Introduction

The young, a resource that is becoming numerically rarer and rarer in the Italian society, today appear to be scarcely protagonist and active in the public scene. The most widespread images picture them as people who are not very keen on growing up, coping with worrisome occupational precariousness, rather late in the evolution of the most important stages of life (namely concluding their studies, entering the work market, leaving their own family of origin, assuming responsibilities and autonomy, creating their own family . . .), they do not seem to be very incisive and determinant in the various sectors of society.¹

The research “Young People in Aosta Valley: social, cultural and religious belongings” is part of this framework of reflection about the condition of the young in Italy: this chapter will illustrate the data that have emerged concerning the relation between the young and religion.

The survey was carried out in May 2006 in the Valley of Aosta, the smallest Italian region, situated in the north-west of Italy, in a mountainous area at the foot of Mont Blanc; the survey involved some 4,000 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19 by means of a questionnaire of 125 questions. The main characteristic of the interviewees is that they are not just a sample, but nearly the totality of the young inhabitants of the Valley of Aosta (82.2%) attending Upper Secondary Schools.²

¹ See Franco Garelli (2008).
² To confront with the national data we will refer to the researches of the IARD Institute, that has carried out an inquiry on the condition of the young in Italy every 3–4 years, from the first years of the 80s till today (Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo 2002 and Grassi 2006), and the data of a research carried out in 1994 by the Catholic University of Milan (Cesareo, Cipriani, Garelli, Lanzetti, Rovati 1995). To confront with other local situations we will refer to Garelli 2006b (province of Cuneo), Corvo 2005 (diocese of Belluno), Castegnaro 2006 (diocese of Venice) and Castegnaro 2007 (diocese of Concordia-Pordenone).
The current chapter, then, first of all means to illustrate the estrangement of the young inhabitants of the Valley of Aosta from religion or, even when they call themselves Catholic, from the religious practice.

Secondly, we will try to demonstrate in what way, however, although the young go to church and attend the rites scarcely or discontinuously, religion still constitutes a cultural factor that is capable of influencing the personal configuration of the system of values strongly and, then, the lifestyle of these young people who often call themselves non-believers or believers “in their own ways”: we will see how religion interacts with the system of values and the behaviours of the individuals influencing ideas, opinions, sociality, behaviours.

Then we will dwell upon the free research of meaning of these young people who make use of their forefathers’ faith freely, integrating it with other sources, beliefs, suggestions, through a creative, mobile\(^3\) and personal research process. Actually we will observe the young people of the Aosta Valley through the lens of spirituality: a few profiles will emerge that can be brought back to the relation between the religious and the spiritual dimensions of believing.

Finally in the last part we will see how the personal beliefs play a determining role in structuring the ideas of the young concerning “the different”, in particular concerning those who belong to different religions: actually we will consider the interaction between spirituality and pluralism, analysing the different relation modalities that emerge according to whether the other religions are perceived as causes of conflict or as resources for comparison.

\textit{The Difficult Relation with the Church}

According to some researchers, the religiousness of the young in Italy is characterized by the primacy of emotions, by the search for authenticity and for a personal internal dimension, and by scarce participation in group activities (Grassi 2006); besides, in a post secular epoch (Barbano 1990, Berzano 1994), a certain number of young people are still to be found within Catholicism persevering in attending religious rites, devoting themselves to voluntary activities and becoming

\(^{3}\) The image of movement seems to be the most appropriate way to read and interpret the contemporary religiousness of the young even in Italy (Garelli and Ferrero Camoletto 2003).