



## Identity, values, online reality and faith of new generations

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**Doi: 10.2478/gssfj-2018-0017**

### **Abstract**

*In today's socio-cultural context, the period of youth is less experienced as a predictable path towards the assumption of the adult status and increasingly characterised by the difficulty of defining one's identity, prefiguring one's future paths and choices to make. To these problems, one must add the so-called collateral damages produced by the Web, which condition, or can condition, the configuration of the personalities of young people, the shape and quality of their relationships, the sense of events, their experiences and how values and faith are conceived.*

**Keywords:** *Youth - Identity - Digital - Values - Religiousness*

### **1. Premise**

One of the main thematic issues of today's sociological research concerns the category of young people as a particular context of the social universe. The investigative effort carried out by many sociologists, through sophisticated quantitative-qualitative investigative methodologies, is aimed at probing the multiple the multiple aspects and constellation of the interests present in their world, such as: free time; cultural consumption; music; associationism; sport; politics; sexuality; inter-generational and intra-generational relations; self-perception; values and religion. This theoretical interest for the younger age group of the population arises from the fact that, among others, it fulfills an important sociological function, not immediately definable and not always mobilized (Merico, 2004), which pushes society towards transformations of ethical codes, established practices, lifestyles; or vice versa, favors the reinterpretation of traditional systems, considered, perhaps, faded away too soon.

Of course, the analysis of emerging generations cannot be isolated from the existential and contextual conditions in which they are placed, because, as Mannheim claimed, not every generation carries a particular identity, nor generates change, but this happens only if certain historical-social conditions arise (Mannheim, 2008). Before facing whichever dynamic of youth reality, the actual cultural climate, which forms and transforms their whole vital world and the construction of their personalities, cannot be neglected: indeed, experiences are elaborated, certain

\* Part of this paper was presented at the *International Panel Discussion "Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas: 25 years of Italian-Azerbaijan relationships"* held in Genoa on May 12<sup>th</sup> 2017.

attitudes are assumed, the self is determined, only inasmuch as one moves in a given “problematic space” (Franchi, Schianchi, 2011; Taylor, 1993; Elliott, 2010). A cultural climate characterized by the multiplication of independent factors<sup>1</sup> in which historically pre-established collective constraint, central principles or shared paradigm values no longer organize the social life, also given the legitimacy crisis that has struck the institutions (Giaccardi, Magatti, 2005). In addition to this, or rather preceding, there is the irreversible, yet not linear nor granted, process of globalization which makes vain whichever unitary interpretation of phenomena in progress, since it has led to the modification of cognitive-relational *habitus*, to the annihilation of barriers between different societies, to the fusion of various forms of life, to the economic-financial homogenization and to the «intellectual fragmentation» of the world (Featherstone, 1996; Montanari, Ungaro, 2004; Tassinari, 2005; D’Alessandro, 2009).

Moreover, even following the digital revolution, precisely in the now unique world and in the current global culture, the concrete social space is being progressively substituted by an abstract *cyberspace*, which modifies social dynamics, individual perceptions and forces to readjust, relentlessly, the interpretative categories (Granieri, 2009; Riva 2016) of the same ordinary living, particularly the youth one. A *cyberspace* characterized, in the first instance, by a “compression” of traditional space-time categories and, consequently, by a singular homeostasis between the online and the offline world (Bauman, 2014). New communication technologies, – which have created this “mass imaginary” and this sort of *inter-reality* –, have not only undermined the sense of belonging and the meaning of community, but also de-localized the social, made spatial boundaries of experience<sup>2</sup> obsolete, even in term of geographical area, since thanks to the *Web* it is possible to experiment at the same time, by subjects dislocated in different physical territories, the same events, undoing, as Augé claims, the same category of place (Augé, 2000).

In the age in which a unitary institutional framework and a shared depth of morality lack, and in which the Internet represents a “whole environment”, the individualization of the self<sup>3</sup>, which Durkheim, at the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Simmel and Durkheim identified, at their time, two determinants of social complexity: a) the increase in the *number* and *variety of elements* in the system; b) the multiplication of *interdependent relations* between these same elements. Cf L. SCIOLLA, *Sociologia dei processi culturali*, il Mulino, Bologna 2002, 86, 87.

<sup>2</sup> In modernity the nexus between space and time was clear, while in the contemporary period the link between these two categories has deconstructed, and this has favored «an individualization of the relationship with them: it takes no time to access distant spaces, thanks to the innovation of communication and information technologies; each is the creator of one’s own time schedules and the organization of one’s own spaces». Cf C. GIACCARDI, M. MAGATTI, *L’io globale. Dinamiche della socialità*, VIII.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of individualization must be distinguished from that of selfishness, because while the latter is a “personal preference”, individualization represents instead “a phenomenon of a macro-historic and macro-sociological nature, which can – but not necessarily must – translate into transformations of the individual attitude”. Cf U. BECK, *Il Dio personale*, Laterza, Bari 2009, 115.

century, saw it take the form of the “religion of the individual”, is even more controversial. This widespread subjective protagonism, which presents itself in some respects in an unprecedented way compared to the century just ended, has its maximum expressive visibility in the emerging generations, as it disposes them to adopt a self-referential elaboration of their own biography and, according to the presumed Simmelian hypothesis, to perceive their own identity in a multilateral way, «as a set of particular selves that are difficult to integrate» (Simmel, 1996, 26). Despite allowing wide margins of subjective freedom of action, this “new” individualism tends to weaken the prerogatives of adolescents’ personalities, because it often makes them victims of conformism, homologation and even extreme imitative behaviors, for example, bullying (Parsi, Cantelmi, Orlando, 2009); and, further, as prefigured by Simmel, places them more than ever «within and without history, within and without any institution or group» (Simmel, 1976, LX).

## **2. The issues of identity building of new generations and the influence of the Web**

The articulated phenomena of advanced modernity, which cross the social fabric and individual biographical narratives, are strengthened also by the effects of the Web. Therefore, in conducting a reflection on third-millennium youths, particular attention must be paid on new communicative-relational languages vehicle by the Web because, in addition to the general cultural complexity, the online dimension has a strong impact on their reality, so much so that in the coming decade emerging generations might be exclusively described on the basis of dominant technologies<sup>4</sup>. The digital expansion and its progressive hegemony have been well understood, since the beginning, even by the Church; indeed John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, underlined how new communicative modalities were not only unifying humanity, but were destined to reach «such an importance as to be for many the main informational and educational tool, of guidance and inspiration for individual, family and social behaviors» (Giovanni Paolo II, 1990, 37). Even now, without having to wait for the near future, the Internet tends to condition the forms and density of youths’ relations, their sense of events, their experiences, – real, virtual or mediated –, the ways in which creativity and imagination are conceived (Gardner, Davis, 2014): in short, the digital world overwhelms their way of thinking, feeling, being (De Kerckhove, 2016) and, more specifically, of defining their identity. Not surprisingly, one of the main problems on the agenda, when considering new generations, is that of identity building, because in the past educational institutions,

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<sup>4</sup> The Harvard research group *Project Zero* in 2006 began to address the impact of new digital media on the ethical orientation of young people using them. Cfr. H. GARDNER, K. DAVIS, *Generazione app. La testa dei giovani e il nuovo mondo digitale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2014, 23.

through the path of socialization, were able to interiorize symbolic universes<sup>5</sup>, normative systems, plausibility structures, patterns of objectivation of experience, and to promote the structuring of stable subjectivities (Remotti, 2010); today, instead, this important function of social reproduction is made more difficult also due to a lesser *legitimization* of the traditional, hierarchical and normative, educational paradigm (Maccarini, 2003). Moreover, due to the pervasiveness of the Web with all that it generates, – from online scholastic courses to bottom-produced encyclopedias –, the school is somehow weakened by its new models of knowledge transition (Eugenì, 2015). Despite all the telematic possibilities of learning, Morin states, the Internet «lacks the physical, carnal, psychic, active, reactive and retroactive presence of the educator, not as an auxiliary, but as orchestra conductor who allows to consider, criticize, organize knowledge» (Morin, 2015, 104).

Young people are however affected by the *collateral damages* caused by their continuous exposure to the Web, not only with regards to the educational-scholastic process, but also with respect to the configuration of personalities, that are increasingly presented as a perennially open “construction site”. In general, beyond the influence of online reality, new generations, – which seem uninterested in the ideal anchorages offered by “fathers and teachers” –, do not aspire, almost voluntarily, to conquer a clear definition of identity, rather they tend to privilege the temporariness, the iridescent, the variety of options and the “liquidity” of convictions, consequently, are little devoted to a thought action, to making irreversible and definitive existential choices (Siri, 2001; Bauman, 1999; Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo, 2002). This lesser conformity of young people to a meditated «reflexive control» of action (Giddens, 1991; Ghisleni, Moscati, 2001), their endemic indecisiveness and their relativization of the universes of meaning, orients them towards a *low definition* of the self (Elliott, 2010; Donati, 2010; Martelli, 1999), to retreat into an «eternal present» and an absence of motivations, visions, plans, projected into the future (Costa, 2010).

Youths’ personalities, thus, are increasingly marked by a high degree of plasticity, of instability and by an incessant dilatation of the spaces of the self. They are, indeed, jagged, de-structured, parceled identities, which compose and decompose, deconstruct and reconstruct, «without ever finding a definitive landing» (Simmel, 1996, 31), following their self-reflexivity, their interests of the moment, their interpretation of events and experiences (Bauman, 2003). The impact of the language of social networks, as mentioned, is not a stranger to this new model of self-configuration, because it strengthens, at times exasperates, the narcissistic protagonism, the need for visibility, to always put oneself “on stage”<sup>6</sup>, to arouse

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<sup>5</sup> Symbolic universes, not universally valid or immutable, have a decisive role, in a defined period, in defining the totality of meanings and the horizon of meaning of the human experience. Cf P. L. BERGER, T. LUCKMANN, *La realtà come costruzione sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna 1969, 136- 139.

<sup>6</sup> New communication technologies have had as their relapse the “myth” of visibility, because one has the perception of being protagonists only if one is connected and has an audience, even if only

public interest towards one's own persona (Bauman, 1999; Sennett, 1982; Lasch, 1981), but most importantly because it excites a commuting identity. The oscillation of identity is such a pervasive phenomenon that it involves some of the most transgressive dimensions of the youths' experience: indeed, a research on the use of psychoactive substances highlighted that the consumption of drugs, by young people, has as its main "instrumental function" that of getting *high* to facilitate the rapid transition from a state of conscience to the other, from one self to the being, without coherence issues. In essence, the same reality of drugs is multiple, fragmented, coinciding with the society of multiplicity and identity variability (Montecchi, 2007).

The structure and quality of relations between young people too are characterized by their immersion in social platforms, because these latter ones determine an unprecedented relational speed and new participative forms (Morace, 2016). Not surprisingly, if the Internet was born as a closed, solitary tool, it has now become one that connects users with a same system of meanings, languages and in which blogs, chats, forums and emotional communities (Furedi, 2008), which serve to destroy or rebuild bonds, to share, in the name of reciprocity, one's own living, one's own temporary sensations and that of others (Eugeni, 2015), are built. Compared to real social circles, however, virtual groups do not force users to the ethical-affective rules and principles that regulate society: ultimately, communities are not composed in the classic sense of the term, also given the high number of connections, but through networks with a low level of involvement and friendship<sup>7</sup>.

Another effect of being addicted to social media is the obligation of a life on the *Net*, sometimes "fake", considering that young people live a relationship with online reality to such a symbiotic level to believe they possess innumerable powers and to confuse the real with the imaginary (Siri, 2001). In practice, the Internet is their life scenario; indeed, they do not say I "use" the *Net*, but I "am on" the *Net*. There is, however, a fracture between the sense of omnipotence the virtual world conveys and the difficulties on the objectivity plane: a substantial gap and difference that make less simple for new generations to adapt to phenomena that cannot be controlled, or changed, as happens in the *inter-reality* (Parsi, Cantelmi, Orlando, 2009).

This addiction to a living almost fully immersed in social networks still transmits the tendency of young people to convey a self-packaged image of the self (Codeluppi, 2015) and to select their own moments considered the best to be "posted" online, – it suffices thinking at the minute-by-minute use of Instagram and *selfies* –, so much

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virtual. Cf V. CODELUPPI, *Mi metto in vetrina. Selfie, Facebook, Apple, Hello Kitty, Renzi ed altre "vetrinizzazioni"*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2015, 29, 32, 35.

<sup>7</sup> As shown by a research carried out by Dunbar, an anthropologist at the University of Oxford, the brain is not in a position to manage friends beyond a certain number. According to this study, the friendship measures are 5/150/500: there are 5 people you can count on; 150 those who are felt emotionally close; 500 those with which exchange small talk or greetings. Cfr. R. HILL, R. DUNBAR, *Social Network Size in Humans*, in *Human Nature* 14 (2002) 1, 53-72.

so that they first immortalize, film and photograph anything, through tablet or smartphone, then, if anything, they *observe* closely the events, objects, situations, characters, which have already been captured in the pictures. In this way, rather than experimenting things through a direct contact, they *memorize* later, in mediated terms, the surrounding world. Moreover, the *Net* represents a sort of comfort zone, an escape from conflicts and unpleasant experiences of the offline world (Bauman, 2014): their taking refuge in a sphere considered protected is perhaps the most problematic aspect, since it highlights their existential fragility.

Not only do digital devices reflect on the identity building of young people, on their relations, on their ability or inability to face the challenges of real life, they also cause, following the changing trends of said social media, an unstoppable succession of transformations. For example, at its appearance in 2003, *Second Life*, different from any other videogame, seemed innovative in proposing an imaginary world, in which anyone could create, through the configuration of an *alter ego* (*avatar*), a second life parallel to the first one, but free of the obligations and constraints of real life. With *Second Life* the identity of users, though partially virtual, was still devoted to presenting a biographical narrative, but this digital electronic world soon faded, in the interest of youngsters, to make room for new virtual dynamics. In a few years, indeed, the speed, the display of one's thoughts and the *consumer display* of the ego (Codeluppi, 2015) have taken over any organic narrative, still possible in *Second Life*, and other online realities, which lend themselves to represent fragments of the everyday and «strategic assemblages of the self» have advanced. In this regards, *Snapchat* (in which messages, pictures and videos posted self-destroy within 24 hours) and the exponential use of *Apps* are two emblematic examples, because they bring the identity of young people to be increasingly packaged, consequently accentuating or excluding information and to minimize attention for the internal dimension (Gardner, Davis, 2014).

This rapid transition from one social to the other, – from *Second Life* to *Facebook*, from *WhatsApp* to *Musically*, from *Hauseparty* to *Snapchat* and *Ask.Fm*<sup>8</sup> –, with the specific potential that each one of them makes available, could be a new investigative path, in addition to the classical analysis parameters, to attempt to read and interpret the evolutions, not immediately evident, of youth identities and the ambivalent declinations of their always “new” culture, with which they organize their real and virtual living.

In general, most sociological literature highlights that the constant exposure of new generations to the *Internet* and the use these make of it does not only cause perverse, dysfunctional effects, but can also bring, in positive, to a precocious learning autonomy, to develop a cognitive capacity, to «provide support to the analytical thought, to the consolidation of its cognitive processes and their contents» (De Kerckhove, 2016, 9), even though all of this hardly allows to reach maturity, since

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<sup>8</sup> Recently, the weekly *panorama* has dedicated an long and circumstantial article at the relation of young people with the virtual world. T. MAROCCO, *La carica dei piccoli social-maniaci*, in *Panorama*, 2 marzo 2017, pp. 36-43.

intellectual resources remain those of the young age ((Morace, 2016, 26). The same youth identity fluidity, excited by the *Net*, favors a “creative” rethinking of the world, it disposes them to activate an infinite variety of expressive-affective possibilities and promotes their availability, for the most part without prejudice, to the multi-cultural and multi-religious dialogue.

Mediatic communication, criticized by the *apocalyptic* and hailed by the *integrated*, must not be stigmatized, neither emphasized because, while bringing functional elements not to be underestimated, it is also a vehicle for «collateral losses» (Bauman, 2014, 31), that can be hereby summarized: a) the indiscriminate use of the *Internet* can lead to a “functional analphabetism” and an “instrumental” one, since one becomes progressively incapable of «knowing how to read, face a text in a critical way, or to do calculation» (De Kerckhove, 2016, 11); b) the reduction of relationships to *virtuality* often produces a cold, aseptic, impromptu, superficial communication and, in equal measure, can favor the violation of interiority, the selling off of the sense of *privacy* and the growth of a sort of “confessional society”, devoid of secrets intimately kept within the intimacy of consciences (Ravasi, 2013; Bauman, 2014); c) the incessant shift in mediatic worlds, in the end, tends to separate rather than unite and to provoke feelings of uncertainty and solitude.

In less listed terms, one of the “vices” caused by the *Net* is the conviction of its users that the perennial connection (circa 10 hours a day) is essential (Contri, 2017) and, consequently, to neglect the fact that communicating does not imply solely the use of verbal codes, exchanging information and sharing a same language. In the full sense of the term, communicating also means meta-language and physical-empathic proximity (Ales Bello, Basti, Pezzella, 2015). The removal of the body in interaction with others, giving birth to forms of dematerialized and disembodied relationships can provoke, among other things, an “emotional analphabetism”, because subjects are deprived of precious data for the interpretation of their own emotions and those of others (Riva, 2016). Above all, the “noise” of the inexhaustible connection can compromise the understanding of «the sense of the word of the other, of his ideas, of his vision of the world» (Morin, 2015, 49).

The *Net*, moreover, can make one lose concentration, it can accentuate a *partial constant attention* (Contri, 2017), it can reduce the reflexive-creative mechanisms that require time to «synthesize, reformulate and reorganize» (Bauman, 2014, 58) the mass of acquired information, it can nullify the critical spirit and the habit of remaining in “silence”. Silence, a category unfamiliar to young people, is indeed a necessary space for the spiritual and intellectual growth, but it could also become, in given occasions, an extremely powerful tool of meta-communication. For example, the “forced” silence of Wojtyła from the window of his studio, a few days prior to his passing, *resounded*, more than any of his previous speeches, in the hearts and minds of the people gathered in St. Peter’s Square and, thanks to the television images, in the consciences of men all around the world (Costa, 2012). Again, reference can be made to the strong mediatic-communicative impact produced by the collected “silence” of Pope Francis at Auschwitz.

Ultimately, on the wave of the continuous connection, *millennials* and digital natives have the feeling of being protagonists of reality and instead often remain excluded, because they are always distracted by the many IT “noises” and almost unable to enter into a real empathic relationship with the surrounding environment. In essence, as Simmel claimed yesterday, about modern life, and as Carr states today, due to the tumultuous advance of technology, there is a risk that young people, – fascinated by the superficiality of the detail and the rapid flow of events –, are inclined to develop indifference towards the «qualitative variety of things» (Simmel, 2007, 20), to neutralize the comparison with the ultimate questions about life and to inhibit «thoughts and perceptions, which arise solely from reflection and contemplation» (Carr, 2011, 262).

Of course, the logical-instrumental thinking, the technique, the new means of communication, the digital platforms, – which do not open and do not want to open up meaningful scenarios, which do not seek and do not want to reveal the truth –, are not the authors of postmodernism anomie and today’s cultural discomfort, which most affect emerging generations, but rather are, if anything, the mirror that reflects the contemporary existential condition (Bauman, 2014).

### 3. The value system and religion

In today's social context, the period of youth is less and less experienced as a predictable path towards the assumption of adult status and increasingly characterized by the difficulty of prefiguring one’s future paths and the choices to be made (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013). To these problems one must add the so-called *collateral damages* of the *Internet*, which can also reflect in the relationship between young people, faith and values, because the online imaginary can give consolations, “repetitions and freedom”, similar to those that used to be associated with the traditional ethical-symbolic framework, to religion and its rituals (Morace, 2016). More than other cultural transformations, the reality of new digital communications, – which as stated in the *Evangelii gaudium*, «saturates us indiscriminately with data and ends up bringing a tremendous superficiality when it comes to setting moral questions»<sup>9</sup> –, therefore has repercussions on the values and religious conceptions of the new generations.

The values paradigm and the religious attitude of young people can be grasped, in a comparative way compared to the last decade, by choosing to refer, among the many investigations carried out over time, to the data collected by the *Quinto rapporto sulla condizione giovanile* of the Iard Institute, in 2002, and two more recent sociological researches: *Rapporto giovani* of the Toniolo Institute, 2013; *Piccoli atei crescono*, by Franco Garelli, in 2016. Naturally, these three empirical investigations, conducted on statistically representative samples of the Italian youth universe<sup>10</sup>, have examined

<sup>9</sup> PAPA FRANCESCO, esortazione apostolica nell’*Evangelii gaudium*, 24 novembre 2013, n. 64

<sup>10</sup> The universe of young Italians, from Iard, is represented by a stratified sample of 3000 units between the ages of 15 and 34. The young samples were given a structured questionnaire



different thematic focuses (in particular the Iard and the Toniolo Institute, while Garelli preferred to dwell on the religious phenomenon), but here relief was given only to some emerging values and to central religious aspects in the reality of young people, because above all religion is placed “at the crossroads of inner and social, personal and collective, spiritual and moral dimensions” (Castegnaro, 2008, 7) and, as Simmel argued, this *transversality* favors the interpretation of the whole fabric of society and the subjective “coloring” of the external world and the life of relationships (Dal Lago, 1994; Mongardini, 1994).

As for fundamental values of young people, the Iard research highlighted a central nucleus of value attraction, which coagulated around family, private and affective relationships. Indeed, at the apex of the hierarchy of preferences expressed by the sample of youths interviewed, there was family, followed by a significant relevance placed upon friendship and love; while a lower percentage was assigned to religion and politics showed a non-existent interest (Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo, 2002). If the Iard report had found that the maximum percentage value was attributed to the family, after eleven years the *Rapporto giovani* of the Toniolo Institute confirms this result, indeed accentuates its role of «not only instrumental support, but also emotional», since new generations consider it a “free zone”, which protects them – at times *overprotects* them – from an uncertain social environment (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013). In some way, the need for a place in which to take refuge, which is indicated by young people within the family unit, closely resembles a function they attribute to the *Internet*, because also the online reality satisfies their need of having a comfort zone (Bauman, 2014). The feelings of fear and risk, which many adolescents attempt to heal in “closed communities” – in *gated communities* – can also be identified in their aspiration to meet coherent personalities (Garelli, 2006), previously registered in various researches and confirmed by the Toniolo Institute, since the meeting with examples of “coherence” represents the possibility of feeling safer, of opening to a “fiduciary dynamic” and to an attitude of dialogue with others (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013).

Moreover, in contrast with the disorderly and narcissistic conquest of the spaces of the self (Lyotard, 2005), in the 2002 research it emerged that many youths’ consciences gave great value to solidarity and commitment in voluntary associations: their commitment to solidarity manifested not only their willingness to be concretely useful in discomfoting situations to others, but also their desire to not be satisfied with “minimal strategies” of living or an existential horizon confined solely to their

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consisting of around 150 questions. Cf C. BUZZI, A. CAVALLI, A. DE LILLO (a cura di), *Giovani del nuovo secolo*, 525; The quantitative research of the Toniolo Institute has as its reference universe 9,000 young people aged 18 to 29, residing in Italy. Cf ISTITUTO GIUSEPPE TONIOLO, *La condizione giovanile in Italia. Rapporto giovani 2013*, 207; The small atheistic quantitative-qualitative research was carried out on a sample of 1450 young Italians aged 18 to 29 years with a questionnaire, with interviews open to young people and focus groups among privileged witnesses; Cf F. GARELLI, *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio?*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2016, 219-222.

private sphere<sup>11</sup>. In this case too, as in that of the family, according to the Toniolo Institute research, the adhesion data of young people to volunteerism have remained positive over the last ten years, although the percentage of participation in non-profit association of adult generations is higher (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013). As for religion, the Iard Institute highlighted a differentiated composition in the religious feeling based on given structural elements, which also correspond to international methodological criteria, such as: age, gender, place of residence, educational qualifications and cultural capital of the family of origin. Tendentially, the research registered that the fideistic living of young people appeared in a subjective form, at times syncretic and pluralist, in harmony with the coexistence of different religions in the West. Moreover, it highlighted, based on registered percentages, an inhomogeneity between the declaration of belonging to the Church and the confessional attitude adopted, even though scarce practice did not seem to fully obliterate the interest towards the transcendent dimension, rather it signaled a distance from non “negotiable” dogmas, from top-down institutional impositions and, often, an inability to establish a clear difference between God and idols (Beck, 2009).

The Iard report, in summing up the religiosity expressed by young people, claimed that, in the last years, there has been a constant trend of percentage levels of interest for the catholic belief, except for a continuous decrease in regular religious practice. A decade later, the data provided by the Toniolo Institute indicate that religion is a less and less «inherited trait» Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013), or dependent on family influence; moreover, the Catholic creed undergoes a progressive erosion, with peaks of atheism and higher agnosticism in the cohort aged 18 to 22 years.

In general, Garelli's recent research ascertains some religious dynamics already detected by the first two surveys (Iard and Toniolo Insitute), but also remodels some aspects, premising a datum that should not be underestimated; that is, that the youthful fideistic reality is pervaded by a multiplicity of different nuances, but above all an incongruity prevails between «the way in which young people – from the religious point of view – represent themselves as a generation and the scenario that is obtained by asking individuals to illustrate their situation in this field» (Garelli, 2016, 20). In essence, the narration of generational consciousness is more secularized, agnostic, indifferent, than what the conscience of individuals really is.

Two other relevant factors, highlighted in this survey, are the growth of five percentage points of young non-believers and the fact that they represent «the modern avant-garde of young Italy», because they are present in the north of the country, they have a high level of education and come from families of medium-high cultural status (Garelli, 2016). Moreover, the choice of unbelief does not seem to derive from the family nucleus, being their parents mostly Catholic, rather it is determined by the shattering of the exhaustive visions of the world and the breaking

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<sup>11</sup> Young Italians are interested in real and proper forms of solidarity commitments, rather than associations less engaged in the hot fronts of social hardship. Cf C. BUZZI, A. CAVALLI, A. DE LILLO (a cura di), *Giovani del nuovo secolo*, 440.

of tradition (Garelli, 2016). And again, as indicated at the time by the Grassi survey and not denied by the 2016 research, within the group of young people with the greatest cultural potential there is a marked distance between those who reject religion and those who instead feel the desire of spirituality: a spirituality that appears as a sort of “intermediate zone” between believers and non-believers (Garelli, 2016) and that is often sought within the doctrinal systems and orthodox participation (Grassi, 2006).

If in the past the religious world was unchallenged, today, instead, due to the difficulty of transferring the traditional cultural heritage from one generation to another, the fideistic dimension is not elaborated by the young unconditionally in its ascriptive-formal aspect, but if anything, it is metabolized in an acquisitive way, in the wake of *preference* and not based on the constraint of *compliance* (Berger, 2005; Aldridge, 2005; Garelli, 2011). Despite everything, however, religion retains its important role, which sensitizes many young people towards an intimate relationship between the single conscience and God (Taylor, 2004), but not always anchored to the institutional apparatus (Garelli, 1996). In this regard, among the young believers and non-believers interviewed, there was a similar affirmative, almost unanimous response to the question posed in the 2016 questionnaire: «is believing in God a human need?» (Garelli, 2016, 35).

In any case, the appeal of young people to faith, or its distancing, is particularly complex not only for some secular and heterodox drifts, but because it includes ambivalent requests: in fact, on the one hand, they are voted towards skeptical-rationalist criteria, to weak ethics and reversible choices; on the other hand, they aspire to strong ideals, they are less inclined to consider the categories of religion and rationality as irreducible alternatives and are involved in emotional situations and feelings, so much so as to privilege emotionality as a way of identifying Christianity (Hervieu-Léger, 2003). Among other dynamics, the widespread emotionalism, which more often than is believed prevails over rationality, has opened up in the youthful experience differentiated symbolic gates, which could lead them to reconsider the “reasonableness of faith”, but equally could address them towards the secular collective liturgies, the rituals and alternative values of virtual environments (Terrin, 2007). Indeed, this sort of “vocation” of young people to be moved and their need for security could be filled by the dimension of faith, but also by the abstract, disembodied space of the World Wide Web, that due to its «immateriality of data, instantaneousness of communications, cancellation of distances, distortion of interpersonal relationships» (Vecoli, 2013, 17) is in harmony with the needs of that current “deep self”, which tends to deny objective reality in favor of subjective authenticity (Pace, Giordan, 2010). Not surprisingly, emotionality, immateriality and abstraction often reward the principle of reality and rationality and these postmodern categories, perhaps, represent the “prime causes” of cultural discomfort, of that same inability of young people to descend fully in the “concrete” world and to give stability to their life (Belardinelli, 2015).

#### 4. Conclusions

All in all, in the current unpredictable historical evolution in its trajectories, – in which the sources of meaning are reduced to the contingent, the eternal to the present, the truth to authenticity, the real to the abstract, the social to the individual, self-control over self-indulgence (Lasch, 1981) –, the various sociological investigations seem to show that the “story” of emerging generations appears as a mosaic of mutually contradictory factors, starting with the singular oscillation between immersion in the *Internet* and nostalgia for spiritual tension. In fact, in this pendular movement of youthful consciences, the complexity of their ambivalent reality often coincides with the search for simple things and traditional values, such as those of the family, affections and solidarity. The religious dimension itself is not completely excluded from the reflective circuit of young people, indeed at times it continues to promote a “common belonging”, a spiritual enchantment (Cipriani, Losito, 2008), and can become a pole of attraction «the more disintegrating, on a symbolic level, the abstract universalism of globalization is revealed» (Ciaramelli, 2000, 191). Ultimately, in the season of always unstable equilibrium (Rovatti, 2011), of cultural stimuli objectively antagonistic to the persistence of faith and in which the *Internet* has become one of the most powerful symbols of contemporaneity, religion continues to represent for the new generations a horizon of meaning, “a deep anthropological need” and a bulwark in defense of the universal human dignity (Joas, 2013). After all, already a hundred years ago, from their absolutely secular theoretical positions, Simmel and Durkheim had considered religion, especially in the time of perennial change, the true heritage to draw on to give unity to society, a meaning and a “truth” to reality (Simmel, 1976) and guarantee hopes for the future (Durkheim, 2013).

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