



A Sociocultural Psychological Approach to Religion

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Abstract

Sociocultural psychology can contribute to the understanding of religion, as it examines the dynamics by which the social and cultural world creates the conditions for the lives of unique people. This approach focuses especially on semiotic dynamics, by which religion can both guide practices and sense-making, but also become an object of shared representations. Drawing on a series of past studies, I first adopt an ontogenetic perspective, to explore early development into a sociocultural environment in which religion is present, and then to address young adults' religious bricolage. I especially show people's creativity in using various symbolic resources, linked to religious elements or not. Second, I consider more sociogenetic dynamics: boundary making processes taking place in intergroup dynamics. This leads me, third, to consider the resonances between social discourses on religion and more subjective experiences: I especially show how public discourses may create confusing fields of meaning which find deep resonances in emotional experiences, which may have dramatic consequences, both at the individual and collective levels. For each point, I try to show how such this theoretical perspective and empirical evidence may illuminate contemporary issues and debates.

Keywords Sociocultural psychology · Religion · Symbolic resources · Boundary dynamics

“Religion” is everywhere and nowhere. After what had seemed like a weakening of religion, the turn of the millennium has witnessed an unexpected return of religion in the world, and mainly incarnated by powerful religious and political movements which have marked the Occident and installed a climate of insecurity long forgotten. In the public debate, religion has thus, one the one hand, often become equated with fundamentalism. On the other hand, western societies promote search for meaning and sense,

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and religion has, in many cases, dissolved into a wide variety of spiritual practices. What makes the fascination and terror of religion, why do political and social discourses resonate so much with intimate convictions, how can people change their lives and that of others for or against religion?

As modest contribution to these questions, I adopt a sociocultural psychological perspective that offers some entry points in these complex matters. In this paper, this perspective allows examining the dynamics by which the social and cultural world creates the conditions for the lives of unique people; it focuses especially on semiotic dynamics, by which religion can both guide practices and sense-making, but also become an object of shared representations. Drawing on a series of past studies, I first adopt an ontogenetic perspective, to explore early development into a sociocultural environment in which religion is present, and then to address young adults' religious bricolage. I especially show people's symbolic creativity in using various symbolic resources, linked to religious elements or not, but also, the social control that may be exerted on these uses. Second, I consider more sociogenetic dynamics, and especially, boundary making processes taking place in intergroup dynamics. This leads me, third, to consider the resonances between social discourses on religion and more subjective experiences: I especially show how the former may create confusing fields of meaning which find deep resonances in emotional experiences, which may have dramatic consequences, both at the individual and collective level. For each point, I try to show how such this theoretical perspective, as well as past case studies, may illuminate contemporary issues and debates.

What Is a Sociocultural Approach Psychological Approach to Religion?

Sociocultural psychology is a fertile domain in psychology which studies human development within its social and cultural environment. It considers human thinking, experience and activity as both enabled by our participation in these environments, and also, as participating to the transformation of these (Bruner 1990; Cole 1996; Valsiner 2007; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Wertsch 1991). As the project of sociocultural psychology – or cultural psychology – is to understand human in society, it aims, as other critical branches of psychology, to capture both dynamics of social and cultural constitution and transformation, and human trajectories and subjectivities (Stenner 2015; Teo 2015); the challenge is then to capture the complex and multi-layered dynamics by which one creates the conditions and guides the other: how the social world enables but also guide the person to privilege certain types of actions over other, or shapes his or her apprehension of the world; and backward, how people, initiate actions and experiences, and negotiate and transform, based on their unique experience, their social and material environment. The *how* these process of mutual constitution of mind and society are at the heart of sociocultural psychology. From such perspective, religion is then something which is both of social and cultural nature, and something that can be experienced; the question is how either of them participates to the other.

Sociocultural psychology has a pragmatist and developmental epistemology (Brinkmann and Tanggaard 2010; Cornish and Gillespie 2009; James 1904; Josephs and Valsiner 2007); as such, it invites to address not religion per se, or religious

feelings, but rather, any type of situation in which people “use” religion, or explain their conduct, or other people’s, in link to religions (Belzen 2010; James 1906; Zittoun 2016). For analytical purpose, I therefore use two related notions. From a descriptive perspective, I will use the term “religion” to designate a cultural system which, in the terms defined by Clifford Geertz (1972), includes specific others, objects, texts of references, values and norms, authorities and practices, and mostly but not always, a reference to a form of transcendence. In contrast, I reserve the term of “religiosity” to designate, from a more pragmatic stance, activities and/or experiences that a specific person may interpret in the light of narratives or a belief system which are considered, by them or by others, as religious. Also, to designate the fact that people at times refer only to one object, sentence or practice as “religious” – without adhering with an existing system - I use the expression “religious elements” (Zittoun 2006a). Hence, people might want a marriage in the Church, thus referring to an institutionalized religious system, yet without making theirs all the attached values, narratives or communities. Conversely, people may have private forms of religiosity, for instance praying trees, which I would not call “religion”.

Sociocultural psychology has developed a series of conceptual tools to address basic dynamics by which a unique person, in interaction with her social, material and symbolic environment, is “guided” by culture yet able to transform it. Drawing on the concepts, I will examine four dynamics by which religion may participate to the co-making of mind and society: two of these address ontogenetic dynamics, that is, the development of the person; one is more sociogenetic as it examines the making of social groups; and the last can be said microgenetic, as it addresses the meeting of these two in specific situations. First, drawing the notion of internalization, I will consider early development and the ways by which the child’s first spheres of experience participate to the making of his or her modes of apprehending the world. Second, with the concept of symbolic resources, I examine the dynamics by which young adults and adults, experiencing a diversity of experiences and meeting the richness of their cultural world, engage in unique revisions of their personal culture, and conferring sense to their experience. Third, the notion of boundary will allow to articulate meaning and belonging – seeing the world in certain ways groups us with others who share such understanding. Finally, I examine the ways by which shared social representations create meaning fields which may resonate with the most intimate and emotional traces of experiences.

This reflection is based on a series of studies and observations made over the past twenty years, initially related to Judaism, and then expanded thanks to collaboration with other researchers in psychology and the social sciences, and finally, here, put in perspective with a series of current observations.

Altogether, then, I try to address how and why religions may bring rich experiences and support productive sense making, while also bringing people to adopt certain positions or to reject others, and more generally, may create confusion and collective anxieties.

Development into Religion

From the very beginning of his or her life, the person develops and moves through a complex socioculturally built world, a “shared culture” (Bruner 2003; Cole 1998; Wertsch 1991); in specific spheres of experience, through real or imaginary interactions with others,

he or she meets specific values, meaning, and practices. Therefore, among the infinity of course of actions in which she or he may engage, some of these are tried out, experienced, encouraged and supported by other relevant persons rather than dismissed., and eventually to some extent, internalized,(Lawrence and Valsiner 2003; Toomela 1996; Vygotsky 1975). Once “internalized”, that is, reconstructed and recreated on a psychological plane, or guiding thinking or action from within, these become part of one’s “personal culture” (Valsiner 1997, 2007). Of course, internalization can be done more or less deeply made (Valsiner 2018), and “ingrows” on the basis of the unique trajectory of the person, (Zavereshneva and van der Veer 2018; Zittoun and Gillespie 2015b). People’s conduct thus becomes mediated by semiotic constructs, at times chosen, at times given by their environment along their trajectory – semiotic means which guide first from the outside, then from within, the elaboration of affects, sense-making, reasoning and action (Josephs 1998; Valsiner 1999). These basic dynamics of internalization are key in the child first developmental and primary socialization, and provides the basic semiotic system by which the child organizes reality, develop a sense of what is good or bad, from where she is or where he goes - and thus a “system of orientation” (Zittoun 2006b). In that sense, culture – of the specific declination of a cultural system in certain spheres of experience – becomes constitutive of the person and her relation to the world and herself – it is the water for the fish’s eye (Bruner 1990).

In a family or a group in which religion plays a role, religion as cultural system – as set of values, beliefs, *Weltanschauungen*, practices, narratives – thus participates to ontogenesis. First, it can guide parent-child interactions, in very concrete everyday practices: what conducts are encouraged, what is the emotional tone associated to certain activities, etc. Religious values of experiences can also shape parents’ sets of values and imagination of the child and its future (Cole 2016), and for instance be designated by the child’s names (Zittoun 2004), or by parents’ reverie or preoccupations, then reverberated in narratives and interactions (Fonagy et al. 2005; Trevarthen 2012). Finally, the cultural system is particularly put to the fore in specific “religious” practices – what food to eat or exclude, rituals done in family, specific holidays, songs, etc. (Hedegaard et al. 2012; Pontecorvo and Fasulo 1999; Rogoff 2003). Hence, children learn to live in their cultural environment, and through interactions, practices, participation, emotional closeness, cultural and religious elements shape, through internalization, their own emotions, practices, sense making preferences and values.

To be able to conceptualize the many ways by which religious elements are internalized and thus guide or “orchestrate” (Baucal and Zittoun 2013) the person from within, it is useful to draw on Jaan Valsiner’s principles of semiotic mediation (Valsiner 1998, 2014a, b). The basic idea is that semiotic means, from without or internalized within us, allow to take distance from experience and “sign” it. Signs can themselves be regulated by other signs, which can increase or catalyze lower-levels signs. Hence, I might identify a state of my body as “hunger”, which invites me to stretch my hand towards the first available comestible element; yet as a religious person, I may be invited to suspend my action, and question whether that food is part of the comestible ones, or invite me to pronounce a prayer, before actually enjoying the food. Conduct is thus semiotically regulated, from the first identification of a felt-experience, to the choice to engage or suspend a gesture, to the meaning the food acquires – which probably, will then infuse the actual taste of the food. Hence, Valsiner distinguished four “levels” of semiotic mediation (Valsiner 2007). If level 0 is pure embodied and felt-in experience, level 1 already indicates that certain emotional or embodied

experience can be distinguished from pure experience and identified as part of one whole - trembling legs and short breath might be one experience. Level 2 then indicates the use of specific words to indicate a thing, a state, a distinct portion of the world or self – in that case, for instance, as “fear”. Level 3 groups of elements or events, and has some degree of generalization, as for instance a class of events considered as “dangerous”. At level 4 can be found “overgeneralized” experiences, values, moods, which can be named by concepts, however are often beyond it – as for instance a diffuse sense of anxiety, which in turn, may create occasions to be scared (at level 0 or 1). Such model is very useful to understand the encompassing power of a given religious system to which one has been socialized and that one has internalized.

For instance, as a religious system, Judaism can be understood as system of rules, practices, values and beliefs, regulated by specific texts of references, protected by certain warrants of the religion. It prescribes guided daily practices, ranging from specific holidays, to morning rituals, food regulations and specific modes of study. In a religious, or at least, practicing family or community, a child is thus introduced to these aspects through daily practices and actions: what one eats every day, the sorts of foods which are forbidden, the excitement of preparing the Shabbat on Friday, the very change of mood on these days – people wearing better clothes, stopping to work, or simply eating special food. Later these practices become accompanied by stories – why we eat this food, why we song this prayer at the beginning of the spring or on Friday night. Eventually, children might be brought into more formal education – whether full time Jewish school, or specific out-of-school classes, which provides them with narrative, relating these specific events within larger narratives, sets of values, and sense of belonging. As cultural system, Judaism – as probably most religious system to which a child is familiarized from young age – is constructed at the psychological level from the lowest level of mediation, emphasizing practices, to progressively elaborate higher mediations – such as values, which can, but must not, become internalized and linked to people’s personal sense of orientation and identity.

To illustrate this argument, let us consider the specific case of the traditional Pessah celebration (Passover, or Jewish Eastern). Its ritual demands a family (or community) evening of narrating the Hebrew’s escape from Egypt, where they were slave of the Pharaoh, under the leadership of Moses. The Haggadah is read during the evening – a compilation of biblical texts and their commentaries, psalms, as well as a script for the evening. The evening is organized in such way that it is punctuated by the eating of small amounts of food (until dinner is served) with high symbolic values: a paste made of figs and grated nuts with orange blossom (or any equivalent in the local tradition); lettuce or celery; salted water; a lamb bone; and the flat, unfermented bread called Matza. At some point, these aliments are passed from hand to hand, with the words “this is maror (the paste)” or “this is the lamb”, and the scenography of the celebration is so made, that everyone asks: “what is this lettuce for?” or “what is this maror for?”. After this ritual questioning, the family or community sings the meaning of each: this paste is to remind of the cement the Hebrews had to use to make brick walls as slaves; this lettuce is to make taste the bitterness of their lives; the salted water is for their tears, etc. Many of the songs that evening theatrically represent the action of asking questions about the meaning of the evening and the various actions it implies, and even, discuss the fact that people may raise different types of question, depending on their age and education; yet these songs also suggest how one should reply to each questioner by

finding the adequate responses. Many psalms have also a very repetitive nature, which, besides their beauty and melancholy, functions as very good mnemonic techniques. Also, the tradition encourages discussing freely these matters, their meaning, and their contemporary relevance. One version of the Haggada invites for instance to consider less the flight from slavery in Egypt as a mythico-historical fact, but rather as an invitation to reflect on the psychological and moral slavery in which people maintain themselves if they engage unreflectively in alienating daily activities (Zittoun 2011).

As a whole, thus, the celebration functions as a very efficient educational device: experiences are first provided to the senses and basic actions (eating, singing, sharing a warm evening) – a level 1 mediation; each experience is labelled and named – a level 2 mediation; these are then associated to more general meaning fields and general experiences – linked to liberation, freedom, shared responsibility, a level 3 mediation; and these, as a whole, provide with value, orientation, in a very diffuse and general way – semiotic mediation at level 4. The whole celebration demands active participation and thus sense-making. As shared, mostly emotionally laden event, it is quite likely to provide participants with important memories, sense of belonging, projects (as transmitting these traditions further, etc.). This simple example of celebration condenses many of the principles of socialization in any cultural system – here simply with a scripted frame enhancing the awareness of the semiotic and symbolic nature of the shared reality.

Of course, in the long run, how much a person will be “built” exclusively in one symbolic or religious system depends on the openness of the social environment, the consistency of the social frame, and the presence (or not) of alternative meaning systems. Hence, some orthodox communities organize daily lives in such ways that the social and material environment is totally homologous to the religious system: time is organized according to religious precepts, food is provided according to the regulation, etc. Here, to draw on Bruner’s metaphor, water is fully invisible... until a small event colors it. Such events have been documented in the cases of young people raised in Jewish orthodox community, and who one day read the Encyclopedia, listened to the radio or had access to internet, which shook enough their basic assumptions about the world enough to feel the need to leave their community (Deen 2015; Ewing and Grady 2017; Lawrence et al. 1992),.

The example of development and socialization into Judaism cannot be generalized to all other religious experiences. However, because it is quite explicit, it offers an interesting entry point to address development into, or with religious elements in various social situations. Some religious systems emphasize practices, while others mainly consider values and beliefs – then how are these shaping interactions? How does one internalize more abstract values? Reversely, would the importance of practice into the building of an internalized value system not be important to reflect upon current phenomena of conversion to religious systems demanding a lot of practical commitment? What is the psychological benefit of being culturally guided into daily choices – what to eat, what to wear in the current cases of “radicalization” (Nathan 2017)? Finally, what happens when one borrows only one religious element, out of any community or specific religious system?

Religious Bricolage - Using Symbolic Resources

Things of course become more complex as soon as the person leaves home to attend the kindergarten or the school, engaging in what is usually called secondary socialization, and thus becomes a young adult responsible for his or her own choices, and later, as adult, moves through and across spheres of experiences (Zittoun 2007; Zittoun et al. 2013). As a whole, experiences become more differentiated (Gillespie and Zittoun 2010; Vygotsky 1933; Werner and Kaplan 1963). Some are organized in ways which are quite homolog to the ones to which the person was initially exposed: that is, the cultural system in the social frame in which the person is located corresponds, to certain extent, to the cultural system she has internalized so far; others are quite different. This is where persons can start to experience ruptures – environments are not anymore as expected, and one's taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs, ways of communicating or presenting, do not function anymore (Schuetz 1944). Exposures to newness are occasions for learning and development, and we have studied them as “transitions” - they demand learning, identity transformation, and active sense-making, ranging from elaborating emotions to developing or revising personal narratives and imagination of one's possibilities (Zittoun 2006b, 2007). People use various resources to facilitate these dynamics. Schools, teachers or psychologists – specialists of guided transformation - closed ones, or communities, of course support these (Coulon 2004; Heath 2004). People draw on personal experiences or knowledge in other spheres (the so-called “transfer”). Also, people draw on cultural elements available to them and may use a movie to better understand one's life situation, or a song to make a life-changing decision (Zittoun et al. 2013). Among these many cultural elements available to them, are these that have been produced by specific religious systems, or made with some religious connotation.

In that sense, people can use elements that they, or others, consider as religious, as part of their “religious bricolage” (Hervieu-Léger 1997),¹ or more generally, the general semiotic bricolage of living. To address the issue of pragmatic question of what people “use”, we introduced the concept of symbolic resources. When confronted with daily issues or more existential questions, people may refer to cultural elements or parts of a symbolic system, such as a book, a narrative, a movie, or a song. People usually have had important cultural experience thanks to these artefacts (they listened to the song and were moved, saw and discussed the film with friends, etc.), so that they invested it with their own personal experiences and emotions. The memory of these cultural elements or related cultural experiences are so strong, that people mobilize them later on, in link to new situations; the cultural guidance provided by these come then to illuminate the new situation. Hence, a symbolic resources is thus a cultural element “used”, that is, mobilized, as something useful for something else, we call it a “symbolic resource” (Zittoun et al. 2003; Zittoun and Gillespie 2013). Here, drawing on a study on young people, I indicate two types of uses of symbolic resources in relation to religion; examples have been presented and discussed in earlier publications.

¹ In French, “bricolage” means do-it-yourself; it was used by Levi-Strauss to designate cultural creativity, contrasting with more systematic engineering; the term was adopted in sociology of religion to designate people's new religious syncretism.

The first type of use symbolic resource is that of religious elements as part of a more general symbolic bricolage to make sense of events during a transition. Here is the example of Thomas, whom I interviewed after he had moved away from his remote region to a University town (Zittoun 2006b). Asked about how he managed his new life, he mentioned many elements that helped him to make sense of his daily experiences. Thomas explained how he spent some time everyday reading the religious – Christian - magazine sent to him by his grandmother, and using them to guide his actions, and reflect upon his daily interactions and feelings²:

Things like forgiveness, compassion, inner conviction, you know - this guides, I find it very useful. (..) I think that there have been times, that I feel stressed academically or whatever. And – I think, it helps you to put in perspective, it says, God - if you worry or so, will take care of you, gives you what you need – and if you trust in him, he will take care about your needs, then you don't need to worry about things - just trust, I suppose. Or (..) there have been times when I had arguments with people, sometimes in the evening - and then you go back, and it says, you know - forgiveness is important – (..) Jesus has died on the cross for you. So it was like, compared to that, to forgive somebody to whom you have said something astute or so, is very small.

Thomas identifies strong images provided by the Christian tradition – Jesus died on the cross – to ground more general values, such a forgiveness, or the care provide to him. This, in turn, allows him to take distance from the course of daily events, and to contain and regulate his own emotions – not to worry – or evaluate conduct and try to orient his future conduct – one should forgive others. Hence, carried by a strong image – level 2 or 3 experiences – Thomas develops value – level 4 – that are oriented toward future concrete actions – level 1 experience. The power of symbolic resource to guide one's actions is even stronger in the following example, also provided by Thomas. He indeed reported how, confronted with the many beggars of the town and not knowing how to react, he drew on another religious element:

I suppose, as a Christian, I would look to - the life of Jesus on this earth. And - I suppose in any situation you are in, if you say, 'what would have Jesus done in this situation?', then, I would say, you know what the right thing to do is – and it might end up in other questions.

Thomas finds himself in the disquieting situation of not knowing whether to give, or not give, some money; this typical disruption demands a suspension from action, and this is where semiotic mediation is necessary. Here, various religious resources – biblical stories or narratives – provide the elements for an imaginary exploration of what Jesus would have done. This imaginary loop allows Thomas, when coming to the situation, to remove the uncertainty of the situation and to guide his action toward giving money. Hence, in this first type of experiences, religious elements are used as

² Quotations originally in English, with a simplified transcription. Transcription conventions: (..) is a suppressed part; ... is a pause in discourse; – is an unfinished word or sentence;:::: designates a prolonged vowel.

symbolic resources: internalized, they are used with intent as semiotic mediator, oriented towards the emotional elaboration, sense-making of experience, and guidance of conduct. In this case, it is interesting to note that religious resources were only part of these on which Thomas drew. Thomas was also impressed by the figure of Margaret Thatcher, whose biography he had read, and whom he considered as “lightening the way”. However, this was partly because of her declared religious convictions, and this Ms. Thatcher, or Thomas’ grandmother, seem to have functioned as authorities or significant inner alters (Marková 2006) supporting, if not encouraging, such uses of symbolic resources.

The second type of uses of symbolic resources is these by young people who precisely complemented their religious symbolic systems by “secular” cultural elements, to make sense of situation not accountable for within their religious semiotic systems. As part of the research project on young adults, I interviewed religious Jewish young men who had spent one or two years in a Yeshiva (a full time religious school) before attending to a secular environment. One of their difficulties was due to the transition from a whole inclusive environment – where external life organization was homolog to their internal orientation system, as seen above – to a place where they had to organize their own lives, decide whom to befriend, conciliate secular studies with their wish to continue study religious texts, or friendships with other students and closeness with members of the same religious community (Zittoun 2006a). These young people did at times not find in their religious education the means to address these questions; neither did they know how to apply their hermeneutic skills to these real-life problems. Eventually, some of them came to use other available cultural elements as symbolic resources to guide their daily conducts. They thus engaged in another type of bricolage, shows the example of Abraham, who explained having found a model in a book from the psychologist Eric Berne, who said that:

We all should learn to function like the heart - because the heart, the way it works, is one third of the time physically pumping, and two third of the time resting; so the way you should maybe structure a day, 8 hours you’re doing your work, 8 hours your due - for yourself, whatever it is, and 8 hours a day sleeping. So: you know, that has been a quite useful model, that I try to integrate.

Berne’s model of the pumping heart is used by Abraham as analogy, becoming a semiotic resource for differentiating, yet integrating his diverse spheres of experiences in a whole – his new secular life as student and its demands, the sphere of his religious studies and activities, which he maintains from before the move, and his more intimate needs such as sleep. The analogy allows him to divide his daily time in three thirds, one devoted to academic work, one to his religious life), and the last for sleep.

It is similarly the question of finding a compatibility between his former life in the Yeshiva and his new secular experiences that Eli addresses, this time drawing on a narrative template found in a novel:

I was talking about this sort of... difficulty somehow in getting a balance between all the aspects of life. *The Glass Bead Game* [by Herman Hesse]- basically, there is a sort of college on a hill, completely isolated from everything else, where

people are very involved in a sort of esoteric learning, which is difficult to understand what is and what sort of impact it has on anything else, and then again on the outside world obviously. And there is one character in it, who is really firmly in one world, and he feels the tension between the one world and the other world. And that, I mean I could really, I really read that, in terms of having been to Yeshiva and coming to University (...) I could relate to that very strongly. (...) it demonstrated the differences, I think - - but it helped. It is nice to know that other people are thinking the same things you are.

The Glass Bead game indeed narrates the trajectory of a young man coming back from an esoteric college, leaving that world, and trying to adjust to the outside world. This existential situation probably found a resonance in Eli's own experience. And thus, thanks to this cultural experience, Eli found a distance to reflect upon his own trajectory, and, using the novel as symbolic resource, could confer some logic and consistency to his life trajectory.

In these two cases, the young men did not find explicit support with other people. Rather, as my fieldwork in the local community and interviews suggested, these young men (and women) learned the Jewish tradition in contexts where the authority figures – rabbis and teachers – rather condemned the choice of young people to leave the Yeshiva to engage in secular vocational lives. In that sense, they created a symbolic boundary to the usability of religious resources to address daily issues. Part of the activities of the local rabbi was to bring religious young people to experience that the tradition could also be used to address daily, secular issues. Yet texts of Berne or Hesse seemed to have been found by the young men in their own explorations of available cultural elements, then sharing them with their friends. In that sense, they seemed to have overcome the limits of usability of their religious systems by expanding them with other, diverse cultural elements, thus adjusting their own systems of orientation to the new demands of their daily lives. This symbolic innovation allowed them to maintain their religious activities, while engaging in new spheres of experience.

Hence, if the study of symbolic resources highlights creativity and innovation of people socialized within a specific environment, the examples also highlight the fact that cultural elements are not socially-free. People live in social environments in which other people evaluate, acknowledge or refuse their uses of specific symbolic resources, or the way in which these are used. The weight of other's recognition is stronger, if these are endowed with institutional power: teacher representing the school system and having a decisive role in students' future, priests as representative of the Church, etc. This, precisely, encourages people toward certain cultural elements rather than others, or prevents certain uses, considered as irrelevant, if not heretic in a given social frame. However, in some conditions, people's new uses of resources, when shared with others, can bring to deeper transformations of the system. For instance, in some Jewish communities, finding the Talmud highly significant, yet exposed to the conservative rules allowing only men to access to leading role, some women drew on feminist values to fight for accessing practices and social positions otherwise reserved to men; collectively, they deeply transformed the face of Jewish education and clergy in the US, where women can become rabbis (Weisberg 1998).

Again, the specific example of Judaism might have various prolongations. One of them regards the difficulties experienced by recent migrants, previously living

in religious environments corresponding to their internalized systems of orientation, to adjust to the new demands of their daily lives. Often, religious systems have limits to their uses, because of habits, traditions, or the role of religious authorities and social communities. Adjusting to new life situation demands religious bricolage and innovation, and it demands times. For instance, one might ask, what sort of resources can be integrated in existing systems, how can these progressively be transformed? What cultural elements, what sorts of spaces for innovation do host countries have to provide?

From Symbolic Resources to Boundary Work

The examples given above raise the question of the coexistence of people and group socialized in different cultural or religious systems, or using cultural or religious systems which tend to assess their specific belonging, and difference. Consequently, a third dynamic to be addressed is related to the fact that people that share the similar cultural or religious systems, or at least use comparable cultural elements, tend to be socially, physically or symbolically, grouped into groups of “same”. These can be experienced as togetherness or sharing a comparable fate; and this can often be accompanied, as social psychology has largely demonstrated, with an experience of being different from others, who do not share these elements or systems. This refers to issues of categorization – to which group does one belong and becomes a “we”, and consequently, from whom is one – or are “we” – different. Although social psychology has developed powerful theoretical tools explain intergroup dynamics (e.g., Tajfel 1981), interdisciplinary collaborations brought me to use the notion of “boundary work”, proposed among others by Kurt Lewin (Lewin 2000) and recently developed by social scientists, which allows to articulate dynamics of meaning with issues of belonging (Dahinden 2013; Korterweg and Yurdakul 2009; Pachucki et al. 2007; Wimmer 2013). According to this approach, group categories are not given, but created and enacted every time people or social agents use some “cultural (religious) stuff” – a name, a practice, a symbolic or a material construct – to activate, or create or act upon, a difference between a “we” and a “they”. This is typically the case when for instance, in recent debates, the length of one’s swimming suit (as in the debate on “burkinis” (Godin 2016)) is used to support a strong social division between a “we” – secular, Christian, progressive – and a “they” –, in the case of these debated, often represented as retrograde, Muslim, gender conservative. In such approaches, no cultural or national or religious “essence” counts: what becomes relevant, is when religion as a whole or religious elements are enacted or used in rhetoric acts or social positioning.

Such perspectives highlight the range of actors entering in dynamics of making and transforming boundaries – nation states, media, teachers, or daily actors. Boundary thus also depend on institutional dynamics and legal arrangements, and reflect deeper power dynamics (Dahinden and Zittoun 2013). In Switzerland, these appeared for instance around debates related to the creation of confessional cemeteries, or the right to kill animals according Kasher or Halal rules. Studies highlight how much these boundaries can be shifting depending of societal evolutions – hence, for instance, the minority of Albanian from Kosovo in Switzerland, self-defined and socially acknowledged as ex-Yugoslavians in the 90s, are now self-defined and identified as the Muslims from Switzerland (Dahinden et al.

2011). These boundaries can become “brighter” – as it is has become to many secular Indians in the States, suddenly “visible” as Asian and potentially dangerous Muslims in the US after 9/11 (Bhatia 2007), or can become blurred, when for instance religious difference become totally secondary in members of a sport or academic group.

The interest of this approach in the context of this paper is that it allows connecting the more personal experience of using religious elements as resources, with the fact that these uses are also always taken in wider social dynamics. Sense making (personal) and boundary work (social) are deeply connected, with or without the clear awareness of the social actors involved. Hence, wearing a kipa (a yarmulke) might be for a person an act of sense-making – as connected to his commitment to God, the application of the law, the feeling of sense continuity or protection this might provide. Yet this act is also and always seen by others – as sign of belonging, distinction, or perhaps, exclusivity – and thus enters in boundary dynamics. The nature of these relations is worth exploring (Zittoun and Dahinden 2013). It is also interesting to remind the surprising quasi-experimental study by Deconchy, who managed to question the adhesion of Orthodox Christian to their core beliefs (modalities of sense-making), which brought them to increase their social regulation – that is, to brighten their boundaries; reversely, attacks on their boundaries resulted in stronger adherence to core beliefs (Deconchy 1973, 1991). In a very broad sense, such study suggests the existence of tendency to reinforce people’s specific religious sense-making dynamics, when boundaries tend to be threatened, and possibly, their openness to exploration and religious innovation, when the threat on identity and belonging loosens. This, of course, should be further explored in the light of current issues. In addition, these dynamics might be not so mechanical; many other aspects might be at stake. For instance, boundary dynamics are not only interpersonal, as very soon, in most countries, the State intervenes, and might, in the name of democratic coexistence of diverse groups, decide to forbid religious signs in the name of secularity (as attempt to suppress boundaries, yet questioning the legitimacy of personal sense making) or to allow them (respecting sense-making) and acknowledging the fact that boundary dynamics do take place.

Resonances: The Societal and the Intimate

Beyond specific issues of belonging, there can also be a deeper connection between one’s religious sense-making and general societal discourses. At a more collective level, indeed, groups, the media and various modes of communication and social dynamics tend to represent events, highlighting possible religious aspects, or symbolic aspects easily included in religious semantic fields. Hence, society generate social representations of, or linked to religious groups, practices and beliefs, mostly value-laden, and indicating potential for a decisions and actions (Marková 2003; Moscovici 2000). Specific persons, or groups, can use images and symbolic construct to work on people’s imagination of self and others, to increase boundaries, or to orient decisions making – as for instance in political parties using caricature representation of any “other” (Moloney et al. 2013). This raises the last series of question I wish to address: what does it do, for one given person, socialized as member of a specific religious group, being exposed to social representations attacking this very same belonging or experiences? What are the possible resonances of collective discourses for a person?

To reflect on this issues, I will draw on a small study done in Italy in the mid-90s (Zittoun 1996). There, I became interested in the experiences of children between 6 and 13 from a Jewish school in the middle of Rome, close to the former ghetto, and near a neighborhood where many Jewish families were living. The children were attending a Jewish school – a walled and police-protected enclosed building -, but had often other activities with non-Jews, at football, skating or at the doctors. What surprised me is how strong was the feeling of distinction between Jews and others, “us” and “them”, and the tendency to avoid the others from the world external from these protected spheres of experience of home and school. Moreover, many children were expressing their distrust and fear of other children, explaining how, when meeting non-Jews, they hid their names, or refused to say they were Jewish, by fear of mockery and attacks. How could that be, in a relatively peaceful period of history?

I therefore engaged in an ethnographic observation of children’s lives and their neighborhood, interviewing teachers and psychologists, speaking with children, observed classroom discussions and having access to students’ essays, in four classes of elementary 5th graders, and one class of 3rd year of middle secondary school – two transitions in the curriculum, at which point children could choose to live the Jewish school to join secular school.

Most children lived in a relatively closed world, with their family and school spheres of experience quite congruent – again, internalized system of values and orientation corresponding to their daily experiences, resulting in a strong sense of being “Hebreo Romano”, Roman Jew. In their essays, it appeared that meeting other children, or going in the street, put some of them at risk: they felt “less Jewish” or “foreigner”. A couple of children had one or two experiences of being rejected or mocked. But mainly, they seemed fearing to “reveal” their Judaism. Asked about the interest of knowing about other religions, one boy replied “it would be good to know other religions, because when the fascists will come back here in Rome, I will be able to pretend that I am catholic, because I would know the religion” (5B*).³ Another reported “Anyway, ninety percent of the Italians are fascists; I have read it in a survey, 25% Italians hate people of color, 30% hate the Roma, 40% hate the Jews. Altogether that makes 90% of fascists. (..) Bah, at the end it is true that Catholics, Nazis, fascists, are different things – there are even Catholics who are not fascists” (5A*). This fear seems so shared, that one child appeared surprised to discover that non-Jews might not be fascists: “It is not true that they are all Germans (Nazis), because in my block there are people that don’t hate the Jews. For instance, my baby-sitter does not hate the Jews, she thinks they are equal. Even my neighbor...” (5A9).

My analysis tried to account for the many strategies by which children would deal with the difference – what would appear as brightening boundaries (staying among themselves), opening up with the risk of losing their specificity, or, in some cases, finding a third way, that of engaging in dialogue with a welcoming other, explaining them the specificities of their religion and practices, and in some cases, learning about the others’ religion. However, the dominant representation or feeling, related to the fear noted above, was that of victimhood, at times even threatening thinking capacities – and I will focus on this aspect.

³ The number refers to the grade, the letter to the class, the number to a student essay or the * to a not taken during an oral discussion. Quotes originally in Italian.

Elements to explain this rampant fear could be found in the environment. Hence, out of the “duty” to teach about history, the children were exposed to many documentaries about WWII – documentaries using archives, with threatening soundtracks, very little commentary, and emphasizing the horror. The teachers were at times themselves overwhelmed by these images and violence. At that time was also discussed a temporary exhibition about WWII and the treatment of Jews in the region. To this, can be added the fact that some graffiti in the neighborhood represented Nazi signs, and that one could see, on some squares of Rome, bands of “naziskin” – shaved young men with rangers and bombers. On the other side, some the Jewish families living in Rome were for one part originally from the town for many generations – and remembered about the fascist rule (e.g., Zimmerman 2009), and others were Jews from East-Europe, North-Africa or Tripoli, mostly arrived in Rome because of persecutions. Memories of horror or experience of survivors were present in most families – often not spoken out, creating a very particular type of unconscious, intergenerational transmission of trauma (Orgad 2015; Zajde 2005).

My hypothesis was thus that there was a type of resonance between the representations of the historical past, with its aggressor, symbols and emotional load, and the unspoken emotions transmitted in the families. This, I would suggest, created overwhelming fears in children, difficult to articulate and share, and therefore, easily invading thinking capacities. In that sense, it is likely that these strong emotions were then projected – or at least, tainting one’s sense making – upon relatively harmless, graffiti and gangs. Because these experiences were so little contained and semiotically elaborated, temporalities – past history, family story, and personal present – also appeared to be mixed up. As a whole, thus, the children’s environment appeared to become colored with these diverse representations of the past and their emotional valence, triggered by signs resembling to these of the past.

If this were the case, one tentative explanation could be the following. First, brutal moving images are generally likely to evoke strong psychological contents – personal fantasies, fears and emotions. This is why it is particularly important that adults discuss with children who have seen violent films or documentaries, so as to elaborate these contents – to give them a semiotic form, to distance from embodied experience (Tisseron 2000, 2013; Tisseron and Stiegler 2009). Here, in the case of violent images linked to the war, such elaboration was probably put at risk by the difficulties of the teachers themselves to face their own emotions. Not elaborated emotions (that is, in our distinction above, level 1 experience) can be very fluid and labile and color many experiences; this, added to a discourse about Nazis or fascists, reverberated by symbols in the environment, can then become very generalized (level 4), tainting many other punctual experience (at level 2 and 3) (Salvatore and Zittoun 2011) – here, the graffiti in the street or encounters with neighbors. In that particular case, children could dissolve these overwhelming feelings through two main ways. First, classroom discussions could offer spaces in which these experiences could be shared and elaborated with the help of the teachers, in sufficient safe and welcoming frames (a “thinking space” (Perret-Clermont 2015), resembling to some extent to certain therapeutic frames (Zajde 2005)); here, emotions being acknowledged, discourses allows a progressive containment, distanciation, and transformation of experience. Second, some children could engage in rich dialogues with welcoming, open others. One young girl for instance wrote about her experience of dialogue with a catholic girl, and how they were

“expressing their ideas clearly and without offense. This was the most interesting discussion I ever had (...). I now felt bigger. Now I knew more than the day before” (5C2). Hence, this girl could draw on her religious resources, share them and learn from another child; in this movement, not only did she appear to develop a relationship beyond boundaries, but through friendship, to replace fantasized representation of others, by real experience.

Hence it might be worth considering the resonance between cultural elements referring to religions or associated to religions, as these are present in the media and the material environment, and the values and experienced to which they associated at a more personal and emotional level – a junction also explored in terms of “narrative unconscious” (Freeman 2016). When these coincidences are too close, and wake too violent or not elaborated emotional contents, these might also fuel other layers of people’s capacities to think and reason. This, in turn, may thus increase people’s tendency to rigidify core beliefs, and to brighten boundaries to others.

Such reading, if solid enough, may help us to reflect upon current debates taking place around the refugee question in Europe. In effect, we could make the hypothesis that the still recent terrorist attacks (in France and Belgium, also in the USA), documented repeatedly on public medias, representing people close to us or in places personally known, awoke intense fears in many of us. Public discourses increased the fear – after every event, it took time to open spaces for discussion and elaboration. It is likely that many people reacted publically or personally on the basis of that fear hard to contain, with the risk of simplifying reasoning and reinforcing boundaries. In that sense, discourses about the Islamic state or terrorism might lead to overgeneralizations about Muslims in general, and about the dangerosity of refugees. Religion – this time of the “bad other” – would thus be used as central argument in sense-making and boundary work in many debates, with the risk of ignoring other aspects of the complex problem. Without going further, I simply wish to say that being aware of such dynamics, at intra-psychological, interpersonal and social levels, might be useful to help us disentangling problems and their possible solutions.

Concluding Words

Examining religious dynamics from a sociocultural psychology, I went through a series of issues related to ontogenetic, microgenetic and sociogenetic dynamics. Drawing on a series of past studies, I tried to highlight a few dynamics typical for the approach. Doing so, I also raised a few questions, trying to use these theoretical tools to address current societal challenges. To conclude, I wish to emphasize two transversal issues.

First, based on the case of mainly Jewish religious children and young adults, I suggested that people’s systems of orientation might differ from that of their social environments; in some situations, it may raise difficulties, and invite them to use various resources to support their own change – “complementing” their personal culture, or finding bridges to others. However, such cases – people growing in a relatively enclosed and consistent cultural system – are a minority in a relatively secular society. Many people have rather been socialized to many sub-cultural systems, and have progressively integrated them, thus accessing to a wide range of elements to be used as resources (Zittoun and Gillespie 2015a). The question of how people use what

religious resources, if they use any, might still be relevant, but has to be re-contextualized in every specific situation.

However, what remains is the fact that talking about religion is a complex matter. On the one hand, many people have met religious elements during their personal and family trajectories; these still become associated to various experiences, pleasant or not, emotionally charged, linked to various people. On the other hand, most public presence or discussion of religious matters are deeply intricate to social, institutional and political matters, as these have been part of the constitutions of our societies. As a whole, thus, my proposition as sociocultural psychologist would be precisely to keep an eye on this permanent tension raised by discourses about religion: these are quite likely to be located at the junction of intimate experiences, as well as social and political issues. In that sense, our challenge is to develop theoretical means allowing to disentangle these aspects and to highlight their mutual dynamics.

Second, this overview also shows the dynamic nature of uses of religious elements. Public discourses tend to emphasize religious “traditions”; the analysis proposed rather emphasizes the fact that uses of religion might be innovative, at a personal and at a collective level. These transformations participate to the evolution of the society as a whole, and in return, create new conditions for people’s lives. Although many parts of these dynamics are to be studied by social scientists and historians rather than psychologists, it may be important to keep an eye on these transformations of the social world in which people develop their lives.

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