

CESNUR, The 2009 International Conference: “Mainstreaming and Marginalization of Religious Movements”

Italian Gay and Lesbian Believers: Fissiparous Belonging or Clash of Values?

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With its particular global identity and national values that are clearly rooted in and interwoven with those of the Christian faith as they present in the Roman Catholic format, Italy can be seen as having its own specific - and even unique - character within the European context.

While wishing to consider the case of (Christian) gay believers and their organisation in a variety of groups, there is no intention on our part of offering any kind of vindictory plea for the cause of homosexuality nor do we intend to advocate the politicalization of such groups. Our aim here is to offer our understanding of and comments regarding a phenomenon of interest to scholars who focus on the sociology of religions and - again, from the sociological point of view - to attempt to analyse and interpret certain social mechanisms underlying the activities of these subjects.

The principle elements of the phenomenon represented by gay believers is their organisation in groups and their particular role and function, within the catholic Church in particular and in the various other churches present in the country considered here; secondarily, but not less importantly, one should also reflect on their often involuntary contribution - in terms of the variety of values and cultural issues addressed - towards civil-rights and the LGBT¹ movements in particular.

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and TransGender/TransSex. In use since the 1990s, the term “LGBT” is an adaptation of the initialism “LGB” which itself started replacing the phrase “gay community” which many within LGBT communities felt did not represent accurately all those to which it referred. (Swain, Keith W., 21 June 2007, “*Gay Pride Needs New Direction*”, Denver Post, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_6198394?source=rss).

The choice of adopting the word *fissiparous*, a term borrowed from biology, stems from a doubly provocative aim. On the one hand, our reflections contain a provocation - albeit free of any malice - with respect to those individuals, who, on the basis of a superficial reading of norms and doctrines, find a personal and/or collective way of living their sexuality and their faith and, on the other hand, with respect to the idea of a double, simultaneous and in some way 'split' association with both the church and the gay/lesbian cultural and political movements. On the part of militants of the gay/lesbian political movements a 'twin membership' is moreover often seen as problematical or as even 'antagonistic' with respect to political aims relating to civil rights and marriage, however I believe such simultaneous associations should be rather viewed as being complementary.

The reproduction and proliferation of these groups occurs in a manner we may view as more or less 'split' as they are created as organisations that are autonomous, and moreover independently with respect to the experiences of former groups. However, they present no differences in terms of their mode of operating or their goals and general aims. The sense of belonging to a particular group - which does not jeopardise an individual's possible membership of the church - entails less inner division; it is the possibility of the occurrence of such double associations that avoids a sense of conflict in the homosexual believer.

At the time of writing there are currently twenty-nine groups of gay believers in Italy. Active all year round, each group will tend to individually organise periodical meetings of its adherents, generally attended by a few dozen regular participants, and other minor events organised in collaboration with other similar groups that form part of a kind of network, which Internet and modern technologies have allowed to develop more easily. These groups are characterized by evocative names and with a strong biblical recall: "The Fount", "The Source", "David and Jonathan", "The Tent", "The Rose of Jericho", "Senfkorn", "The Ford", "The Ladder of Jacob", and others.

These groups, of which the oldest is *il Guado* (The Ford) (early 1980s), are normally well-established although they often lack the formal structure of an association (as occurs in the case of the group called *La Fonte* [The fount]). They organise weekly meetings to cater for the spiritual pursuits of their adherents (e.g., biblical readings and prayer meetings) and other cultural activities; even though religion and spirituality may not necessarily be the

central theme of these meetings, such matters always remain as their quite visible underlying framework and point of reference.

Ever since the famous Stonewall revolt², which occurred exactly forty years ago, one of the predominant concepts underlying the activities of the international LGBT movement might be summed up in the phrase 'diversity is a value'. Various difficulties have marked the evolution of the gay/lesbian movement; for example, the discovery of the AIDS epidemic occurring in the mid 1980s was the cause of a considerable crisis. The vindication of diversity in conflictual and antagonistic terms, the claim that marriage is nothing other than a bourgeois/patriarchal social institution and criticism aimed at the family as the social 'substrate' capable of generating liberticidal forms of *familismo* [familialism] found its voice in the activities aimed at furthering acceptance and the promotion of self-help. However, such action ran the risk of being heavily imbued with a certain militant dogmatism, whereby visibility would be seen as an obligation (cf. the need to 'come out') and a necessary attitude aimed at promoting general acceptance/provocation, sex would become a weapon to be used in the fight for freedom on account of its distance from the restrictions of religious mores and there would be a certain compulsive 'deconstruction' of gender relations.

However, starting in the mid 1990s, something began to change very slowly also in Italy. We began to witness a consolidation of the first groups of gay believers and activities that advocated open debate and an encounter between the worlds of religion and homosexuality. An example of such action occurs with the *Fede e Omosessualità*³ week-long, summer camps organised by the *Chiesa Evangelica Valdese*⁴ at the 'Agape Ecumenical Center'⁵, which, for the last thirty years have offered a venue where reflection, meditation

² The Stonewall riots were a series of spontaneous, demonstrations against a police raid that took place in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a bar in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. They are frequently cited as the first instance in American history when gays and lesbians fought back against a government, and they have become the defining event considered the start of the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world.

³ [Ital.], 'Faith and Homosexuality'

⁴ The Italian Waldensian Evangelical Church. This Confession is the oldest Italian protestant community, and has approximately 45.000 members. (Recently, surveys and researches confirmed that Catholic is the largest Italian faith community (80%). Only 1,92% of population belong to other religion and or confession).

⁵ Agape describes itself as an "Ecumenical centre", where ecumenism is understood in broad terms, In an open dialogue among atheists, agnostics and believers, each participant comes to lose his or her presumptions in claiming to know and possess the truth. Agape is located in the Waldensian Valleys, the only part of Italy where

and prayer focusing on this theme have been the principle goal. As these gay-believer groups have been developing, the 'secular' LGBT movement appears to have simultaneously overcome its troubled adolescent phase of ideological conflict, and those who do not believe in marriage would nevertheless also like to have the right to get married or choose not to marry as the case might be, thereby indirectly recognising the value of marriage and the family. It would appear that from the extremist view that upholds 'difference as a value' we are moving on to 'equality is a right'. And diversity? Are we now witnessing a new political strategy or is there a new front? It's neither one nor the other. Let us proceed in an orderly fashion. I shall now highlight those aspects in which, the central position of religion - and above all the religious sentiments of homosexuals and lesbians - may be often seen as an interesting sign of the times.

However, we should first of all not forget that these groups of homosexual believers often live and express their faith within the Catholic Church. Although the confessional groups are giving way to ecumenical groups⁶, membership of the Christian community and the life of homosexual individuals that form part of these groups within the parishes and in the various ecclesiastic activities nevertheless remain the fundamental aspects. Personal experiences reported by gay believers tend to emphasize how the possibility they have to attend such groups has afforded a greater sense of serenity and facilitated self-awareness⁷. There are however certain homosexuals who would see in the groups of gay believers an inherent possibility of justifying their sexual behaviour and the chance of adhering to a 'do-it-yourself' faith, which might recompose incompatible beliefs; on the basis of the analysis I propose here however this would appear to be a rather superficial and inherently erroneous 'reading'. A gay believer who adheres to a group of equals is not 'surrendering' and does not forget the conflict that exists in relation to the norms and doctrine of the Church but rather finds in the group that which - beyond its doctrine - the Church fails to provide, and

protestants are a sociologically relevant presence. It is affiliated with the protestant world and is involved in organizing national and international encounters and conferences. [ref. www.agapecentroecumenico.org]

⁶ E.g., 'Gruppo del Guado' is an association of gay believers, for many years open to men and women of any confession over the Catholic Church, and also to persons who are not Christian. Founded in 1980, is the longest association of its kind in Italy, and is based in Milan.

⁷ [Ital.] *Angelo, the joy of having found respect and support*, pp.50-53; *Luca, an evermore problem... with some exit strategies*, pp.114-118; in Pezzini D. "Alle porte di Sion", [ital.] "At the Zion doors" Editrice Monti, 1998, Saronno, Italy.

whether this be out of fear or on the basis of a decision. The gay believer finds welcoming and 'containing' others in the group, a sympathetic ear, friendship and the possibility of reading those norms and doctrines no longer in solitude and, finally, within a context free of the confining burdens of confessional secrets. In an association of gay believers the homosexual will above all once again find faith in his/her membership of the church and thereby faith in himself/herself. In such a situation, he/she can thus accept and absorb that which the doctrine would deem as auspicious and once again begin to express and experience his/her faith.

According to the testimonies of gay believers, the parishes and the diocese do little or nothing, or even be a hostile and not very welcoming place. If in the secular world homosexuality seem to be less a taboo; in churches, outside the confessional, the discourse is still fearful. Homosexuality will be less frightening, but homosexuals in the church are still so scared.

Despite the title of the guidelines which the catholic Church sent to all of its bishops⁸ in the early 1980s, the Church would seem to have not yet paid serious attention to the groups of gay believers in order to comprehend the important changes that political gay movements have advocated and, that is, the adoption of initiatives for homosexual persons.

To speak about homosexuals and, more specifically, with homosexuals, can thus imply 'taking care of them' but to take care of someone or something is an activity which, although it may have a personal and private nature, will necessarily have a public and social effect. As long as homosexuals are stigmatized and held as sinners, they run the risk of never really feeling at ease and at home within the Church. This is a sensation similar to that which - in a rather different situation - many homosexuals have experienced on coming into contact with political movements used to proposing a militant model of homosexuality they would naturally shy away from⁹. Moreover, a risk denounced by many Christian homosexuals is the support the churches offer to attempts at removing homosexual sin and

⁸ Letter to the bishops of the catholic church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, *Epistola ad universos catholicae ecclesiae episcopos de pastorali personarum homosexualium cura* (Oct 1986).

⁹ Personal dialouge with a member of "CIG - Arcigay Milano" (lgbt association).

the “intrinsic disorder of their relations¹⁰” through the promotion of prayer meetings aimed at their atonement; here we find not a welcoming or ‘containing attitude’ nor any form of sympathy but only a basic acceptance of the heterosexual model.

It is not my task to find arguments for or against underlying motives or teleological reasoning; in the light of legitimate teleological reasons and while considering the activities and experiences of groups of Christian homosexuals, I would however merely wonder whether that chosen by the churches - and above all by the Catholic church - is the only possible solution that may be seen as coherent with doctrine and tradition.

Participating as a guest at meetings of gay-Christian groups, there have been moments when I have thought that if by chance an outsider were to enter the room, the thought would never cross their mind that the many individuals present might be homosexuals. The issue of the problematical difference between ‘being’ or defining oneself as a homosexual and behaving as a homosexual is a rather relevant one. Almost by definition an invisible minority, homosexuals would appear to be ‘visible’ for the Church exclusively as people who ‘behave’ in a certain manner, i.e. as people who commit a sin; the church tends not to see them as people who have an identity of their own as if the fact of ‘being’ something were to automatically presuppose certain actions and facts. And yet, these are also people who have found and experienced their own way of belonging to a church and practising their faith; they truly live their beliefs and quite often also recognising their ‘sin’. With an enhanced confidence ensured by their faith and an acquired awareness, they meet to pray, talk with their friends on an unbiased and disinterested¹¹ basis, share meals, offer assistance to others and think of their well-being and become generally interested in the life of their companions.

Thus, from within the Church itself, through the activities of gay Christians, the ecclesiastical powers encounter a fine example of what might be; here, we find a particularly interesting manner of conducting pastoral activities and a modality of spiritual aspiration

¹⁰ [Ital.], Pontifical Council for the Family, *Family, Marriage and “Civil Union”*: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20001109_de-facto-unions_it.html, 26 luglio 2000, Vatican City, Rome.

¹¹ Uhlmann, F., *Reunion. Der wiedergefundene*, [Ital.], *L'amico Ritrovato*, Feltrinelli, 1988[1971], Milano.

promoted by homosexuals, with the presence of neither hypocrisy nor prejudice. While it does not 'remove' it and does not ignore official doctrine, such a form of pastoral behaviour is apt to dissipate the entire issue of homosexuality, focusing real interest on others and their problems.

And yet it would seem that the specific issue of homosexuality still conceals an elusive factor, a 'ghost' that is difficult to exorcise. With the advance of individualism, the imperative 'consumer' ideal and other 'theories' conducive to the 'secularization' of society, official groups and/or parish activities dedicated to the problems of single mothers or divorced fathers have often been established under the auspices of the church but groups for homosexual persons have never been officially supported¹². Nevertheless, since the mid 1980s, the Italian Church and various eminent cardinals have advocated the rejection of this kind of segregation¹³. If one of the fears is that of encouraging the growth of a pro-homosexual movement within the church itself, the opposite risk is that of proposing only silence and/or eternal damnation or even mystical/magical solutions.¹⁴

In its consideration of the gay-Christian movements that have been created as an internal and yet autonomous requirement, the church might however realise the extent to which the values it promotes have also 'contaminated' and modified the scenario of the LGBT movement and how in due course this has had a positive influence on the church itself.

Claiming the right to start a family may be an abomination for those who believe in the family and in the sacrament of wedding, in opposition to the existence of "homosexuality rights". If this is true theologically, socially (and sociologically) should be considered from another point of view.

¹² E.g. "Noi siamo Chiesa" [Ital.], "We are church", <http://www.noisiamochiesa.org/>; "Famiglie separate cristiane" [Ital.], "Christian 'divorced' families", http://www.pastoralefamiliare.it/famiglie_separate_cristiane.htm; "All sons of the same father" [Ital.], "Tutti figli dello stesso padre", <http://www.tuttifigli dellostessopadre.it/chi.htm>.

¹³ [Ital] National Catholic Church Conference, *Christian Reconciliation and men community*, 1985, Loreto.

¹⁴ [Ital.], "My son is gay, the priest wants to make him an exorcism - Desperate mother: his husband hunting their son and ask her for divorce", *Corriere dell'Umbria*, 5 april 2009, http://www.corrieredellumbria.it/resources/ArchivioPrime/2009/04/20090405_CORR_PG_001.PDF

When homosexuals claim the right to have a family - generally but erroneously referred to as a 'gay family' - they have indirectly acquired a value which, in its essence, had been previously denied them; although relativised, in terms of its *raison d'être* the value moreover has a universal character. The church may decide to condemn homosexual acts on the basis of its own conception of sin but it might also decide to claim a political and cultural victory with respect to the value it advocates in our 'post-secular' society.

As a value, within the Italian context the family has been valorised and corroborated by this confrontation¹⁵ (which is often transformed into a futile conflict) between lay movements for the civil rights of homosexuals and the Roman Catholic hierarchy. A cultural need and the evolution of customs - which would have us accept that 'something different' may be granted the same name - should be considered with respect to the original model as that will always be the universal point of reference and an unavoidable term of comparison. In the secular context, outside the ecclesiastic domain, the co-habitation/marriage dichotomy can be considered in relation to the two extremes but it is the social value of marriage that is reinforced by a civil form of co-habitation and not the union of a couple in lay terms that devaluates marriage. The Christian value would thus seem alive and well thanks to a transformation of the nature and mode of expression of what is deemed as sacred and rendered sacred in recent modern society. The battles waged to ensure the recognition of the rights of *de-facto* couples have reinforced the family model besides the economical and political motivations inherent in Italian tradition. The family - construed in terms of its sociological formulation - has been corroborated by this double front, which, above and beyond the varying formats, recognises its central importance in Italian society.

It is interesting to note how, in these two decades, these groups of gay Christians, within the LGBT movement, have experienced some situations of misunderstanding and others in a half-light role. On account of their formation as a consequence of the designs of a few priests interested in providing pastoral and spiritual guidance for homosexuals, these groups have not followed the path of rationalisation or institutionalisation, leaving the

¹⁵ In 2006 there were a large amount of headline about Family and civil union in newspapers and magazines, due to the fact that Civil Union law was a central issue in the political agenda for general election. Also in 2007 and 2008 there were rallies and national meetings around family issues such as "family day" organized by religious movements, and in opposite terms "we are family" during the lgbt pride at rome, 16th june 2007.

pursuit of political action within lay movements to personal choice. These groups came into being as 'places where the soul might find solace'. As stated in a variety of websites, they principally aim at alleviating the loneliness of gay Christians, offering a place where people can meet to pray and exchange views and ideas, with activities provided for both homosexuals and all members of the Church. The primary aim was not - and is not - that of constructing a ghetto within a ghetto but to provide an opportunity to live the life of the church, openly and in the light of day.

We might see them as revolutionaries or as wayward Catholics but we might also see them simply as groups of believers that have come together, united by a common sentiment or perhaps by experiences of discrimination or difficulties encountered in society and in their churches of origin; above all, they are united by a sense of deep solitude - both spiritual and social - which has been slowly defeated. Some groups of gay believers have in fact recently been involved in vigil prayers against 'homophobia', which, although almost always supported only by the progressive evangelical churches¹⁶, have succeeded in becoming venues attracting not only small groups of Christian believers and their friends.

These are mainly ecumenical events and occasions which open the doors of the church to the world and in particular aim at conveying a spiritual message to the LGBT community, which would be normally quite hostile towards most forms of religious sentiment. It is here that we witness the possible contamination of the sacred and the profane that has developed in our 'late-modern' age. These prayer meetings and events at which participants can express feelings of trust and faith are not characterised by a need to

¹⁶ In 2008, the website www.gionata.org [a rich Italian network about 'faith and homosexuality' issue] induced gay believers groups to organize in different cities some vigil prayers for the 'international day against omophobia'. The organization of that ecumenical event in Milan was much hinged, and informally, the three groups involved tried to organize this meeting in a Catholic church, but there were different evaluations about "visibility" and use of some words such as "gay", "homosexual" "love" in the same sentences. The Catholic gay group wanted to be less explicit [they needed the approvation of parish and bishop] and in the other side, not-confessional groups wanted to fight also for the equal consideration of their [forbidden] love during the prayer. At the end, two vigils was organized in that year one in the Waldesian church (liberal church), and a second few months later in a Baptist church. Catholic gay believers group accepted this outcome, but in free speeches during the vigil prayers, somebody dreamt about the possibility to organize these services in a catholic church. In 2009, inexplicably, catholic gay group organized his vigil in a catholic church, with a different approach used in former vigil, but the other groups were invited like exeternal auditors. Evangelical gay group organized an entire worship in may 17th at the Waledisian Church. It would be interesting to know if it was an interruption of ecumenical relations or a change of vision of the role of gay groups of believers. [*Personal notes collected during the organizational meetings and inter-group e-mail correspondence*].

engage in conflictual relations with hierarchies and the church but by their insistence on open dialogue and the sharing of personal experience.

Emerging from the catacombs, passing from the shade into the light, Christian believers and their groups have finally found a place in the sun; they have found a place free from any traces of politicized dogmatism that is recognised by all and have acquired a role as ‘witnesses’ of evangelical truths that will allow all positions to be respected. With no desire to assume a position of authority, imposing their own vision upon the world, but dwelling actively in the very soul of the world - with a double and conflictual sense of belonging and association - gay believers have allowed for the full emergence of the homosexual identity, while not forgetting nor condemning themselves to a life without God.

The catechism of the Catholic Church recognises homosexuality as an ‘innate’ (1992 version) or ‘deeply-rooted’ (1997 version) trait. The change of the former term in article 2358 of the catechism is most definitely worthy of note and requires reflection as its modification and the subsequent wording may give rise to a certain degree of doubt. To accept others with respect and sensibility is an attitude that entails considering people as they are or might it imply that we should help them become what they are not?

The verb ‘to educate’ derives from the Latin *educare* (meaning ‘to nurture’ or ‘to bring up’) and can be traced to the Latin root words ‘*e*’ and ‘*ducere*’, which convey the idea of bringing out or leading forth. There is thus in this verb the sense of allowing an inner capacity or reality to emerge; many homosexual Catholics would often experience the sensation however that the church would prefer to actually eliminate their inner tendency, ‘drawing out’ their true self in order to finally extirpate and destroy it. Are the churches then creating the appropriate conditions so that those who are characterised by a diversity or ‘difference’ - or, as gay believers would often define themselves, those who feel they are the ‘last ones’ of the earth - are sustained in the arduous task of living true relationships, and nurturing their capacity to give a sense to existence, without becoming fixated on ‘sexual orientation’ variables? Even assuming that homosexual behaviour is a sin, does the Church recognise the capacity of individuals to experience the value of relationships above and beyond the sexual act (e.g., friendships, work and relatives) or is it merely the genital aspect of one’s existence that should be seen as having any value?

It appears that, if the church is concerned only to the sin of the homosexual person, in that way the sin flattens the rest. Condemned the sin, not something else exists for the person: the homosexual person in the church receives only a sentence and the obligation to change.

If these groups have helped the capacity of the Church to speak less subheading of homosexuality in official contexts, the situation in Italy, in the Catholic media and large public events seems still arrested and unchanged from decades.

In the words of a homosexual priest: *“it would appear that the confessors’ message to homosexuals is that ... if you don’t have a companion ... if you suffer a relapse, you can pull yourself together, repent and move on. However, if this is not the case and if you do have a real partner, then you will not even be granted absolution.”*¹⁷ Where a stable relationship involving true affection becomes an ‘intrinsic perversity’ or a condition of wickedness, the merging of sexual relations with an affective element can result in a lacerating experience, especially in a younger person.

From the experience of the gay-believer movements the churches would be able to elaborate an operative model for pastoral activities and relations with homosexuals which might really address their needs and nurture their faith.

First of all, the discourses on homosexuality and the family would be radically splitted, the wealth of experience acquired by Christian homosexuals in these groups shows how they have been capable of separating homosexuality from homoeroticism and promote the emerging strength of ‘homosocial’ relations in groups of equals. If homosexuality is the problematical condition then, the unresolved issue and the disorder to be treated and if homoeroticism is the forbidden desire, the sin not to be committed, homosociality can be that disinterested and fruitful relational dimension which, in the domain of the Church, can ‘pacify’ homosexuality and allow for a response to the call for chastity, which the Church identifies as the right path for homosexuals.

¹⁷ [Ital.], Politi, M., *La confessione, un prete gay racconta la sua storia*, “the confession, a gay priest tells his story”, p. 146, Editori Riuniti, 2000, Roma, Italy.

Secondarily, in a manner coherent with its theology and traditions, this would allow the Church to free itself of the homophobic attitude it has often been accused of perpetuating.

To sum up, in the 'believing-without-belonging' scenario, in a multicultural and secularised context such as that of contemporary Italy, it would seem useful to examine certain fringe or 'borderline' situations, where the ethnic and cultural contrasts of our time appear to evolve towards a solution and integration. Although not operating at the hub of political action aimed at claiming 'rights of full citizenship' for homosexuals, gay Christian movements have played a fundamental role in three ways: i) in their upholding of Christian values and sexual morality in an adverse context, presenting themselves as an alternative to certain extremist stances in the sexual revolution (although relativised, Christian values and morality are linked to the universal model of a monogamous, faithful couple and a union founded on romantic love; it may fail and grow weak but it is love nevertheless!); ii) in their having allowed the Church not to become barricaded behind extremist views (in their non-institutionalised forms, the movements have allowed homosexual Catholics to express their faith outside the traditional ways of the parishes and dioceses); iii) within the 'twin scenario', they help to defuse tension, warding off clashes between sets of values that differ less in substance and more greatly in form. Even for non-believers, so many reminders of Christian cultural values and mores can be identified within Italian society; if not destabilizing for society, a clash of vast proportions would have been digested and reabsorbed at a very slow pace and would have generated an ideological resistance much greater and more pervasive than that which actually presented.

From the sociological point of view, the second aspect is the most interesting. For those interested in studying phenomena relating to individual membership of an organised religion, personal beliefs and religious sentiment in our times, it allows us to highlight the ways in which memory, adherence and identification - expressed through individual behaviour and rational action - become factors that reinforce a sense of social cohesion and the capacity to face cultural challenges. In religion we find beliefs and practices that take for granted the existence of a supernatural force or of a sacred sphere.

The 'homosocial' hypothesis we have briefly outlined here, which bases its strength on the individual/group relationship¹⁸ should be studied in the field and subjected to in-depth analysis. It is very definitely a resource that allows many individuals to define themselves as Christians and Catholics and also homosexual at one and the same time, without avoiding dilemmas generated by the relentless drive of desires and sentiment on the one hand and the compliance with norms and values on the other. It moreover allows for less conflictual expressions of faith on account of the removal of the state of solitude, which, through an institutionalisation of homosociality as a pastoral mechanism, the churches might also help to eliminate.

Finally, individualism, subjectivism and relativism offer the individual the chance to choose his/her faith in the seemingly infinite market of religions; the homosexual believers' desire not to repudiate the Church they belong to further enhances the precious nature of believing and belonging. All of that which is considered as sacred and the phenomenon of faith appear as elements we can study, analyse and interpret. We might even learn 'how' individuals believe, what they believe in and how they relate to everything seen as sacred, but the deep, underlying reason for the existence of those beliefs and of all things sacred may not be entirely grasped. Every human experience is quite unique and what is referred to as 'faith' is no exception.

¹⁸ [Ital.], Simmel, G., *Individuo e gruppo*, pp. 791- 863, Armando Editore, 2006, Roma. (*This is a new translation of the last chapter of "Sociology"*)

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