Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (ed.)

Religion in Cultural Imaginary

Explorations in Visual and Material Practices

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, March 2015

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Religion in Cultural Imaginary
Setting the Scene

> Parler d'image sans imagination, c'est, littéralement, couper l'image de son activité, de sa dynamique.
>
> Une image sans imagination, c'est tout simplement une image sur laquelle on ne s'est pas donné le temps de travailler. Car l'imagination est travail, ce *temps de travail des images* sans cesse agissant les unes sur les autres par collisions ou par fusions, par ruptures ou par métamorphoses ... Tout cela agissant sur notre propre activité de savoir et de pensée. Pour savoir, il faut donc bien s'imaginer: la *table de travail* spéculative ne va pas sans une *table de montage* imaginative.[1]

A question arises in your mind as you awake: is the significance of religion in contemporary society increasing or decreasing? You reflect on this question as you switch on a rolling news channel and this question journeys with you as you accompany your children to their multicultural school, travelling together on public transport covered with adverts that appropriate symbols from traditions all over the world. Continuing on to work, you read your newspaper (in print or tablet), assessing the role of religion in current global wars and conflicts. You arrive at work, an historic building whose evident Christian origins barely register anymore in your consciousness, and argue, over coffee with your colleagues, about immigration restrictions and the right of expressing and practicing religion. Later, whilst eating your lunch of vegan sandwiches, your peace is disturbed by the construction-site opposite, as the new shopping mall (with interreligious chapel) looms over the city-scape. People-watching, you are struck by the broad range of fashions and styles displayed by the clothing of pedestrians, trying to imagine their stories, backgrounds, and religious identities. That evening you visit the latest exhibition that subtly reshapes its viewers' shared visual language of religious images, whilst debating with friends the religious issues confronted by recent cinematic releases. That night, whilst

1 Didi-Huberman 2003, 143, 149.

checking your emails you browse the web in which the whole world is presented in the form of audio-visual media, and conclude the day, perhaps, by thanking God with prayers that your parents used to say with you… It is astonishing to realize the diverse ways in which religious traditions, narratives, practices and symbols are disseminated, globally, and hence to face the difficulty of capturing these recurrences in a consistent conceptual framework that could be used in research and teaching about religion and visual media, and material culture. Furthermore, the multi-faceted references to religious communities, traditions, and symbol systems are strongly related to visual and material culture. Moreover, they are not only embedded in rational discourses, theological reflections and religious practices, although it is not possible (and reasonable) to separate the visual presence of religion in society from verbal assertions and writings. Let us take the controversies about religious symbols or dress codes in the public sphere as an example: the statements legitimating or prohibiting these practices – whether they are expressed from inside a religious community or from a political perspective – are a crucial part of the conflict, but, I would argue, the symbols and clothing themselves also constitute an important part of these controversial and multi-layered meaning making processes.

These reflections on the recurrence of religious references in the public space as well as questions about possible approaches to this striking but fragmentary field, lie at the origins of this project. A group of scholars from different disciplines related to religion and working in different countries, languages, and academic traditions met regularly during the last few years to discuss common methodological questions and analyse different approaches to engage with religious references in different social spheres. In this introductory chapter, the main lines of the theoretical aspects of the project are presented, aimed at outlining the interpretative frame in which the case studies discussed in the following chapters are embedded.

First, the common research question that we approached from different disciplinary perspectives is presented. Secondly, the main concept of the project, the 'imaginary', is introduced and discussed in the light of the positions that most influenced our work. Finally, the individual case studies are summarised outlining their particular contribution to the general question.

The Diffusion of Religious Symbols in Society

As already mentioned above, in many spheres of our contemporary society explicit references to religions recur in multi-faceted ways. From religious buildings to religious references in films, contemporary art or advertising, from press photography depicting present conflicts to didactic exhibitions about the role of religion in a particular culture; from posters for political campaigns evoking 'foreign' religions to the interaction between religion and clothing in fashion: the range is broad and challenges academic approaches. Facing this diffusion and diversity it is to be asked whether it makes sense to assume a common ground between such varied references to religions, since they do not relate to a homogeneous tradition or culture. Does a generalisation of 'religion' as a theoretical concept help at all in this case? In the broad debate about the achievements and limits of the secularization paradigm, there are useful insights for deepening this question. Therefore, I draw attention to some influential arguments selected from this debate.[2]

The functional differentiation of social subsystems is one of the central points in the depiction of the relationship between modernity and religion. In reconsidering the potentiality of the secularisation paradigm, Detlef Pollack affirms that the loss of influence which religion can deploy upon society has been overestimated or, more precisely, generalized in a way that needs revision. For instance, the dynamic of religious production of meaning or the role of religion as a socially relevant factor of change has not been outlined sufficiently. It is evident that religion can promote global networking, acquisition of education, political mobilization, democratization, and individualization and therefore positively influence modernization processes in society. At the same time, it is important to observe that not only religion influences modernity but that the effects of modernity upon religion may be likewise remarkable.[3] Modernisation has changed the general social order, from political systems to communication in the public

2 It is beyond the scope of this contribution to recapitulate in detail the critical debate about the secularisation paradigm. Therefore, I prefer to select and arrange the scholarly positions discussed in a systematic, rather than a chronological, sequence. For a general overview cf. Pollack 2011, Krech 2011, Calhoun/Juergensmeyer/VanAntwerpen 2011.

3 Cf. Pollack 2011, 50: "Nicht unberechtigt ist der Einwand bezüglich der dynamischen Potenz religiöser Sinnformen. Tatsächlich nimmt die Säkularisierungsthese Religion zu wenig als gesellschaftsverändernden Faktor wahr und sieht sie zu stark in Abhängigkeit von gesellschaftlichen Wandlungsprozessen wie Industrialisierung, Wohlstandanhebung, Urbanisierung, Bildungsexpansion und Ausbau des Sozial- und Rechtsstaates. Es ist

sphere, from alimentation to everyday private life. Therefore one may assume that even religion has been profoundly affected by this development.[4] Reading Pollack's contribution and considering the references to empirical data, it seems that religion is understood as a set of practices that are generally related to a defined religious tradition. His position is interesting because, even by sustaining the validity of secularisation theory, he actualises it by underlining the emergence of religion in other subsystems of society.

Pollack responds to, among others, the position of José Casanova. Outlining the concept of deprivatisation, Casanova's critical reading of secularisation is more radical:

> The central thesis of the present study is that we are witnessing the 'deprivatization' of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.[5]

Casanova does not reject completely the theory of secularisation and sustains the "thesis of the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institution and norms."[6] 'Deprivatisation', a term that has also a polemical connotation,

> is also meant to signify the emergence of new historical developments which, at least qualitatively, amount to a certain reversal of what appeared to be secular trends. Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society, between family, civil society, and state, between nations, states civilizations, and the world system.[7]

By describing this general trend, Casanova correlates religion with traditions, institutions and norms. The term is not defined sharply, but encom-

> unbestreitbar, Religion kann Prozesse der globalen Vernetzung, des Bildungserwerbs, der politischen Aktivierung, der Demokratisierung und Individualisierung befördern und damit auf die Modernisierung der Gesellschaft selbst einen positiven Einfluss ausüben. Aber es ist ebenso zu beachten, dass die Moderne das Gesicht der Religion verändert hat. Ja, man muss sogar fragen, ob die Wirkungen der Moderne auf die Religion nicht bedeutsamer sind als die Wirkungen der Religion auf die Moderne."

4 Cf. Pollack 2011, 50, and also Bhargava 2011.

5 Casanova 1994, 5.

6 Casanova 1994, 6.

7 Casanova 1994, 6.

passes different levels: on the one hand, concrete communities and organisation, and on the other, more general products such as normative discourses.

In contrast to Casanova's descriptive approach, Jürgen Habermas' concept of a post-secular society outlines the relevance of religion in the public sphere with a decisive normative claim. To define society as post-secular means to recognise a 'change in consciousness' due to three phenomena. First, the role of religion in global conflicts and its reception: "The awareness of living in a secular society is no longer bound up with the *certainty* that cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the political influence and personal relevance of religion."[8] Second, the increasing influence of religion within national public spheres: "I am thinking here of the fact that churches and religious organisations are increasingly assuming the role of 'communities of interpretation' in the public arena of secular societies."[9] And third, the pluralistic ways of life that are the consequence of widespread, important phenomena of immigration, bringing migrants with traditional cultural backgrounds and other religious orientations into complex societies where different denominations already coexist. Following his argumentation, secularised societies can be termed as 'post-secular' because

> in these societies, religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground. If we henceforth adopt the perspective of participants, however, we face a quite different, namely normative question: How should we see ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews?[10]

The presence of religion in the public sphere is, therefore, conceived on different levels: on a descriptive level it appears as the result of particular socio-historical developments, while on a normative level Habermas expects religious organisations to be 'communities of interpretation' providing worldviews that sustain social cohesion. In commenting on Habermas' position, Eduardo Mendieta summarizes:

> Religious practices and perspectives […] continue to be key sources of the values that nourish an ethics of multicultural citizenship, commanding both solidarity and

8 Habermas 2008, 20.
9 Habermas 2008, 20.
10 Habermas 2008, 21.

> equal respect. Yet, in order for the 'vital semantic potential from religious traditions' to be made available for wider political culture (and in particular, within democratic institutions), they must be translated into a secular idiom and a 'universally accessible language', a task that falls not only to religious citizens but to all citizens – both religious and secular – engaged in the public use of reason.[11]

All these approaches, although they are quite different in their respective focus on social processes and in the scholarly perspective they represent – covering a spectrum from description to normative claim – agree in pointing out the increasing role of religion in the public sphere. Furthermore, a double role of religion in the global context is highlighted: on the one hand, religion emerges as relevant in social phenomena all over the world, and, on the other hand, the diffusion of religion in the public sphere in Western societies is largely motived by the perception of this global dimension of religion. Moreover, religion is not only identified with institutions and organisations, which implies defined social stakeholders, but also more generally with worldviews and traditions that generate and transmit values and norms.

At this point, it seems relevant to me to consider approaches to religion in contemporary society based on cultural studies. They allow a further elucidation of the correlation between religion and modernity, focusing on the question of how those worldviews, norms and values produced within religious traditions and communities are diffused in the public sphere and which function they in fact assume.

In a special issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* on *Religion, Media and Social Change*, David E.J. Herbert addresses the question of "how do changes in the media through which religious meaning systems are communicated influence the character of public religion in contemporary societies?"[12] To ask about the communication processes that sustain the diffusion of religion in the public sphere implies a new perspective to complement the sociological and philosophical perspectives by looking at the dimension of cultural processes and the production of meaning. The diffusion of religion is correlated by radical changes in mass media and political economy, as well as in the role of the state.[13] The effects of this transformation are manifold: the diffusion of religious symbols and discourses generates new meaning making processes with religious connotations and involves new actors, which leads to the question "around the ownership

11 Mendieta/VanAntwerpen 2011, 4–5, cf. also Calhoun 2011.

12 Herbert 2011, 629.

13 To deepen the concept of diffusion and circulation cf. Lee/LiPuma 2002.

and meaning of religious symbols and discourses" and reconfigures the "status of established religious authorities."[14]

Modern communication systems contribute to the publicization of religion, and, this is a crucial point, challenge the dialectics between private and public. Through the influence of new media this difference loses sharps outlines becoming a fluid and dynamic tension.[15] Therefore, to summarize Herbert's thesis, the communication processes that allow a diffusion of religious symbols and discourses (I would include here also norms and values, although he does not mention them explicitly) generate new meanings involving a broad range of actors:

> The increased circulation of religious symbols and discourses arguably creates a pool or reservoir of cultural resources which can be mobilized for political (or other, for example, commercial) public purposes, as and when group interest and circumstances require and permit. More subtly, public discourse itself may be influenced by the penetration of religious idioms and symbols, just as the latter may be changed by their circulation and use in political and commercial contexts.[16]

The main consequences of the publicization of religion through modern communication processes are the visibility of religion, the transformation of religious authority, the re-articulation of devotional practices and of religious identities.[17]

In the same special issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Steward M. Hoover discusses more in detail the changes induced by the interaction between new media and religion:

> Of course, the form of religion that persists today is new and protean, adapted to the social and cultural conditions of the times including, not unimportantly, the media sphere. The role and function of the media in relation to religion deserves attention on several levels, not at least one that is significant at this point: the arguable role that media have had in remaking or restructuring it, a process that some voices have called a 'mediatization' of religion.[18]

Hoover makes a strong claim to deepen the interaction between media and religion in the context of the contemporary transformation of society and,

14 Herbert 2011, 628.

15 The author assumes a critical position toward secularisation and rational choice theories. Among other arguments, he stresses the static and a-historical character of their concepts of private and public, and the identification of religion with concrete providers of religious 'services', cf. particularly Herbert 2011, 635–636.

16 Herbert 2011, 633.

17 Cf. Herbert 2011, 640.

18 Hoover 2011, 612.

within it, of religion. Media are at the core of meaning making processes, and the "media and processes of mediation have important capacities to serve the religious imagination."[19] Therefore, the diffusion of religious symbols, discourses, norms and values in a post-secular society is also enabled through the impact of media on social life.[20] The effects and possibilities of media are not be underestimated:

> The larger context of entertainment media, particularly the screen media, instantiate another, wider set of functions, although what we think of as news still resides somewhere at the center. These functions have to do with imagination and the way the media are situated to provide particularly salient imaginaries […] In cultural negotiation about religion today, this media imaginary is moving increasingly to the center.[21]

To illustrate these effects of media, Hoover names the role of the cinema since its inception in the late 19th century, as a medium that transports ideologies across other spheres of society, as the example of fascism illustrates.

Let us go back to the initial question at the beginning of this overview of different approaches to the relation between religion and modernity in sociology, political philosophy and cultural studies: which theoretical concepts of religion are used to describe the diffusion of religion in the public sphere? As we have seen, the definition of religion is not clearly addressed in the selected contributions. A synthesis of the selected contributions, however, allows some central points to be identified.

First, religion is seen as a social sphere regaining significance for the whole society. Second, religion is linked with institutions, organisations, and communities. Third, religion is seen as a pool of worldviews, symbols, discourses, values, and norms that are broadly circulating and interact with different social spheres. Although not all authors attribute the same significance to this aspect, it seems to me that the tension between religion as an institution and religion as a circulating pool of meaning making processes through media is drawing more and more attention.

Regarding this last point, it is necessary to clarify a fundamental aspect of the relation between media and religion. Since the circulation of religious symbols and discourses is described in the context of a revision of the secu-

19 Hoover 2011, 614, cf. also Herbert/Gillespie 2011.

20 To describe the diffusion of religion in media, Knoblauch introduces the concept of 'popular religion' as an identifiable entity that is different from religious traditions, cf. Knoblauch 2009, 193–264, and also Valaskivi/Sumiala 2014.

21 Hoover 2011, 615.

larisation theory, it makes sense to speak about an interaction between 'media' and 'religion' as in principle different social spheres. Instead, an approach to this questions based on religious and cultural history would stress that religious traditions are in fact complex systems of communication and that to speak of the 'histories' of media and religion would be to differentiate two facets of culture that are not so clearly divisible.[22] The history of religions is always closely related to the history of media comprising, as Jörg Rüpke points out, a critical use or regulation of media.[23] This remains valid in many fields also for modernity, as the invention of print in the 15th century and the consequences for the diffusion of the Bible in Europe may illustrate. A broadly comparable example is provided by the invention and diffusion of film and later of television, since in both cases the relationship between the advent of a new medium and religion – both as an institution and as a pool of worldviews, and symbols – is evident.[24]

The deep anchored interaction of religion and media – both historically and functionally – influences the diffusion of religious worldviews, practices, organisations, and values in society in multi-layered, and non-homogeneous ways.[25] Therefore, religion must be conceived in a quite open way, both as a social stakeholder in the form of institutions, organisations, and communities as well as a communication system of worldviews and practices involving individuals and communities. This second aspect can be captured by approaching religion as a representation practice that generates multi-layered meaning making processes. Compared to other representation practices, religion focuses especially on the tension between immanence and transcendence.[26] Contrasting such a theoretical approach to religion with the results of the case studies presented in this project, it is interesting to observe that often the religious references circulating in the public

22 For an initial approach to this field cf. Burke 2004, de Vries/Weber 2001, Beinhauer-Köhler/Pezzoli-Olgiati/Valentin 2010.

23 Cf. Rüpke 2007. For the specific case of the relation between religion and visual media until the Renaissance cf. as an example Belting 1994.

24 Cf. Hoover 2011. The interaction between a religious institution, the Catholic church, and cinema is presented as the base of a detailed local analysis in Fritz/Martig/Perlini-Pfister 2011. Another interesting medium to analyse the intricate interaction between media and religion through history is the case of money, cf. Hörisch 2004, Seele 2010. For the interaction between religious worldviews, values, and symbols there is a very extensive bibliography. For a general introduction cf. Lyden 2009, Blizek 2009, Miles 1996.

25 Cf. Meyer/Moors 2006.

26 Cf. among others Krech 2011, 25–43, Knoblauch 2009.

sphere can be attributed to defined religious traditions and their articulated regulation of transmission, as I will explain later. In this sense, there is still a more or less close link between institutions, their receptions and the production of meaning making processes in the public sphere, where religious symbols and worldviews are involved.

'Imaginary' at the Crossroad of Different Languages and Traditions

It hardly seems a coincidence that Steward Hoover, in defining the importance of the dynamic between religion and media, speaks about 'imagination' and 'imaginaries'.[27] In the last few years, this term has been re-evaluated and recurs in different academic analyses of social and cultural transformations.[28]

In our research group, the idea to capture the diffusion of religious references in society with the concept of 'imaginary' has been proposed by the Italian and French speaking members. In these languages, this term – that emerged in the first half of the 19th century and developed a rich intellectual history – has become an everyday word. The Italian *immaginario* and the French *imaginaire* are defined as "the ensemble of the representations of the world, of the fantasies, and the models of behaviour that are typical for an individual, for a group or a community"[29]. In English and German it appears more elusive, since it does not have a correspondence as a substantive. In these languages, it can be related to the adjective *imaginary* and *imaginär* respectively, understood as 'produced by imagination, existing only in imagination'.[30] Imaginary, as a concept, recurs in a broad range of disciplines, from psychoanalysis to political philosophy, from history to cultural anthropology.

27 Cf. above and footnote 21.

28 Cf. Lee/LiPuma 2002, and Strauss 2006.

29 This is the definition given in Zingarelli 2007, 878: "Insieme delle rappresentazioni del mondo, delle fantasie e dei modelli di comportamento tipici di un individuo, di un gruppo o della collettività." Similarly, in French it assumes meanings like: "Fantasme, souvenir, rêverie, rêve, croyance invérifiable, mythe, roman, fiction sont autant d'expressions de l'imaginaire d'un homme ou d'une culture. On peut parler de l'imaginaire d'un individu mais aussi d'un peuple, à traves l'ensemble de ses oeuvres et croyances. Font partie de l'imaginaire les conceptions préscientifiques, la science-fiction, les croyances religieuses, les productions artistiques qui inventent d'autres réalités (peinture non réaliste, roman, etc.), les fictions politiques, les stéréotypes et préjugés sociaux, etc.", Wunenburger 2003, 5.

30 Both refers also to the mathematic significance of imaginary related to a number, cf. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1992, 588, and Duden 2014.

A reconstruction of the usage of the term by selected authors has revealed useful facets to define it and its manifold possibilities and nuances. We are not proposing an integral review of the history of the 'imaginary', rather we choose positions that have been influential for our project as a whole, namely those that explore the 'imaginary' as a dimension of culture that involves a collective.[31] We are engaging with the term 'imaginary' because we are looking for the possibility of capturing in a theoretical framework the diffusion of religious symbols and discourses within different spheres of society and in public space. Can the imaginary serve as a theoretical framework to understand the widespread, heterogeneous references to religious symbols, worldviews, values and norms in plural society?

We enter the debate with the contribution of Jacques Le Goff, who approaches the imaginary as a dimension of history. He defines 'imaginary' in relation to three other terms: concepts, documents, and images. Firstly, on the level of concepts, the imaginary has to do with representation, symbols (*le symbolique*), and ideology, but is not identical with them. Although the imaginary shares some aspects with these concepts, it is different from them because it encompasses not only procedures of abstraction but rather creative processes.[32] Second, in reconstructing the imaginary of a society, the historian has to consider a variety of documents, including literary and artistic works. Finally, there is a privileged link between imaginary and image. The images that are relevant for the study of the imaginary are both the images embodied in the history of iconography and artistic production and mental images.[33] The imaginary is a crucial dimension of culture that must be reconstructed in order to describe and to understand a society: "The imaginary nourishes and motivates the human being to operate. It is a

31 However, depending on the case study and the specific interest of the individual contributions, other positions are also discussed in the following chapters of this book. For an overview of the history of imaginary cf. Iser 1998, Wunenburger 2003, 5–29.

32 "Quelle que soit la part d'invention conceptuelle qu'ils renferment, les systèmes idéologiques, les concepts organisateurs de la société forgés par les orthodoxies régnantes (ou par leur adversaires) ne sont pas des systèmes imaginaires à proprement parler." Le Goff 1985, III.

33 Cf. Le Goff 1985, III–VI, particularly VI: "Les images qui intéressent l'historien sont des images collectives, brassées par les vicissitudes de l'histoire, elles se forment, changent, se transforment. Elles s'expriment par des mots, des thèmes. Elles sont léguées par les traditions, s'empruntent d'une civilisation à une autre, circulent dans le monde diachronique des classes et des sociéteés humaines."

collective, social, historical phenomenon. A history without the imaginary is a mutilated, disembodied history."[34]

The element of creativity is crucial also in Cornelius Castoriadis' approach to the imaginary that – in the reception of the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan – develops an articulated work on this concept.[35] His study of the imaginary is embedded in its broader political-philosophical thought. He defines the imaginary as a 'power of creation' that is a constitutive faculty of human collectivities, and more generally of the socio-historical sphere.[36] The imaginary is what explains transformation in human societies:

> From the start of history, one sees the emergence of radical novelty, and if we do not wish to resort to transcendental factors to account for this, we definitely must postulate a power of creation, a *vis formandi*, immanent to human collectivities as well as to individual human beings. Consequently, it is quite natural that we call this faculty of radical innovation, this ability to create and to form, the *imaginary* and *imagination*. Language, customs, norms, and technique cannot 'be explained' by factors extrinsic to human collectivities. No natural, biological, or logical factor can account for them. At most, such factors may constitute necessary conditions (generally external and trivial), never sufficient ones.[37]

Castoriadis introduces the distinction of the 'instituting social imaginary' from the 'instituted social imaginary'. They represent two different moments of the creative process. The first is related to the faculty of human beings to create radical novelty (*creation ex nihilo*):

> Creation here means creation ex nihilo, bringing into being a form that was not there before, the creation of new forms of being. It is ontological creation: of forms such as language, institution qua institution, music, and painting; or of some specific form, some work of art, be it musical, pictorial, poetic, or other.[38]

As an illustration for an institution created by this radical form of the imaginary, the author names the God of the monotheistic religions, "upheld by a myriad of institutions such as the Church", or the gods of polytheistic religions.

34 "L'imaginaire nourrit et fait agir l'homme. C'est un phénomène collectif, social, historique. Une histoire sans l'imaginaire, c'est une historie mutilée, désincarnée." Le Goff 1985, VII, (translation by the author).

35 Cf. Castoriadis 1975. Wolf 2012 and Caumière/Tomès 2011 offer a detailed analysis of Castoriadis' concept.

36 Cf. Castoriadis 2007, 73. The original text in French has been published in 1999 with the title *Figures du pensables: les carrefours du labyrinthe VI*.

37 Castoriadis 2007, 72.

38 Castoriadis 2007, 73.

The second, the instituted social imaginary, refers to a solidified stage that

> provides continuity within society, the reproduction and repetition of the same forms, which henceforth regulate peoples' lives and persist as long as no gradual historical change or massive new creation occurs, modifying them or radically replacing them by others.[39]

Finally, I would like to focus on one more aspect that is particularly relevant according to the goals of our research project. Castoriadis relates the different forms of the imaginary as 'instituting' and 'instituted' to a vision of the history of society as a pulsating process where "phases of dense, intense creation alternate with lulls, sluggishness, or regression."[40] He is interested in the question of what keeps societies together and what generates other or new forms of society. He presupposes, therefore, that there is some consistency in the social institution as a whole, and this is the imaginary.[41] There is a distinction to be made between culture, "in the strict sense of the term, and the purely functional dimension of social life. Culture is the domain of the imaginary, in the literal sense, the domain of the poietic, of that element of society that goes beyond the merely instrumental."[42] The imaginary is a creative and cohesive dimension of society.

A further significant contribution is found in Paul Ricœur's approach that defines the concept of social imaginary and addresses it as a practical function of imagination. The latter is related to the capacity of a metaphor to cause a *choc sémantique*, a semantic shock, by relating in an innovative manner to two semantic fields. Hence, to imagine means to restructure semantic fields[43] "a free play with possibilities, in a state of non-engagement towards the world of perception or of action."[44] Imaginative practices – the social imaginary – are a fundamental capacity of the human being of experiencing history.[45]

39 Castoriadis 2007, 73–74.

40 Castoriadis 2007, 75.

41 Cf. Castoriadis 2012, 22.

42 Castoriadis 2007, 77, cf. also the analysis by Gaonkar 2002, 6–10.

43 Ricœur 1986a, 243.

44 Ricœur 1986a, 245: "[…] un libre jeu avec des possibilités, dans un état de non-engagement à l'égard du monde de la perception ou de l'action." All translations of Ricœurs' quotations by the author.

45 Ricœur 1986a, 254: "La verité de notre condition est que le lien analogique qui fait de tout homme mon semblable ne nous est accessible qu'à travers un certain nombre de *pratiques imaginatives*, telles que *l'idéologie* et *l'utopie*."

> My goal in this text is to put two fundamental phenomena together that play a decisive role in the way we situate ourselves in history to relate our expectations toward the future, our traditions inherited from the past and our initiatives in the present. It is indeed remarkable that we became conscious of this by means of imagination, of an imagination that is not only individual but collective.[46]

The 'social or cultural imaginary' has a double character. It acts either as ideology or as utopia and is characterised, therefore, by a conflictive structure. Both, ideology and utopia – whose polemic connotation is explicitly declared by Ricœur – can be described by outlining three different levels. Ideology provides, firstly, a distortion, a dissimulation, an inverse image of reality; on a second level ideology is seen as a justification, a discourse of persuasion and of legitimation, and thirdly, ideology assumes a function of integration. On this level, ideology produces a social memory for example through commemorations that attribute a shared identity to a collectivity.[47] Utopia has something in common with ideology: both provide an interpretation of real life. Ideology reinforces reality by providing a distortion of it, it legitimates a reversed image of reality and integrates the community into it by means of a collective memory and, therefore, generates a sense of identity, whereas utopia interprets real life by projecting it into a dimension outside of space and time: "If ideology preserves and conserves reality, utopia essentially questions it."[48] Utopia is described, following a parallel process, on three levels. First, utopia produces an alternative to reality, it proposes an alternative society. Second, it offers a critique of power, by offering an imaginative vision of it. The third level of utopia is the dissolution of reality.

In the social imaginary, ideology and utopia are always intertwined. The "imaginary is based upon the tension between a function of integration and a function of subversion."[49] Ideology and utopia are complementary, not only because of their parallelism but also because of mutual exchanges. "It

46 Ricœur 1986b, 417: "Mon but dans ce texte est de mettre en relation deux phénomènes fondamentaux qui jouent un role décisif dans la façon dont nous nous situons dans l'histoire pour relier nos attentes tournées vers le future, nos traditions héritées du passé et nos initiatives dans le présent. Il est tout à fait remarquable que ce soit par le moyen de l'imagination, et d'une imagination non seulement invidivuelle mais collective, que nous opérons cette prise de conscience."

47 Cf. Ricœur 1986b, 419–426.

48 Ricœur 1986b, 427: "Si l'idéologie préserve et conserve la réalité, l'utopie la met essentiellement en question."

49 Ricœur 1986b, 431: "[…] cet imaginaire reposait sur une tension entre une function d'intégration et une function de subversion."

seems, in fact, that we always need utopia, because of its fundamental function of contesting and projecting into a radical elsewhere, to complete successfully an equally radical criticism of ideologies."[50]

The ambiguity of the social imaginary in the tension between an ideological and an utopian approach to history and reality formulated by Ricœur is taken up and deepened by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, whose concept of imaginary is influenced by Ricœur and others like Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, and Henry Corbin:

> The imaginary is inseparable from works – both mental and materialised works – that serve to every consciousness to construct the meaning of its life, its actions, its experiences of thought. […] Finally, the imaginary presents itself as a sphere of representations and affects, that are deeply ambivalent: it can be both origin of errors and illusions and a form of revelation of a metaphysical truth. Its value does not reside only in its productions but also in the usage that is made from it.[51]

Wunenburger outlines two aspects of the imaginary. It encompasses mental and productive aspects that are materialised in works, based on visual images (like paintings, drawings, photographs) and related to language (*images languagières*, like metaphor, symbol, story, narration). It has a representative and an emotional and affective side that involves the subject. The imaginary is closer to the perceptions that affect us than to the abstract conceptions that inhibit the affective sphere.[52]

> The study of the imaginary as a world of complex representations should hence focus on the system of images-texts, their creative dynamic, and their semantic pregnancy, that enable an undefined interpretation, and, finally, focus on their efficacious practice and their participation in individual and collective life.[53]

50 Ricœur 1986b, 431: "Il semble, en effet, que nous ayons toujours besoin de l'utopie, dans sa fonction fondamentale de contestation et de projection dans un ailleur radical, pour mener à bien une critique également radicale des idéologies."

51 Wunenburger 2003, 29: "L'imaginaire est inseparable d'œuvres, mentales où matérialisées, qui servent à chaque conscience pour construire le sens de sa vie, de ses actions et de ses experiences de pensée. […] Enfin l'imaginaire se présente comme une sphère de représentations et d'affects profondément ambivalente: il peut aussi bien être source d'erreurs et d'illusions que forme de révélation d'une vérité métaphysique. Sa valeur ne réside pas seulement dans ses productions mais dans l'usage qui en est fait." All translations of Wunenburgers' quotations by the author.

52 Cf. Wunenburger 2003, 10.

53 Wunenburger 2003, 11: "L'étude de l'imaginaire comme monde de représentations complexes doit donc porter sur le système des images-textes, sur leur dynamique créatrice et leur prégnance sémantique, qui rendent possible une intérpretation indéfinie, et enfin sur leur efficace pratique et leur participation à la vie individuelle et collective."

The imaginary allows the possibility to assume a distance from what is real, present and perceived. It produces an alternative world. "Human beings invent, develop and legitimate their beliefs in imaginaries"[54] following their human nature.

The imaginary assumes three general functions: it offers an aesthetic-playful orientation, where the possibility of selfless activities is realized, a cognitive and an 'instituting practical' orientation (*visée instituante pratique*). The imaginary does not only satisfy the needs of sensibility and thought, but it realizes itself also in actions. It motivates people to participate in society.[55] "The imaginary provides humans with memory by giving histories that summarize and reconstruct the past and legitimate the present."[56] The relation of the imaginary to practices, affects and emotions is very much outlined by Wunenburger. They are a fundamental part of the imaginary that, although it is fundamentally ambivalent, motivates people to attribute a meaning to life and society.

Charles Taylor's approach to the imaginary is conceptually very much connected to the latter position but introduced within a different debate concerning modern democratic societies and what he calls their 'new moral order'.[57] In the debate about secularisation, Taylor criticises the particular importance attributed to religion within secularism. The neutrality of the state, that is the base of secularism, is a strategy to respond to the diversity of positions that can be religious or not. Therefore, he states:

> What deserve to be called secularist regimes in contemporary democracy have to be conceived not primarily as bulwarks against religion but as good faith attempts to secure the three (or four) basic goals I have outlined in this chapter. And this means that they attempt to shape their institutional arrangements not to remain true to hallowed tradition but to maximize the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs.[58]

Following Taylor, the social imaginary is "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[59] The social imaginary is a common ground that has a dialectic relation to the new moral order in a complex, plural modern society where a

54 Wunenburger 2003, 64.

55 Cf. Wunenburger 2003, 74.

56 Wunenburger 2003, 75: "L'imaginaire sert en effet à doter les hommes de mémoire, en leur fournissant des récits qui synthétisent et reconstruisent le passé et justifient le présent."

57 Taylor 2002 and 2004.

58 Taylor 2011, 56, cf. also the introduction by Mendieta/VanAntwerpen 2011.

59 Taylor 2002, 106.

multiplicity of religious beliefs as well as religious and non-religious world-views coexist. Taylor describes his concept of imaginary, that is especially influenced by Benedict Anderson,[60] as:

> What I am trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.
> I want to speak of social imaginary here, rather than social theory, because there are important – and mutliple – differences between the two. I speak of imaginary because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends. But it is also the case that theory is usually the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. […] Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one anther, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life.[61]

In this shared imaginary social practices are implicitly grounded and underlie even the very idea of a social public space:

> The background understanding that makes this act possible for us is complex, but part of what makes sense of it is the picture of ourselves as speaking to others to whom we are related in a certain way – say, compatriots of the human race. There is a speech act here, addresser and addressees, and some understanding of how they stand in this relation to each other. There are public spaces; we are already in some kind of conversation with each other. Like all speech acts, this one is addressed to a previously spoken word, in the prospect of a to-be-spoken word.[62]

The social imaginary, this common ground of understanding, enables human beings to "sustain a democratic order together, that it is within our range of possibilities, is based on images of moral order through which we understand human life and history."[63]

The public sphere, as a central feature of modern society, has to be understood as an emerging configuration of the social imaginary. It refers "to a common space in which the members of society meet through a

60 Anderson 1983.
61 Taylor 2002, 106.
62 Taylor 2002, 110.
63 Taylor 2002, 110.

variety of media: print and electronic as well as face-to-face encounters, where they discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these."[64] Taylor stresses the intercommunicative character of the public sphere where media are constitutive of these interactions.

Taylor's redefinition of secularism in democratic modern society presents a concept of social imaginary that brings us back to Hoover's analysis of the role of media in producing imaginaries about religions and their function as a constitutive part of the public sphere. On the background of Taylor's concept it is possible to link circulating religious symbols, worldviews, values, and norms with this shared common ground, the imaginary.

Even though it remains concise, this overview aims at pointing out the complexity and richness of the history of the imaginary, a field where different disciplinary perspectives – from history to psychology, philosophy, hermeneutics, political science, and anthropology – are interrelated. I have discussed the selected concepts very much in the light of our project, focusing on the aspects that are relevant for our general shared question.

Religion in Cultural Imaginary

Working with a specific focus on religion and considering the position we have elucidated above, we understand the imaginary as:

a) A constitutive, historically anchored dimension of society. It encompasses a heterogeneous pool of mental and material images and products, it is related to expectations, representations, images and stories, ideas and practices.
b) As a product of imagination, the imaginary shares with it two characteristics. Firstly, it has a character of reproduction, mimesis, and reiteration; secondly, it has a creative dimension, where novelty is possible.
c) This double character of the imaginary is strongly tied with its ambivalent trait. The imaginary can be ideology and/or utopia, can legitimate cohesive or destructive social orders or offer a subversive alternative of power structures.
d) The imaginary is a common ground that allows meaning making processes within a collectivity. Therefore, it relates individual with groups by means of communicative practices.[65] The imaginary informs and is

64 Taylor 2002, 112.
65 Cf. Valaskivi/Sumiala 2014, 230.

informed by the public sphere where communication processes take place that are enacted by means of different media.

e) The imaginary involves individuals and collectives in multi-faceted ways, involving affects, emotions, and cognitive processes. The interactions with communicative practices are to be analysed not only from the perspective of diffusion, but above all from the perspective of a plurality of receptions by involving human beings in their whole life.

These general aspects we derive from the discussion of some crucial stages in the history of the term are at the core of this interdisciplinary project and build the horizon of the specific definitions that are developed in the individual case studies. There, the concept of the imaginary is confronted on the one hand with empirical data and analyses relating to the contexts, periods, and topics they concretely address. On the other hand, the case studies consider further, specific theoretical debates about the imaginary in the disciplines where the individual studies are embedded.

Since the concept of imaginary is deepened to analyse communicative practices in the public sphere where religious references are transported and generated, it seems more precise to use the term '*cultural* imaginary'. Accordingly, on a theoretical level, we approach religion generally as a specific aspect of meaning making processes within culture that interact with different spheres of society. We speak about the 'imaginary' in the singular when referring to the general category as a theoretical concept. The use of the plural 'imaginaries' is appropriate in the context of the empirical studies, where various, different, even conflicting concepts generated in plural societies and plural academic traditions come to light.[66]

The present project focuses on the significance and the role of religious references within the cultural imaginary and is based upon an intense exchange between the discussion of the different theoretical approaches in the history of the term and the outcomes of the empirical analysis. By looking at the interaction of religious symbols, worldviews, narratives, images, concepts, values, and norms in the cultural imaginary, the following lines emerge as particularly significant.

The interaction between religion and the cultural imaginary can be analysed in relation to a 'construction of memory'. The dimension of a col-

66 Regarding the plural dimension of imaginaries cf. Anderson 1983, Strauss 2006.

lective memory is particularly emphasised by Ricœur[67] and Wunenburger[68]. The imaginary is a shared, common ground that legitimates the present by reconstructing the past: a shared memory produces an attitude of belonging and is strongly entangled with identity processes.

Memory[69] is connected with the social imaginary in manifold ways. Spatial practices play a fundamental role. Religious symbols, rituals, worldviews are performed in space and generate an attitude of common remembering by transforming space – as a general condition of existence – into a specific place where memory is embodied and can be lived as a part of a shared history.[70]

> The performance of memory is a set of acts, some embodied in speech, others in movement and gestures, others on art, others still in bodily form. The performative act rehearses and recharges the emotion which gave the initial memory or story embedded in it its sticking power, its resistance to erasure or oblivion. Hence affect is always inscribed in performative acts in general and in the performance of memory in particular.[71]

Memory interlaces spatial, embodied practices with a diachronic dimension. In research about religious symbol systems and communities, this time axis is interlaced with a further key concept in dealing with the imaginary: tradition.

Tradition encompasses the dynamics of reception and transmission that, on the one hand, transport and, on the other, adapt and modify religious meaning making processes through different times. Religious symbols circulating in the public sphere can refer to tradition and, therefore, to concepts of authority and legitimacy. The reference to tradition has a strong normative aspect, as Paul Valliere states: "The concept of tradition in religion may be applied to the means by which norms of belief and practices are handed down (e.g. bards, books, chains of teachers, institutions) or the

67 Ricœur 1986b, 424: "Il s'agit des cérémonies commémoratives grâce auxquelles une communauté quelconque réactualise en quelque sorte les événements qu'elle considère comme fondateurs de sa propre identité; il s'agit donc là d'une structure symbolique de la mémoire sociale."

68 Cf. above and footnote 54.

69 The concept of memory is complex and multilayered. Aleida Assman (2010) distinguishes four 'formats' of memory: individual, social, political and cultural memory. In *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* she discusses critically the concept of 'collective memory'. In this context she refers to the 'social imaginary' with reference to Lacan, Castoriadis and, later, Anderson, cf. Assmann 2006, 29–31.

70 About the relation between space and place cf. Casey 1996, Danani 2014.

71 Winter 2010, 12. About the spatial dimension of memory cf. also Assmann 2009.

norms themselves."[72] Tradition is linked to a practice of teaching and learning; it embraces a knowledge which is received and handed over to the next generation. It

> is received on the assumption that the authors and transmitters are reliable and therefore the tradition valid; and that it is received with the express command and conscious intention of further transmission without substantial change. […] Tradition, purporting to embody a fixed truth from an authoritative source, demands faithfulness and obedience.[73]

In dealing with religious elements in the cultural imaginary, the concept of tradition can be illuminating to grasp. On one hand, tradition captures the dynamic of transmission and conservation of references to worldviews and value systems On the other hand, in modern societies, the references to tradition can also assume the traits of alienation, subversion, and rejection of the alleged validity and normativity and the evoked authority and legitimacy. Modern tradition processes appear therefore as fragmentary.[74]

Religious symbols, worldviews, values, and discourses, play, as we have argued, a crucial role in cultural imaginaries. They can be at the core of shared memories or be negotiated in the tension between tradition and subversion. All these dynamic processes are based on the articulation between individual and collective that can be captured with the concept of *identity*.[75] Accordingly, identity must also be understood as a dialectic expression of belonging and exclusion, a 'boundary making process', as Andreas Wimmer suggests in his research on ethnicity.[76] In the transmission and reconfiguration of religious symbols circulating in cultural imaginaries, the boundaries of belonging and exclusion are continuously renegotiated and redefined. A shared memory, a shared or rejected tradition are an integral part of this tension between individual and collective, in the construction of groups of counterparts.

72 Valliere 2005, 9268, cf. also Despland 2005.

73 Valliere 2005, 9276.

74 Cf. Auerochs 2004, 32–33: "Moderne Traditionen sind somit eigentümlich gebrochener als traditionelle Traditionen. Sie werden distanzierter 'gehabt' und verschieben ihren identitätstiftenden Kern mehr und mehr ins Reflexionswissen. […] Moderne Traditionen haben weniger Autorität als traditionelle Traditionen und erfüllen den Normativitätsbedarf einer Gesellschaft damit weniger gut."

75 On the collective dimension of identity cf. Knoblauch 2004, Faltin/Wright, 2007, Hall 2004, 2009.

76 Wimmer 2008, cf. also Dahinden/Moret/Duemmler 2011, and, for a link between identity and spatial practices, Migdal 2004.