social and the individual in human psychology. Typically, it is assumed that individuality comes before sociality (for example, in Piaget's theory), but in Vygotsky's approach individuality emerges out of sociality. According to this view, human beings are social "by nature", and then gradually individualize themselves.

The third assumption defines *mediation* as key mechanism of development of HMFs. Vygotsky considered mediation as the central part of his theory (Vygotsky 1993). HMFs are mediated by tools, which can take one of three forms—symbols, material or another human being's behaviour. Mediation tools lead, organize, and scaffold a person's activities and mind, toward the appropriation of socially and culturally designed patterns of activities and their change. Mediation tools are developed by social and cultural communities for some social and cultural purpose, but they can become tools that mediate activity or signs that mediate the HMFs in the mind of individual persons. Mediation tools or semiotic means (sign-like) can be of various kind: counting systems; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, and technical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs, etc. One implication of the notion of mediation is that if we wish to understand how a certain person feels, think, acts in a given context, we need to identify *what mediates the person's activity, and how it does so*.

The idea of mediation can be clarified by the metaphor of *orchestra* and orchestration. In an orchestra, the performance of each player as well as their orchestration is organized, guided, and scaffolded by music notes, as well as by the conductor. Similarly, the activity of persons is influenced by others, material and symbolic tools and structures. When an orchestra needs to master and appropriate a new piece of music, musicians and instruments need to be orchestrated in an appropriate pattern. The same occurs when person takes part in some socio-culturally defined activity: she needs to learn how to orchestrate her existing capacities according to certain socio-cultural patterns (what cognitive anthropologists call a *script*—e.g. Holland and Quinn 1987)—here including the movement of the melody as written, the technique of playing the flute or the violin—in order to be able to take part and perform in the activity. The other (like a conductor) guides the person in the orchestration of her capacities—technique, expressivity, etc.—so as to be able to perform a given socially

and culturally relevant activity. As part of the process of learning, the person becomes able to conduct her/himself. When the orchestration is achieved first through collaboration with someone else and then gradually overtaken by the person him or herself, this process can be called *internalization* (Vygotsky 1934/1986). Therefore, the orchestrations might be done through collaboration with someone else (collaborative orchestration) or by person her/himself (self orchestration).

From such a perspective, then, human thinking, feeling and activity can be seen as mediated both from the inside and from the outside. From the outside, through their movements in the social and material environment, their exposure to public discourses—in history manuals, the news or internet—their participation in specific socially shared situations (e.g., a Board of directors, a Christmas dinner), or interactions with others (e.g., a father, a priest) and objects (e.g. a joystick, incense), people are guided to engage certain actions, feel certain emotions, or understand certain ideas. Human thinking, feeling and action is also enabled and mediated from within, by internalized signs, which eventually get organized through their recurrence, according to social conventions, and out of simplification needs. Semiotic mechanisms are progressively differentiated and hierarchized: some values or representation are very broadly guiding a wide diversity of actions (e.g., "Honour your parents"), while others just enable to understand local and punctual experiences (e.g., "this apple is acid").

Finally, a Vygotsky-inspired sociocultural psychology has its core a developmental question: as the world is constantly changing, how do people develop and adjust to their environment, first during childhood and youth as they are building basic competencies, and later in life, when they keep deepening expertise and experience, reorchestrate own competences, or reorient their lives, or imagines alternatives? The emphasis is on processes and dynamics, not on outcomes or stable entities. And it is from such a developmental perspective that we propose to consider religion.

## A Sociocultural Approach to Religious Experience

From the perspective of the socio-cultural psychology, then, people are not simply "religious" or "having a religious experience": rather, they are engaged in activity or thoughts or emotions which are system of higher mental functions *mediated* by the internalized semiotic means socially constructed as "religious"—be they architectural facilities, relationships to specific others representing a religious authority, objects, prac-tices and rituals. For an anthropologist like Geertz (1973), a religion is a cultural system that includes specific others, objects, texts of references, values and norms, authorities and practices. In our terms, the elements that belong to such system will participate to the mediation and the orchestration of the person's experience: participating to a given religious community demands specific activities and practices, socially organized and guided, connoted as religious, and also, the mediation of experience from within, through the already internalized norms, values, meanings and narratives of the person. In some cases, a person might thus live exclusively religious environment, completely organized through and according to a given religious system, thus fitting with the values already internalized—as for example orthodox Jews living in a rabbinic school (Zittoun 2006b). However, in most cases, people only occasionally meet cultural elements, or participate to social interactions, that are socially and individually interpreted as "religious"—and these,

progressively, can be internalized and become part of one's unique *bricolage* that is her personal culture (Valsiner 2000). This is also the basis on which every person actively engages with and interprets the world. And thus, given today's variability of values, recomposition of religion, and personalisation of trajectories, participating to a Christmas dinner can be interpreted as religious practice by some, and a family meeting by others; feeling transported by the view of the mountain shining in the sunset can be interpreted as religious experience by some, and as aesthetic one by others.

At this point, then, what is relevant is not so much what religiosity is, or what religious experiences are, or where to find religion in the mind or brain. Rather, following James' pragmatist stance, the question becomes, what can people *do* with experiences or practices that are socially attributed to religion? When do they use "religious stuff"? (Duemmler et al. 2010). What can people do with religious texts, images or practices, what does it enable or prevent to do? How does religion participate to human meaning-making?

Adopting such a stance, we have shown that religious elements can be used as *symbolic resources*—to engage in religious practices can support one's sense of continuity, maintain one's sense of belonging, regulate one's relationship to others, and guide one's relationship to knowledge (Zittoun 2006a). Here, we rather want to argue that the use of religious elements as resources can mediate one's thinking and activities, and thus support the constant and inherent *dialogicality* of mind and human experience. This idea will bring us to show, through a series of examples, how people find a variety of dialogue "partners" in experiences identified as religious.

## Using Religious Elements to Support Dialogue/s

Compatible with a sociocultural framework, the notion of *dialogicality* is another way to designate the social nature of human activity, or the constant circulation of semiotic means from interpersonal to intrapersonal processes (see for instance Linell 2009). Inspired by Bakhtin (1982, 1996), it highlights the fact that any utterance is a reply to Other's previous utterances, as well as anticipation to further ones. It also emphasizes the social situatedness of the words used for speaking, and with it, the cultural thickness of semiotic mediation. By extension, not only speech, but also individual thinking, feeling, activities or social representations can be considered as dialogical even when they are performed by individual person in the context of no visible others. Finally, dialogical perspective have shown the permanent tension that takes place between remaining the same and becoming different, maintenance and changing, collaboration and conflict, what is and what could be (for recent presentations, see Grossen and Salazar Orvig 2011; Leiman 2011). Thus, dialogical perspectives have emphasized the many potential partners of dialogues (Zittoun and Grossen 2012): distant others (or others in *absentia*); others in present interactions (*in presentia*); inner alters as in auto-dialogue; dialogues between situations (e.g., a Church service always refer to another Church service); and dialogues between human and non-human actants (such as material and semiotic object, places and stuff). Hence, as semiotic systems, religions do provide people with a wide range of dialogical partners: others in- and out-groups, texts of references and sacred objects, a range of stable situations (regular rituals and prayers, seasonal holidays, etc.), and for most

theist religions, a reference to an ultimate Other. It also frames and regulates with whom, when, why, and how to get into or to avoid dialogue.

In what follows, we present diverse vignettes in which people or group engage in a form of dialogue with an *other* provided by a religious system, or interpreted as associated to religion. These vignette come from various studies mentioned below; they are not representative of all possible religious experiences and uses of religious resources. Our goal is more modestly to point at the modalities of psychological orchestration made possible by dialogical processes involving religious experiences, and to question some of their implications. In each case, we try to show what religious dialogical partner is involved and what orchestration of people's actions these allow—we thus wish to show how religion is both an external guide, and an internal mediator.

## Dialogue with Self

Doing practices guided by rules from a religious system is part of constituting self as member of the group. Because the activities are embodied—food, modes of prayer, organization of time—they can be seen as having the basic function of dialogue within self through time—I who pray today am the same as I who was praying yesterday, or celebrating those holidays this year relates me to whom I was last year. Interviewed in the frame of a research on transitions in youth adulthood (Zittoun 2006a), a young religious Jewish man tries to explain the importance in respecting the *Mitzvot*, the obligations imposed by the Jewish law and that punctuate the hours, days and years of practicing Jews:

> The content of what I do is irrelevant. No. But it is less less relevant.—It is more the fact that I am doing, rather than WHAT I do. I mean… Ideally I try to understand what I am doing, and trying to internalise that I suppose, to the next time. So it is important in THAT sense. But I think it is more the fact that I am doing it—which IS important. (Abraham) (Zittoun 2006a, p. 68).

Based on a life course interview, Abbey (2007, p. 86) similarly describes how a man in his fifties does a "serenity prayer" (from the Alcoholic Anonymous) twice a day to regulate his life through a culturally mediated internal dialogue. In contrast, many religions also offer procedure for self-examination and *self change*, such as weekly confessions, yearly self-examination, uses of meditation technique, or uses of texts to reflect about self as well as others. For instance, Thomas, a Christian young man having moved away from his family, reads every night a religious journal sent by his grand-mother; he reflects about his daily contrarieties in the light of these biblical readings, and so deduces values to guide his life or regulate his moods (Zittoun 2006b). Religion can thus become a self chosen orchestration of one's life, supporting a sense of personal continuity through time and situations and a sense of value and purpose.

## Dialogue with a Distant or Imaginary Other

Most religions suppose a dialogical relationship with a transcendent or *general Other* (see also Cresswell, Towards a pragmatic cultural psychology of religion that

includes meaning and experience, unpublished): a god, a prophet, an important religious leader on earth (rabbis, the Pope, etc.). Religious symbolic resources can be means to establish contact with these. But in addition, religious beliefs can also support representations and dialogue with other humans in their absence—when they are away, or mostly, when they are dead. In her autobiographical writings, George Sand, a French woman novelist from the end of the 19th century, reports her dialogues with an imagined god—inventing a personal religion,, contrasting to the dominant Catholic church of that time. Her new deity—Corambé—came to her in a dream:

> Corambé was created by itself in my mind. It was as pure and as charitable as Jesus, as shining and handsome as Gabriel; but I needed a little of nymphic grace and Orpheus' poetry. Consequently it took on less austere forms than the Christian God and more spiritual aspects than the gods of Homer. And then, I also had to complement it at times with a woman's garb, because what I had loved best and understood best until then was a woman—my mother. Hence it often appeared to me with female features. … I wanted to love it as a friend, as a sister, all the while giving it the reverence of a god. *I did not want to fear it, and for that reason I wished it to have a few of our failings and weaknesses* (Sand 1991, p. 605, emphasis added).

First, we see how the deity is a product of some "bricolage"—the young woman uses her knowledge of various gods and angels, developed in various religious systems, and combines them together with her relationship to a real other—her mother. The construction of the "imaginary other" consists in combining these culturally shared religious elements, together with her personal feelings, and to project them somewhere out there. Then Aurore made a temple for her deity. A secluded forest spot became a construction site, and soon the deity lost its quality of being humanly made; eventually, this imagined acquires an existence of its own, which, in turn, can regulate and guide her (see Zittoun et al., Human development in the lifecourse: melodies of living, unpublished). Similarly, Josephs (1998) has shown how a person might use a tombstone in a cemetery—a setting developed by religious traditions—to trigger an imaginary dialogue with a deceased beloved other, dialogue which in turn enables the person to reflect upon her experience.

## Dialogue Within Groups

Of course, religions—which etymology suggests the idea of linking—are about linking self *to others*, and are transmitted primarily through family ties, or, later in life, under the guidance of religious figures and communities. Religions demand regular shared actions, celebration, often with strong emotional implications; they constitute interper-sonal memories and are linked to projects. As most religious elements demand interpretation in new social and cultural contexts, many religions also consider studying religious texts, or collectively discussing its applications, as important. Finally, reli-gious narratives often represent interpersonal relationships, and thus might become resources to understand or support one's dialogue with others (Zittoun 2007).

Most rituals in a religious group are means to reassess the belonging of the person to *the group itself*: rituals linked to birth, naming, becoming an adult, etc. Hence,

circumcisions or naming rituals in many religions have as function to celebrate the "cultural birth" of the child, after the "natural" one (see also Van Gennep 1981).

The dialogue with members of the group can be done *in presentia*, but also very often with others in absentia, as in the case of diasporas, when religion is used to build, maintain a transnational belonging. In that case, the other might become a distant other, if not an imaginary other, yet still belonging to a group and maintaining collective continuity through time and history (e.g., Bordes-Benayoun and Schnapper 2006).

## Dialogue Between Groups – Groups in Context

At a different level, religious elements are often used in intergroup situations to create and transform boundaries between groups, as when young people use a religious belonging to justify their differential treatment of some of their comrades (Duemmler et al. 2010). Yet such studies show that religious belongings are particularly likely to be used when they are salient in a given sociocultural context, or associated to differential treatments. More generally, classical social psychological studies thus show how members of a group, facing other groups perceived as hostile or threatening, change the core beliefs or representations, including religious ones. In a classical experiment, Deconchy (1980) showed how members of a religious congregation reinforced their faith and adherence to core religious ideas as they felt their community threatened.

Hence, social and cultural orchestration of human experience and meaning-making is not only a smooth process. In specific social and cultural contexts, when issues of power and exclusion are involved, they can take dramatic forms—as occurred during the Balkan wars in the 90's, as we will now show.

In Serbia, like in other former communist countries, religion and religious institutions were suppressed and deeply marginalized during almost 50 years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the democratization of former communist societies was followed by a revival of religions and church in every domain of life—political, social, cultural, and private. Hence, if in 1982 about 20% of persons interviewed about their religiosity declared to be religious (Đorđević 1984), in 2008, 80% of persons declared to be religious persons (according to the European value survey).[1]

What is more interesting from a sociocultural perspective is the dynamic relationship between the religious revival in a post-communist society and the rise of conflicts among different ethnic groups within Former Yugoslavia, resulting into divide, mistrust, and finally military conflicts. The main aim of this analysis is not to come to conclusion about the role(s) of religion in the Balkan wars, but to illustrate how religious discourse was used to frame social ruptures and meaning making at the social level, (re)positioning of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the society, and legitimizing its demand for social power.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) often stresses in public announcements that it constitutes the core essence of the Serbian national identity. For example, the letter of the Holy Synod of Bishops to leading political actors regarding the

[1] Data taken from www.europeanvalues.nl

decentralization of Serbia in 2009 started with the following phrase: "As the guardian of the Serbian spiritual being for centuries and also the Serbian national identity even in times when there was no Serbian state…".[2] With such a sentence, the speaker (the SOC) presents itself as "guardian" of ethnic identity, and legitimizes its involvement in every issues considered as relevant by the Church. Claiming a collective "timeless" identity, the Church is positioning its voice as more important than other political or social actors. Declaring itself as the "guardian" of collective identity and soul, the SOC also clams the right to a dominant voice in public debates over a wide range of issues, not only religious ones. Often presenting itself as an innocent victim of the Communist regime—reminding that it was suppressed and marginalized during Communist times—the Church brings additional legitimization of its supremacy in the dialogue over social issues. As a result, accepting a dialogue with the Church demands the recognition of the self-claimed dominant voice—with the consequence of ignoring competing ones.

The revival of the SOC happened at a time of rising tensions in former Yugoslavia. Former Yugoslavia consisted of different ethnic communities which hold together during the communist era thanks to the official ideology of "brotherhood and unity" which suppressed national identities. Religions themselves were thus suppressed for two reasons. First, communist ideology promoted atheism against religion. More importantly, as religions (Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim) varied in different ethnic groups, they were considered as something that might divide the country. As the fall of the Berlin wall practically and symbolically marked the collapse of Communist ideology and states across Eastern Europe, it triggered tensions between different ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia and was followed by ethnic wars.

Religion and religious discourse were then used to frame ethnic tensions and wars in Former Yugoslavia during the 90s. In the social vacuum resulting from the dissolution of the former structures, rising conflicts converted into ethnic wars, and disorientation and confusion were shared by many. In such context, a high representative of the SOC interviewed by an influential daily newspaper in 1993 (when the war in Bosnia attained dramatic dimensions) declared: "God expects something great from this People, when He positions the People in the focus of world events. We need to endure, as the victory belongs to the innocently crucified".[3] This statement made an explicit link between Balkan wars and Serbia's struggles, and God's will. It introduced the voice of a religiously defined, ultimate Other into the "war dialogue". Thanks to this religious meaning, citizens otherwise overwhelmed with confusion, wondering why and how they found themselves in such situation, could find a mean to confer sense to these dramatic events—that it is God's will and His plan. This discourse of authority also silenced emotional and moral challenges one could experience in that context, given that, from a religious perspective, God's will is typically described as non intelligible for common people. Thus, the person who would have difficulties to morally and emotionally accept war events, would also find in such a justification for his emotions and moral dilemmas: he feels tensions because

[2] http://www.spc.rs/eng/serbian_orthodox_church_concerned_about_suggestion_new_statute_ap_vojvodina

[3] Interview with a Bishop of the SOC Amfilohije Radović, in daily newspaper "Politika" (12. March, 1993) —„Hoće Bog nešto veliko od ovog naroda« (God expects something great from this People).

he cannot understand the ultimate Other. Finally, such statement offers to interpret Serbian war victims as manifesting the fact that Serbia was crucified. It suggests that Serbia was on the God side and implies that it should prevail.

Ironically, the Western media cheered a "return of God" in the Balkans after the fall of the Marxist utopia because churches were viewed as locomotives of democratization and as proven anticommunists (Perica 2002); yet they failed to see that these religious institutions voiced their positions in a very specific context.

In the Serbian context, we see how religious discourse, silenced during the communist decades, re-emerged as authoritative voice, justifying its power by its eternity and the divine; possible objections were silenced, both because no alternative social discourse was strong enough to challenge it, and because the religious discourse itself discredits doubts and objections. In this rapidly evolving context, the religious discourse could be used by individuals to make sense of personal and social chaos, but more importantly, by religious authorities, promoting and orchestrating alternatively war deeds and defeat—it hence was used as political power.

## Openings - Religion as Constrained Resources

From a sociocultural perspective, religion offers semiotic systems and discourses to groups and societies. People who internalize, willingly or not, these semiotic means, might use them as resources enabling them to support and enrich self-dialogue and understanding of their feelings, actions and thoughts. It might also mediate their dialogue with real others and their sense of belonging. Hence, religion can be used to support dialogical processes in individuals and groups, to facilitate their dealing with the many mysteries of daily life as well as to apprehend deeper individual and social ruptures.

However, the various modalities of dialogicality are usually mutually dependent, and how they will function in a given situation depends notably from larger cultural and historical dynamics (Marková 2005; see also Zittoun 1996). In some relatively free social context, people can explore available religious means as any other cultural elements, and build their own personal culture and private religions—as Goerge Sand's Corambé or young people's religious bricolage—and thus support their needs for company, uniqueness, identity or sense. Of course, even in such context, a person might construct a personal culture which is highly congruent to an existing, institutional religious system; in such case, the others of his real and inner dialogue will point to the same, supra-ordinate Other and texts, thus conferring order to the diverse of one's experience and constituting identity. One might question whether it might not bring inner-dialogicality to fade out and be replaced by a more monological movement (Bakhtin 1982, 1996), as might occur when people belong to particularly stable institutions (Moore et al. 2011) or are submitted to Other's authoritative perspective (Marková 2005). Hence, many religious systems are regulated by institutions which precisely attempt to constrain the variability of these dialogical and interpretative processes.

The risk of ending dialogicality, and thus the orchestration of a meaningful life, occurs when the sociocultural context itself becomes threatening and strongly coercive, bringing transformations to the local or general institutions. The Serbian case

dramatically shows how religion, once united to politics, can silence dialogue in individual and collective movements.

Religions offer symbolic systems which provide people with various elements, people and situations with which and through which they might animate real and inner dialogues. A sociocultural perspective thus suggests that people can be quite creative in their uses of religious resources, which can lead them to transform their own actions, meaning making, and relationship to others. However, such a psychology also strongly demands to take into consideration the historical-cultural context in which interpersonal or group dynamics take place. Religions, because of their plurivocity and complexity, are easily taken hostage in wider institutional and political dynamics—themselves affecting how people can relate to them, find resources, establish relationship to others, and conferring sense to their experience.

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