

Religious Traditions as Means of Innovation: The Use of Symbolic Resources in the Life Course

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1 Religions between tradition and innovation

Religion has become an issue of major interest in politics and daily affairs, and has recovered its academic relevance. At a sociopolitical level religion is currently invoked as cause or explanation for many political, social, or economical issues, and therefore decisions as well.

From a social science perspective, religions cannot anymore be considered as stable entities, attached to clear-cut groups. Religions rather appear as transnational phenomena (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010), as complex networks to which people can relate from various locations in the world thanks to new forms of communication (Levitt 2007; Plüss 2009). Religions appear on the one hand as related to long-standing traditions, shaped by communities' histories within and through nation states with the corresponding inertia and conservatism (Eade 2011). On the other hand, they also evolve under pressure of internal and external forces, sometimes adapting very fast to social and political reconfigurations; in this respect they prove to have immense innovative capacities. It is interesting to recall that a century ago Durkheim concluded his seminal study on religion by stating that religions were the space for social innovation: a product of the effervescence of human activity, they are a creation of an ideal through which society can reflect and reinvent itself (Durkheim 2008: 603–604).

Thus, religions can be seen as social phenomena oscillating between maintenance and innovation, but some counterpoint to this process can also be identified at the level of personal religiosities. In this chapter I will adopt a developmental psychological perspective and examine how religion or religious elements can be used by specific individuals as a means to maintain a sense of self-continuity, while under some conditions also facilitating personal change.

1.1 Working definitions

The new rise in studies on religious phenomena, the emergence of new forms of religions, and the invention of personal forms of religiosity, make it both necessary and more difficult to define the semantic field of religion.

In what follows I will use the term 'religious tradition' in a sense close to that proposed by Geertz (1973): a religious tradition demands a symbolic system likely to provoke or support certain orientations in people by formulating general statements on existence, and by giving them concrete or practical implications to be anchored in actual reality. More specifically, I propose using the term 'religious traditions' to designate: a symbolic system (material and immaterial, of objects, rituals, specific language, practices); a corpus of core rules (in written or oral form); specific guardians of that tradition (groups or practices that control which innovations can be accepted); and an orientation toward a form of transcendence. Of course, religious traditions themselves evolve through time and adjust to local, social, and material circumstances. In contrast, I will here use the notion 'individual religiosity' to designate people's experiences of their own relations to religion or transcendence, whether these result mainly from individual do-it-yourself (Hervieu-Léger 1997; Willaime 1995) or religious 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss 1966), or whether they relate to existing religious traditions.

These two working notions will allow me to approach different varieties of phenomena considered 'religious' or part of a 'religion' from the perspectives of the individuals concerned (Belzen 2010). Also, these working definitions will make it possible to analyze religion as both a social phenomenon and a personal dynamic. On the one hand, one can study relations between groups, for instance when religious traditions become relevant in intergroup dynamics or in boundary making (Dahinden 2011), as well as investigate processes by which specific religious traditions are themselves evolving. On the other hand, one can examine how people are engaged in processes of self-definition through their exploration, appropriation, and reinvention of religious symbols or specific religious experiences.

Finally, such a working definition will allow us to connect individual and social analysis. Socially constituted religious traditions as well as personal religiosities are based on language and symbols – both require the circulation of signs, that is, semiotic dynamics. Such semiotic processes can take place in social negotiations and be actualized in material creations and practices. Religion thus becomes part of the 'cultural stuff' used by groups in defining, maintaining, and transforming themselves (Barth 1969: 15, quoted in Wimmer 2008: 982). It

also becomes the ‘stuff’ of people’s individual thinking and sense making¹ (Shakespeare [1877] quoted in Oatley 2011: 15), whether these are mainly internalized (e. g., as in praying, meditating, hoping for a better future) or used for symbolic activities (e. g., lightening candles, refraining from specific food). Finally, semiotic forms circulate from traditions to the individual, and back.

2 A psychological semiotic approach

For my investigation into how people engage in religious practices and beliefs in their life courses I have chosen a sociocultural and developmental perspective (Cole 1996; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Valsiner 2012). I have been inspired on the one hand by American pragmatism (James 1890, 1904), which invites us to examine dynamic processes as well as notions that have actual consequences for the world, and especially to study what people actually *do* with religion. On the other hand, I have been inspired by the work by Vygotsky and other authors emphasizing the semiotic, social nature of human activity (Janet 1926, 1928; Vygotsky 1971). Unlike other social or cultural approaches in psychology, this perspective specifically emphasizes the processes by which people make sense of their experiences (Bruner 1990). It also encourages examining the temporality of social and psychological phenomena, and especially the ways in which groups and persons invent new solutions to the problem of having to adjust to an ever-changing environment (Valsiner 2007; Valsiner et al. 2009). Such a perspective is dialogical: it is assumed that someone’s thoughts and actions are always part of a dialogue with social values, because they are either a response to or an anticipation of social discourses or practices (Bakhtin 1982; Josephs and Valsiner 1998; Grossen and Salazar Orvig 2011; Marková 2005). Consequently, even when I focus on individual trajectories I assume that human actions are always social in nature.

To sum up: in this chapter I will examine what people do when they refer to religious traditions or mention their own religiosity (Belzen 2010; Bhatia 2010), with a focus on the semiotic dynamics such activities entail.

¹ In the sociocultural tradition, I distinguish here processes of *meaning making*, which designates socially shared meaning, from *sense making*, designating the idiosyncratic, specifically located, work of interpreting a situation by a person, depending on the situation, her past experience, etc. (Bruner 1990; Vygotsky 1934; Zittoun 2006).

2.1 A personal ‘system of orientation’

In order to accommodate the plurality of human experience over the lifecourse, I have proposed to consider the diverse *spheres of experience* in which people are engaged (Zittoun 2012). Spheres of experience are phenomenologically identified by a given person on the basis of a stable way of acting or defining the self in relation to others, taking place in specific social frames. People move through diverse spheres of experience in their daily lives– from home to work to their basketball club. As they move through their life course, some spheres appear, others are transformed or disappear. Hence, people are likely to experience *ruptures* – i.e., when one sphere of experience previously taken for granted is broken off – and *transitions*, i.e., the process of adjusting to a new situation or setting, or recreating a new sphere of experience. Transitions usually involve processes of identity redefinition, different forms of learning, and, more fundamentally, an intense process of sense making (Zittoun 2006a).

In order to orient themselves in a complex world, through the long process of adjustment to diverse spheres of experience and the constant internalization of social discourses and others’ actions, people develop a sort of inner stabilized – relatively stable, yet always evolving – *system of orientation* (Zittoun 2006b). This notion designates a hierarchically organized semiotic system, on the basis of which new experiences are organized and reflected upon, and which might eventually evolve further (Valsiner 2007; Zittoun 2006b). This semiotic system comprises, first, our capacity to recognize and organize various aspects of our immediate experience into identifiable patterns; second, our capacity to attach such patterns or quasi-concepts to specific labels, words, or identifiers; third, our ability to group different experiences into more general categories or groups; and fourth, much more general and abstract values which might then apply to very broad fields of experience. There is thus a continuum of progressive distancing and organization of experience through the mediation of various semiotic means. Some semiotic means, such as concepts, domain-specific categories, and explicit rules, are organized in hierarchies and socially shared.

During a person’s development this system or orientation is slowly elaborated – first in the family, the immediate environment, and school – and progressively transformed as the person moves through various spheres of experience. This is partly the result of the individual’s socialization or enculturation – if we admit that these processes always demand an active reappropriation of existing socially shared meanings. Hence, a system of orientation is always a unique ‘bricolage’, developed as the person moves through different experiences, resolves contradictions, reflects upon experiences, etc.

People's systems of orientation and the diverse spheres of experience in which they live can be more or less consonant. For example, a young person who is growing up in a traditionally Jewish family in Paris, living in a traditional Jewish neighborhood (Endelstein 2004) and attending a religious school, might move through social spheres in which the same set of values, comparable languages, discourses, and norms are valorized. In this case, the youngster is likely to develop a system of orientation which is relatively consistent with the shared religious tradition: if it is 'natural' not to work on Saturday at home, at school, and in the whole neighborhood, it will be natural to internalize the value of Saturday as a resting day; conversely, it is very easy to follow the religious rule forbidding work on Saturday if it is shared by one's family, friends, and neighbors. In that case, religion as a symbolic system is as 'transparent' for the person as water to the eyes of a fish (Bruner 1990).

In contrast, someone's system of orientation might valorize meanings and values different from those valued in the person's spheres of experience. Thus, children from migrant families are likely to move daily through various spheres of experience, in their family and at school, which require different sets of values, language, implicit rules governing social relationships, and skills (Hale and De Abreu 2010). In these cases following internalized rules at school might give rise to misunderstandings in another sphere of experience (e.g., not attending school on Saturday, refusing certain food), and conversely, the school might require actions which contradict the child's system of orientation. In such a situation of cultural or religious diversity, symbolic systems become visible through their diversity. In that case, people are often forced to become more active and reflective in the construction of their systems of orientation.

Of course, these two cases represent extremes on a continuum: there is never a 'pure' system of orientation, as people always move through various spheres of experience, meet others, interpret their experience, etc. Even in an orthodox religious environment people can read a book which opens their minds to new modes of understanding, and radically transforms their systems of orientation (see the case of a young woman discovering the world through an encyclopedia, in Lawrence, Benedikt, and Valsiner 1992).

2.2 Use of resources

People experiencing ruptures as they move through spheres of experience may develop various strategies to facilitate subsequent transition processes. When people actively work to restore a sense of identity, define new skills, or make sense of ruptures, they are often required to draw on various available elements,

which might then be used as resources (Gillespie and Zittoun 2010b). In a given situation, people may draw on knowledge or skills from other spheres of experience as resource for understanding, ask other people for help, find support in institutions that facilitate changes, or draw on various cultural elements such as books, web pages, and stories as symbolic resources (Zittoun 2006a).

In effect, *cultural elements* such as movies, novels, songs, or rituals are all semiotic constructions which have as first function to crystallize and transmit other people's interpretations of life situations – in the past, or in distant places. Engaging in a cultural activity or having a cultural experience such as reading a novel or praying opens a space of imaginary experience which is made possible not only through these socially shared meanings but also through the resonance the cultural element has for the person: a film is sad because the music has a specific tonality, but also because one recalls similar occurrences of personal sadness. In that sense, cultural experiences not only contain personal experiences, but they are likely to have a transformative effect: listening to aggressive music can have a calming effect, seeing a romantic comedy in which tension is solved by a happy resolution can bring a sense of inner relief (Vygotsky 1971). During these cultural experiences, but more likely afterwards, people can relate these to other parts of their experience, which might then acquire a new value or sense. People might also reflect upon the similarities between their own lives and the situation represented in a film, or the contrasts between a character and someone they know, etc. Hence, cultural elements are used as symbolic resources, which can play an important role in sense making (Zittoun 2006a, 2008).

3 Methodological implications

The theoretical frame sketched so far has a few implications when it comes to study people's actual experiences and psychological development. The first is that attempts to study psychological development involve examining issues of meaning and sense making: they question how people interpret the events or phenomena that the researcher has in mind. Concretely, as it is impossible to 'see' sense making or any other psychological process, researchers have to limit themselves to the study of externalization (Valsiner 2000): what people say or show, that is, their own uses of semiotic systems such as discourse, gestures, writing, or painting. Beyond single-case studies, theoretical generalization is then possible through comparison with other case studies and abduction (James 1904; Valsiner et al. 2009).

A second implication is that research methodologies should be aimed at capturing processes of change rather than the outcomes only. The main technique to do this is real-time data gathering – reading diaries, observing real-time processes – or reconstructive means such as self-narratives (Zittoun 2009). However, because any self-narrative is an externalized discourse addressed to someone else and the narrative form itself is shaped by linguistic rules and cultural conventions, self-narratives always transform the experience they are meant to record, and are likely to increase the authors' self-reflection or bring them to new perspectives or understanding (Abbey and Zittoun 2010; Gillespie and Zittoun 2010a; Zittoun and Gillespie 2012).

The question of how people relate to and use religious elements as resources can be studied in various ways. In my own work on uses of religious resources I use ethnographic methods (Zittoun 1996, 2006b), narrative and literary material (Zittoun 2001, 2007), and problem-specific, reconstructive interviews (Zittoun 2004a, 2006a). In what follows I will mainly draw on semi-directive, reconstructive interviews gathered as part of a research project on the role of cultural elements as resources (Zittoun 2006a). In a British town with an important university, twenty young people likely to have experienced a recent transition were contacted between 2002 and 2004. They could be divided into three sub-groups: 1) people who had recently moved from various parts of the UK to that town and started their studies; 2) young religious Jews from a large British city with middle-class Jewish neighborhoods, who came to the secular environment of that university town after one or two years in a rabbinic school in Israel; 3) young people from the town itself who had dropped out of school and were working in menial jobs. In what follows, I will refer to cases from the two first subgroups, whose interviews also yielded the richest harvest of people's uses of various resources. The analysis of the experiences of the young people from the second group was expanded by observations in the local Jewish community, and an interview with their rabbi (Zittoun 2006b). Interviews were announced as being about 'cultural experiences in young people's lives'; they had a chronological structure, questioning the interviewee about recent ruptures and transitions, going back to earlier events and asking about future plans. For each event mentioned the interview focused on what elements had helped to overcome difficulties, with a particular stress on cultural elements.

If we work from such a theoretical and methodological perspective religious elements may be used by research participants to support self-narrative in two ways. First, the developmental, semiotic approach chosen here suggests that people are constantly engaged in the process of making sense of their own experience and establishing a sense of self-continuity, through various semiotic means. Language is only one of the modalities through which this sense making

is produced: it may also be realized through real or imaginary dialogues with others, confrontation with unexpected aspects of oneself, as well as interactions with material and symbolic objects or representations – which all might be borrowed from religious traditions or considered religious by the person in question. Second, the specific methodological technique (reconstructive interviews) used here induces people to present their experience to the interviewer in a temporal, narrative mode, which demands a specific reflective posture. This means that a research participant mentioning religious elements could either report past uses of religious resources, or be actually using them in the actual interview situation to make sense of past events.

4 Religions to support transitions

As symbolic systems, religious traditions have as their main function to offer a worldview, a perspective from which to approach life and its events. Hence, a person growing up in an environment strongly emphasizing the sets of values, narratives, and actions related to a religious tradition is provided with means to render the world intelligible and actionable – even in a non-reflective way. Narratives, images, and symbols borrowed from religious traditions or attributable to religions are pervasive in our Western society. Thus, these belong to the stock of available cultural elements to which people might refer when they need to. From a developmental perspective this means that religions can play different roles when people experience ruptures due to transformations in their spheres of experience. In what follows I will examine three ways in which religion as a symbolic system might support or facilitate transition processes, and one specific type of constraint on such uses.

4.1 Normative transitions

Because religious traditions are oriented towards conferring meaning and focus on people's lives, their symbolic systems often contain a theory of time and templates for major life transitions. Most religions are organized along a calendar (be it linear or cyclical) with specific milestones – celebrations of new years or new cycles, anniversaries of all kinds, etc. These might also provide organization of small time units – months, weeks, or moments of the day. Punctuating time, they provide people with a sense of orientation and predictability and support sense making. Hence, celebrating a new year becomes an invitation to reflect upon one's life during the past year, or doing one's daily morning prayers

link the new day to the long series of days. Providing time markers, often supported by material objects and specific actions, religious traditions reinforce people's experience of their own continuity and belonging to a larger and shared history as members of a specific community (Zittoun 2008, 2011a).

In addition, most religious traditions propose ways to symbolically handle major life changes: birth and death, but also becoming an adult, a parent, or an elderly. Religious systems usually confer a specific value to these events or a particular explanation, and have developed practices and rituals accompanying these transformations (Nathan 1991; Valsiner 2000; Van Gennep 1981; Zittoun 2004a). Thus, an event which could otherwise have been experienced as personal rupture may become a transition significant in the terms defined by the collective system, and an occasion to reassess one's inclusion in a community. For instance, religious rituals of namegiving as part of the transition to parenthood (Zittoun 2004b), of becoming an adult, and of preparing dead people for burial or burning, are means to both re-establish the continuity of the group and to render major life ruptures meaningful for its members.

4.2 Using isolated religious elements as symbolic resources

In our contemporary societies people rarely live in a homogeneous environment; most people internalize a great variety of cultural elements as they move through diverse spheres of experience. Hence, cultural 'bricolage' is more the rule than the exception, and personal systems of orientation reflect this heterogeneity. Thus, people confronted with the many challenges of daily life are likely to be looking for any available means to understand or define a course of action. In that respect, religious cultural elements are often part of the available means in one's material or virtual environment.

Borrowing religious cultural elements, for example, is done when people experience events which were traditionally ritualized by religious and cultural groups. Becoming a parent is typically one of these transitions. When I examined what resources people are drawing on when they choose a name for their unborn child, it appeared that traditional religious elements were often invoked or mentioned as part of the parents' reasoning – giving the name of a godfather to a child in a Christian family, not giving the name of a deceased person in a Jewish family (Zittoun 2004a, 2004b), or giving a name that refers to biblical imagery (Zittoun 2011b). It appears that even non-practicing or non-religious couples would often consider the name repertoires or naming rules typical of their religious tradition of origin. They might know these rules, but would also often ask relatives about these or use genealogical trees, manuals, and internet resources

to inform themselves about traditional names and practices. In these cases, the cultural element is not so much borrowed from a symbolic system in which the person has been socialized than the product of cultural reinvention. The naming rules or their justifications then become semiotic resources used by the parents to realize a specific intention: to establish an imaginary continuity between the child and other members of a family, to keep the memory of loved ones, or to reassess boundaries between one's perceived group and others.

Migration often brings major ruptures, especially when these are imposed rather than chosen. Migration in effect demands a drastic reorganization of one's spheres of experience – friends and leisure, neighborhood, work, and so on. People's need to maintain some sense of continuity, that is, to restore an inner dialogue between who one was and who one is becoming, often leads them to identify stable elements outside the migration. For instance, people bring objects and memorabilia with them – these remain stable when everything else changes (Habermas 1996). Also, people might reactivate religious practices, thus drawing on religious elements as symbolic resources. Studying Sudanese refugees in Egypt, Mahmoud notes how some people start regularly engaging in prayers and rituals, as repeated prayer 'creates order in the face of the ambiguity and chaos characterizing their lives, offering something concrete and consistent to hold onto' (Mahmoud 2009: 121).

Cultural elements borrowed from a religious system can also be used for their potential to make people think about or go through current experiences in a different way. Thomas is one of the young people I interviewed because he had moved away from his village to come to study in the university town. Although retaining some of the shared beliefs he was also quite critical of the village's religious conservatism, and a consequence was developing his own system of orientation. Like many other young people, he took objects maintaining a sense of continuity with his place of origin with him – flags and pictures. What is more relevant here, he regularly used elements from the religious tradition he knew (Zittoun 2006a). First, Thomas explains that every day he spends some time reading a religious magazine sent by his grandmother, and using it to reflect upon his actions:²

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

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.

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.

In the above passage, Thomas identifies values or propositions from his religious tradition – such as ‘God gives you what you need’ or ‘forgiveness is important’. These propositions function like filters through which he can reread daily events and interpret them in a different way. In the same vein, Thomas gives an example of how, confronted with the many beggars of the town and not knowing how to react, he draws on another religious resource:

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.

In this case a scene developed on the basis of the shared stock of religious imagination – more than a specific biblical sequence – is used as a symbolic resource: it allows for opening a small imaginary sequence in which Thomas can explore what Jesus would do; and from this vicarious experience he might then decide how to carry on his own action.

Finally, religious elements are not the only cultural elements used as symbolic resources. When questioned about his other interests and values, Thomas mentions biographies of great political figures and especially Mrs. Thatcher's; like these figures, he wishes to engage in politics. Interestingly, when he explains his admiration for Mrs. Thatcher he says that ‘she lightens the way’, partly thanks to her faith. Indeed, her positions were partly supported by her declared religious convictions, and she often quoted the Bible in public discourse. Thus, Thomas seems to establish some parallel between his religious commitments and that of a former Prime Minister. We could suggest that, through Mrs. Thatcher's biography, Thomas defines more general, abstract values – such as conviction and loyalty –, which he views as borrowed from the same religious tradition so that they become part of his own system of orientation. As is the case for most people, Thomas's orientation system is not totally consistent with the one present in his environment. Engaged in regular bricolage, he borrows propositions, narrative sequences, and general values from diverse spheres of experience, which he identifies as connected to one consistent religious system.

Thus, the use of isolated religious elements as symbolic resources can serve to make sense of specific events, to evaluate them, to imagine alternatives, and

to define general values. When used as symbolic resources these elements are always embedded in interpersonal relationships, or at least in relationships with imaginary or generalized others. We see that Thomas's symbolic resources are linked to, or mediated by, the grandmother sending the magazines, the fictionalized image of Jesus or God, and the figure of Mrs. Thatcher. Hence, Thomas engages in an imaginary dialogue with these internalized others, or in other words, a sort of auto-dialogue (Josephs 1998; Josephs and Valsiner 1998) mediated by religious semiotic means. Thus, because of their content or shape these elements always refer to a specific group with its representative figures, to shared meanings within that group, and to the personal significance these acquire for the individual and his life story.

4.3 Using a non-religious cultural element to complement a religious system

Having strongly internalized a religious system in a religious sphere, under the guidance of specific representatives of that tradition, may facilitate someone's ability to deal with different spheres of experience, by providing basic sets of values or guidance for daily practice. This may also support one's sense of self-continuity. However, in some cases people may feel the need to complement their system of orientation with elements from other spheres of experience. In these cases people engage in innovative practices.

The young religious Jews who came back to a secular environment after spending some time in a rabbinic school explained how much they experienced a 'split', a radical change. Even if they found the means to re-establish a sense of belonging and thus restore their identity through maintaining their religious activities and regular meetings with the community, while adjusting to the demands of the more secular environment, they still had to make sense of that rupture. Some of them seemed to have been open to different cultural elements – religious and non-religious – in their need to restore a feeling of personal continuity.

Abraham explains that he has found a model which enabled him to rethink his own mode of life by reading about psychology – a book by Eric Berne:

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 your 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.

Abraham uses the model of the pumping heart as an analogy for organizing his own life in a secular environment: one third should be devoted to academic work, one third to other activities (in his case mainly his religious life), and one third to sleep. This model enables him to rethink the relations between his spheres of experience: they are separate, yet part of the same whole.

Eli reports reading a novel which enabled him to reflect upon his experience:

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.

Here *The Glass Bead game* seems to have offered a cultural experience by portraying a character going through a very similar experience: a young man coming back from an esoteric college, leaving that world, and trying to adjust to the outside world. The existential situation probably found a resonance in Eli's own experience. Hence, it seems that the fiction enabled Eli to represent on a fictional level his experience of leaving a sphere of experience, meeting tensions, and adjusting to a new environment. Using the novel as a symbolic resource, Eli was now able to reflect upon and confer some logic and consistency to his life trajectory.

Interestingly, we see that both Eli and Abraham use non-religious, general public cultural elements to reflect about the plurality of their spheres of experience. This paradoxically enables them to consider and restore the specificity of their religious experience in a secular environment. Thus, these young men display cultural creativity – their own 'bricolage' – using available cultural elements to restore and adapt their previous religious life to the new demands of their environment. They are capable of religious innovation.

4.4 Limitations of the use of religious elements as symbolic resources

Cultural bricolage and the possibility to use religious elements as symbolic resources also have their limits. Like any other cultural artifact, cultural elements have a limited area or period of use – an ‘expiry date’.

For instance, rabbinic, traditional Jewish studies are oriented towards the study of the legal corpus of the Jewish tradition (the Talmud) and its narrative counterpart (the Tanakh). A characteristic of this tradition of studies is its dialogical, hermeneutical, and argumentative nature. Scholars learn to question the texts in search of its contradictions and possible implications; this debating is done in pairs of scholars, drawing on earlier discussions that took place and were recorded, thus becoming part of the tradition itself (e.g., Steinsaltz 2006). The scholarly tradition has itself catalogued and named the argumentative and narrative operations by which different segments of the text can be linked, or what can be used to illuminate, clarify, explain, or contradict another one. Also, the same operations are meant to allow people to interpret everyday problematic situations on the basis of the traditional corpus. Thus, in traditional Talmudic discussions various legislative aspects of daily life were defined (e.g., whether the fruits of a tree growing on the borders of a field belong to one owner or the other), in later discussions the same texts had to be used to analyze new problems: is consulting internet on a Saturday against the rule that forbids any work on that day? Are new forms of artificial reproductive techniques against basic Jewish beliefs about the origin of life? In this way, the rabbinic tradition has developed an explicit know-how about using textual elements as symbolic resources, as is revealed by these catalogues of hermeneutic operations and their systematic application in the Talmudic and Biblical literature, as well as in all aspects of Jewish prayer, study, and daily life.

The young people whom I interviewed after they had spent some time in a rabbinic school had internalized many aspects of that religious tradition. To some extent this supported their actions and understanding of new experiences in a secular environment: their time was still largely structured according to religious codification, and general values developed in a Yeshiva, such as the importance of study, were still at the basis of their secular studies. However, they had to deal with many new experiences – a secular environment, other students whose conduct was governed by very different sets of values, and a more complex mode of life in which many options were available and more individual initiative was required. To handle these, they surprisingly did not seem to use biblical or cultural elements as symbolic resources. The interview with their rabbi did indeed suggest that these young people had learnt to use religious texts

as symbolic resources, but only within the specific setting of the tradition. From their perspective, using religious texts and skills as resources from which to interpret new situations was part of their religious sphere of experience, and was validated by the community and religious authorities. It even seemed that in the Yeshiva in which these young people spent some time rabbis often criticized their intention to leave the rabbinic environment in order to live in a secular environment. As a consequence, it seems that the young people felt that it was illegitimate to use these religious texts as symbolic resources in new spheres of experience. Moving spheres of experience, they seemed to have discovered the boundaries beyond which their religious symbolic resources should not be used any longer. And indeed, the rabbi of the university community had to create new settings – group discussions, shared meals – in which religious texts could be used to reflect upon everyday and secular issues, for these young people to rediscover the power of these symbolic resources (Zittoun 2006b).

More generally, this example suggests that even if they seem readily available, cultural elements cannot always be used freely by anyone. In certain situations figures of authority or institutions even have a very strong power to determine what resources are legitimate, for what use, and by whom. Further, people's biographical trajectories, their past experiences, or their actual relationships, limit the construction of a system of orientation and the use of symbolic resources.

5 Discussion: religious traditions and innovation

Religious traditions usually transmit their own foundational myths and history; they also develop means to facilitate their continuation through institutions, texts of reference, material artifacts (religious art and architecture), and so on. However, religious traditions can survive only if they can adjust to the changing demands of a world in constant flux and maintain their relevance for people.

Religious innovation is particularly visible at the level of individual trajectories. As recent studies suggest, religious experience tends to become more individual, more self-made, and more heterogeneous in many parts of the world. Through the examples reported here, I have discussed how in their daily lives people may borrow one or the other element from religious traditions directly accessible to them as resources to address daily issues. I have also suggested that the possibility of using religious cultural elements is limited: institutions and legal representatives can, either explicitly or via people's internal dialogues, impose constraints on what can be done with what cultural elements. Finally, I hope to have shown how even religious people, in a changing situation, might

use diverse cultural elements as symbolic resources to reinforce and make sense of their own religiosity. In this way, the use of both religious and non-religious resources can facilitate personal adjustment to a changing environment.

The examples chosen show how people use religious and symbolic resources to facilitate specific transitions, but the specific use of resources can also have longer-term effects and wider implications. On the one hand, the use of resources itself enriches biographical trajectories: a person's use of symbolic resources can bring her to encounter new cultural elements; these can be used as symbolic resources, and open new life paths and options, leading to new resources, and so on (Zittoun 2006a, 2010). Thus, religious conversions can sometimes be described as individual trajectories in which a person's need for sense was satisfied by a religious resource, eventually leading the person to use other resources belonging to the same religious tradition, then to identify with the related religious community, and so on (Day 2009; Fournier 2009).

On the other hand, individual uses of religious symbolic resources can find a social echo and become amplified until they lead to the creation of new social networks or communities, as suggested by studies on new forms of religiosity. A study of the life trajectories of young Muslim women in France shows that they have rediscovered religious elements from the tradition into which they had been socialized, and use them as resources to claim more visibility and recognition (Saint-Blancat 2004). Similarly, migrant Vietnamese women draw on symbolic resources from the existing Pentecostal communities, and with that become involved in social networks in which they can develop administrative and managing skills, and eventually receive social recognition and means of subsistence (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010). Also, gay women have been inventing new forms of religiosity in order to make sense of their experiences and trajectories (Wilcox 2009). The 'Sisters of perpetual indulgence', for instance, is a gay movement whose members use the imagery, symbolism, and general values of nuns in order to present themselves in a theatrical way and promote a message of tolerance and recognition. Hence, when many people engage in similar actions and use the same symbolic resources networks develop, and a community can emerge and create boundaries that separate it from other groups. Finally, such inventions can also affect general, long-standing religious traditions: as in many other cases, the activism of a minority can become persistent enough to force dominant groups to enter into a dialogue and eventually to redefine their own values and boundaries (Moscovici 1976).

Finally, two points must be highlighted here. First, using religious symbolic resources is always a dialogical process: it demands an imaginary dialogue with cultural elements and their meanings, as well as a dialogue with real or imaginary persons who produced or shared such meanings. Finally, these uses of sym-

bolic resources imply a dialogue with the social worlds, because they always imply positioning their users in specific networks, and creating and redefining boundaries between social groups. Second, any use of religious elements as a symbolic resource or of a non-religious resource as complement to a system of orientation demands a form of hijacking, of the new use of an old cultural element, a form of local innovation, due to the new temporal and spatial situation. Consequently, innovative uses of religious elements as symbolic resources, which can support sense making and can open imaginary spaces in which alternatives and possible worlds can be explored, are likely to foster not only individual, but also social change.

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