Religious Lifestyles

The core of this paper is a methodological proposal for the analysis of religious lifestyles. By now the concept of religious lifestyle has become widespread in everyday language, but it has not yet been clearly defined within social sciences. Undoubtedly the concept of «lifestyle» has had a longer and clearer history, with its roots in sociological (Veblen, Weber, Simmel) and psychological (Adler) classics.

Throughout the various stages of this history, the fundamental perspective in the analysis of lifestyles has always been mainly oriented towards a socio-cultural segmentation of the people under consideration, with the aim of identifying – among these people – a defined number of socio-cultural sectors which are sufficiently homogeneous internally and heterogeneous externally.¹

Such segmentation is not the only perspective characterizing this kind of analysis. Indeed on one hand almost all approaches to the study of lifestyles are characterized by the fact that they work transversally to the traditional sectorial divisions into which over time the field of sociology has been organized (economics, politics, religion, culture consumption and so on). On the other hand – allowing for different modalities – this type of study has jointly taken into account individuals’ thoughts and actions on multiple levels: social position, personality, values, attitudes and behaviour have been from time to time pointed out as the fundamental factors, but all the various elements are part of the observation. Thus two hotly debated questions have been first, the recognized relevance of each level, and second, the interpretation of the interweaving relationships among the various levels.

¹ For an investigation into the evolution of models of lifestyles definition and analysis, see Berzano and Genova 2011: Part One. On the same theme see also Cathelat 1985 and Valette-Florence 1994.
The hypothesis of applying the analytical model of lifestyles to the study of religious phenomena therefore raises three basic questions.

The first is clarifying in what sense an analytical tool which is characterized by a transversal approach to sociological “fields” may be applied to phenomena defined as being within one particular field, such as the religious.

The second is the necessity of defining what levels of analysis should be considered as making up the lifestyle, in other words what the nature of its basic components is.

The third is an indispensable evaluation of whether or not – in order to be able to talk about religious lifestyles – it is necessary that there should be a particular form of influential relationship among the various analytical levels, without which it would not be possible to speak about lifestyles.

Here we refer to a specific conception of lifestyles, the definition proposed by Berzano and Genova, according to which a lifestyle may be understood as «a set of practices, with unitary sense and relational meaning, which is a distinctive model shared by a collectivity, without having either a pre-existent cognitive-axiological system or a pre-determined socio-structural position as generative factors, even though it may be influenced by them» (Berzano and Genova 2011: Chapter 9).

As may be seen, at the heart of this definition there is on the one hand a specific relevance assigned to practices as elements of distinction and recognition, and on the other the assumption that there is no direct generative effect on these practices, deriving neither from individuals’ social positions (consisting mainly of their «capitals», as understood by Bourdieu, and the cultural models with which processes of socialization have put them in touch), nor from the framework of representations, values and beliefs which they have developed.

Referring to the three questions presented above, the adoption of this analytical model thus allows us to speak of «religious lifestyles» insofar as: 1. It is not necessary that all the practices making up the lifestyle, with their meanings, be recognized as religious – it is sufficient that the researcher evaluate some of the practices or their unitary sense as “religiously relevant”; 2. It defines the practices as the basic level of analysis but does not exclude the possibility that other elements may contribute to the lifestyle’s composition; 3. The only relational condition it imposes is the fact that these practices should not be produced directly by cognitive-axiological or socio-structural elements.