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The persistence of spiritual experience among churchgoing and  
non-churchgoing Italians: Sociological and psychological perspectives

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### Abstract

This study draws on theories and methods developed within the psychology of religion to examine from a fresh perspective a problem established within the sociology of religion, the ‘oddity of the Italian situation’. The study employs the notion of openness to mystical experience as an indicator of the level of spiritual awareness among a sample of 1,155 Italians ranging in age from 14 to 80 years. The data demonstrated that, while levels of openness to mystical experience remain quite high among non-churchgoing Italians, these levels are significantly associated with sex, age, religious attendance, and personal prayer. Moreover, the differences between attenders and non-attenders are sensitive to the ways in which aspects of mystical experience are expressed. This dialogue between the psychology of religion and the sociology of religion generates fresh insight into the religious and spiritual landscape of Italy today.

*Keywords:* mysticism, spiritual experience, secularisation, Italy

## Introduction

### The **sociological** debate about secularisation in Italy

The fact that about 90% of Italian people define themselves as Catholic clearly shows how it is still possible to claim that Italy is a Catholic country (Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi 2015). This simple fact, however, lends itself to multiple interpretations and leaves open the question of how the relative monopoly of the religious market by Roman Catholicism is changing under challenges both from growing religious pluralism due to migration (Pace, 2013) and from increasing differentiations within Catholicism itself (Cesareo, Cipriani, Garelli, Lanzetti, and Rovati 1995; Garelli 1991; Diotallevi 1999, 2001, 2002).

The oddity of the Italian situation, described as the so called ‘Catholic effect’ (Iannaccone 1992), within a modernized society emerges when we try to interpret it with the two main theories available today in the sociology of religion: the secularization theory and the religious market theory. The oddity of the Italian case, as showed by Diotallevi (2002), consists in not being properly explainable and understandable when read through the lens of these two theories. If we follow the paradigm of secularization, which argues that the role of religion is gradually disappearing in the social and cultural contexts where the processes of modernization have emerged with more force (Wilson 1985; Dobbelaere 1981; Casanova 1994), in Italy the religious attendance at Sunday Mass is still too high for a ‘modern nation’. At the same time, such religious participation is too high even for the religious market theory (Stark and Iannaccone 1992, 1994; Stark and Finke 2000), which argues that religious practice is destined to decline drastically in the contexts where the religious market is regulated in a monopolistic way.

The specificity of the Italian case with regard to religious change, however, has never been interpreted in a unanimous and linear way. From the studies of Acquaviva (1961, 1971) and Buralassi (1967), which began to observe the **decline** of the religious practice of Sunday

Mass, the studies that followed continued to confirm a consistent tendency for reduction in religious practice. This reduction in religious practice, according to some scholars, should have slowed down during the 1980s (Ricolfi 1988; Garelli 1991; Cartocci 2011), even suggesting 'religious revival' (Introvigne and Stark 2005; Barone 2006). Recent studies, however, show that the decline of religious practice remains a consistent tendency even in Italy (Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi, 2015; Garelli, 2016; Diotallevi, 2017). That is why the thesis of secularization seems to be fully confirmed, at least with regard to regular Sunday Mass attendance. At the same time, as Palmisano and Todesco (2017) pointed out, it would be inappropriate and reductive to interpret the religious changes that are taking place in Italy using only the variable of Sunday Mass attendance.

The specific role of Catholicism in Italy needs to be considered in light of the changes that have in recent decades deeply changed (both culturally and socially) the experience and views of Italians on issues such as divorce, abortion and the recent recognition of same-sex couples. The 'Italian style' Catholicism, as noted by Garelli (2014), manages to hold together issues that might apparently seem contradictory. For example, it brings together, on one hand, the increasing secularization (with the decrease of religious vocations, the decrease of those who regularly attend Sunday Mass, and the lower level of obedience to the directions of the Church hierarchy in the field of sexual morality as well as in the field of public ethics), and, on the other hand, a new need to relate with the sacred that goes beyond religious affiliation meant in a rigid and exclusive manner (Palmisano 2010).

Then, if the important role that Catholicism plays within Italian society and culture in general is undeniable (Garelli 2007), it is equally undeniable that this role is changing within the strictly religious field. If actually nine Italians out of ten continue to define themselves Catholic, such declaration of belonging often hides very different modalities, both of belonging and of believing. As noted by Berzano (2009), the relevance of religion within

Italian society lends itself to multiple interpretations. In one respect, the effects of the secularization processes are evident, mainly understood as gradual emancipation of the different social spheres from the direct or indirect influence of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; in another respect, new connections are to be seen that Italians establish between their daily lives and the sacred, triggering processes of re-enchantment within a disenchanted world. These are changes and transformations that affect those who regularly attend Sunday Mass as well as those who attend rarely or not at all. In other words, it is a new kind of sensitivity that arises as an unexpected effect of the secularization processes, and just for this reason Berzano (1990) speaks of a post-secular era.

Starting from the pluralism of values typical of the present age and from the increasing recognition granted at social level to the freedom of choice of the individual, Giordan (2007, 2010), Palmisano (2010), Palmisano and Pannofino (2017) describe such change that is taking place within the religious field in Italy in terms of 'spirituality'.

The Italian case, however, highlights how the debate on spirituality that has developed mainly in the United States and Northern Europe needs to be articulated differently when applied to the countries of southern Europe. As Palmisano and Pannofino (2017, 132) pointed out, the 'country variable' well illustrates how 'the spiritual dimension in Italy is not altogether independent of institutional religion but rather the latter is the fundamental cultural model of reference for those undertakings a spiritual-type itinerary'. Catholicism remains a 'cultural' point of reference far beyond the narrow religious field, and this also has implications on how spirituality is understood and lived (Fedele and Knibbe 2013).

If traditional religion regulated (and still regulates) the relationship with the sacred starting from the moral norms and the liturgical practices dictated by religious institutions, contemporary spirituality puts at the centre of the relationship with the transcendent autonomous individuals who can build for themselves paths of meaning that connect them

with what lies beyond the worldly life, resorting either to experiences that are within the Church religion or to those which are at the edge or totally outside it.

Such turn from the objective truth, from the dogmas scrupulously safeguarded by the Church, to the subjective authenticity of the individual in search of meaning, opens up chances of new spiritual and mystical experiences which bring with them a specific attention to emotions, feelings, body, individual life experiences, personal wellbeing, and self-realization, all of which are not seen in contradiction or in competition with a relationship with the sacred. Then post-secular spirituality, understood as one of the possible outcomes of the secularization process in Italy, shapes new modes of believing and of relating with the sacred where the separation between churchgoers and non-churchgoers perhaps is no longer the main discriminating factor. It is a mode of believing that makes the Italian Catholicism more and more differentiated in itself and that renders the religious field in Italy complex, making it more and more plural.

### **Spiritual experience and mystical orientation**

In light of the oddity of the Italian case (as discussed above **from the perspective of the sociology of religion**), this paper proposes the investigation of spiritual experience **as conceptualised within the psychology of religion** as one key way of assessing the persistence of a non-secular worldview among contemporary Italians. Spiritual experience is, however, itself a broad and somewhat amorphous concept that has been conceptualised and operationalised in a variety of ways within the scientific literature. A tighter, more fully discussed, and better agreed construct within the **psychology of religion** is that of mystical experience, mystical orientation, and mysticism.

Mysticism has been a topic of central interests to the psychology of religion from the very early days of the discipline. In his foundational study, *The varieties of religious experience*, James (1982, 301) referred to mysticism as ‘the root and centre’ of religion.

Subsequently (and independently) two philosophically-based approaches have analysed, identified and discussed the recognised components of mysticism: one by Stace (1960) and one by Happold (1963). Stace's framework was adopted by Hood (1975) to form the theoretical basis for the Hood Mysticism scale (M Scale). Happold's framework was adopted by Francis and Loudon (2000) to form the basis of the Francis-Loudon Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS) and the subsequent Short Index of Mystical Orientation (SIMO) reported by Francis and Loudon (2004). While the MOS and SIMO were originally constructed to reflect an explicitly Christian interpretation of mystical experience, subsequent revision has produced an instrument that operationalises the construct without specific reference to Christian language. The present study is specifically concerned with the revised version of this instrument, the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised (MOSR), grounded in Happold's conceptualisation.

Happold's definition of mysticism embraces seven key characteristics, the first four of which were taken directly from James (1982): ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, consciousness of the oneness of everything, sense of timelessness, and true ego (or self). The Francis-Loudon Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS) proposes three indicators of each of these seven characteristics in order to construct a 21-item measure. In their foundation paper, Francis and Loudon (2000) reported an alpha coefficient of internal consistency reliability of .94 for this instrument (Cronbach, 1951).

*Ineffability* is a negative description emphasising the private or incommunicable quality of mystical experience. According to James (1982, 380), those who have this kind of experiences report that they defy expression, and that 'no adequate report' of their content can be given in words'. The MOS accesses ineffability with items like, 'experiencing something I could not put into words'.



*Noesis* emphasises how mystical experience carries states of insight into levels of truth inaccessible to the discursive intellect. According to James (1982, 380-381), those who have this kind of experiences regard them ‘to be also states of knowledge ... They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.’ The MOS accesses noesis with items like, ‘knowing I was surrounded by a presence’.

*Transiency* emphasises how mystical experience is brief, inconstant, passing, and intermittent. According to James (1982, 381), mystical states do not endure for long though they may recur ‘and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as an inner richness and importance.’ The MOS accesses transiency with items like, ‘passing moments of divine revelation’.

*Passivity* emphasises both the experience of being controlled by a superior power, and the undeserved, gratuitous nature of the mystical experience. According to James (1982, 381), mystical states are ‘not passive interruptions, an invasion of the subject’s inner life with no residual recollection of significance, and this distinguishes them from phenomenon like prophetic speech, automatic writing, and mediumistic trance’. The MOS accesses passivity with items like, ‘being grasped by a power beyond my control’.

*Consciousness of the oneness of everything* emphasises how mystical experience conveys the sense in which existence is perceived as a unity. According to Happold (1963, 47), although it may be expressed in different ways by Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Christian contemplatives, the resolution of the dilemma of duality through this sense of the oneness of everything ‘is at the heart of the most highly developed mystical consciousness’. The MOS accesses consciousness of the oneness of everything with items like, ‘sensing the unity of all things’.

*Sense of timelessness* emphasises how mystical experience appears to have a timeless quality and to occupy an entirely different dimension from that of any known sense of time, and to be wholly unrelated to anything that can be measured by what is known as clock-time. According to Happold (1963, 48), mystics feel themselves to be in a dimension where time is not, where ‘all is always now’. The MOS accesses sense of timelessness with items like, ‘being conscious only of timelessness and eternity’.

*True ego* (or self) emphasises how mystical experience speaks to the deep, the true inner-self, and how such experience addresses the soul or the inner spirit. According to Happold (1963, 48), mystical experience gives rise to ‘the conviction that the familiar phenomenal *ego* is not the real *I*.’ The MOS accesses this notion of the true ego with items like, ‘feeling my everyday self absorbed in the depths of being’.

The Mystical Orientation Scale has been subsequently employed in a number of studies, including work reported by Bourke, Francis, and Robbins (2004), Francis, Village, Robbins, and Ineson (2007), Edwards and Lewis (2008a, 2008b), Francis and Littler (2012), Francis, Littler, and Robbins (2012), Francis, Robbins, and Cargas (2012), and Ross and Francis (2015).

### **Research question**

Against this background, the present study has three main research aims. The first aim is to produce and to test an Italian translation of the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised (MOSR). The second aim is to explore the association between scores recorded on the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised and religious practice **among Italians**, differentiating between two expressions of religious practice, namely public (worship attendance) and private (personal prayer), **while also taking into account the two personal factors of sex and age**. The third aim is to take a more detailed look at the 21 individual items of the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised in terms of the levels of endorsement given by those who never

attend worship, in order to explore whether such scrutiny might generate deeper insight into the spiritual experience of non-churchgoing Italians.

## Method

### Procedure

Participants were drawn from all over Italy (North, Central, and South) by a team of trainee psychologists operating under the supervision of a senior psychologist within the Institute of Psychology at the Salesian University in Rome. Participation was anonymous, and no monetary reward was offered or given. The informed consent procedure required written consent prior to participation, as agreed with the Institutional Review Board of the Salesian University. Questionnaires were administered, mainly at home, in the presence of a trainee psychologist. A total of 1,155 individuals submitted thoroughly completed questionnaires.

### Measures

*Mystical orientation* was assessed by an Italian translation of the revised form of the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (Francis and Loudon 2000). This is a 21-item measure containing three items to assess each of the seven key characteristics of mysticism identified by Happold (1963): ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, consciousness of the oneness of everything, sense of timelessness, and true ego. The revised form of this instrument expresses these characteristics of mysticism in ways independent of traditional 'religious' language. Respondents were asked to assess 'how important each experience is to your life', using a five-point scale anchored by: 1 = low importance; 2 = some importance; 3 = medium importance; 4 = quite high importance; 5 = high importance.

### Participants

The participants ( $N = 1,115$ ) comprised 538 men and 617 women range in age from 14 to 80 years ( $M = 30.69$ ,  $SD = 15.13$ ); 247 were in their teens, 493 in their twenties, 199 in

their thirties or forties, and 216 were aged fifty or over; 878 were from Central Italy, 69 from North Italy, and 208 from South Italy. In terms of religious worship attendance, 366 never attended services, 342 attended services at least once a month (of whom 276 attended weekly), and the remaining 447 attended less frequently than once a month. In terms of personal prayer, 402 never prayed, 311 prayed occasionally, 61 prayed at least once a month, 104 prayed at least once a week, and 277 prayed almost every day.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed by the SPSS package using the frequency, reliability and ANOVA routines.

### **Results**

- insert table 1 about here -

The first research aim of the study was to produce and to test an Italian translation of the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised (MOSR). This aim is fundamental to the project, since if the instrument were not to meet the appropriate psychometric criteria, the findings would be invalidated. In this regard three psychometric criteria need to be explored: the factor structure of the scale (to test whether all 21 items contribute to the core factor); the correlations between the individual items and the sum of the other 20 items (to check that each item makes a proper contribution to the total scale score); and the item endorsement as the sum of the high importance and the quite high importance categories (to test whether the items sample a range of levels of discrimination in terms of some being endorsed by many participants, and other items being endorsed by few participants). These data are presented in table 1. The first factor of principle component analysis accounted for 31% of variance and the individual items all loaded on this factor with values between .38 and .67, indicating a strong first factor. The item rest-of-test correlations all ranged between .33 and .61, indicating a broadly homogenous group of items that generated an alpha internal consistency reliability

coefficient of .89. The item endorsements ranged between 20% and 77%, indicating a good variability in item discrimination. These figures are broadly in line with the scale properties of the original English language edition.

- insert table 2 about here -

Table 2 addresses the second research question by presenting the mean scale scores of mystical orientation across four factors: sex, age, worship attendance, and personal prayer. The data demonstrate the following findings. In terms of sex, females recorded a significantly higher mean scale score than males. In terms of age, there was no overall significant difference among the mean scale scores recorded by the four age groups. In terms of worship attendance, those who never attended worship recorded a significantly lower mean scale score than those who attended worship at least monthly. In terms of personal prayer, those who never prayed recorded a significantly lower mean scale score than those who prayed at least weekly or daily.

- insert table 3 about here -

Table 3 addresses the third research question by examining and comparing the levels of endorsement of the individual items (as the sum of the high importance and the quite high importance categories) by those who never attend worship and by those who attend worship at least monthly. While the mean scale scores presented in table 2 demonstrated that those who never attend worship were significantly less open to mystical experience than those who attend worship at least monthly, the figures presented in table 3 illuminate the differential way in which the 21 individual items contribute to that overall difference in the mean scale scores. There are some items on which the non-attenders record a much lower level of endorsement. For example, while 60% of monthly attenders reported high importance or quite high importance for knowing that they were surrounded by a presence, the proportion fell to 22% among non-attenders; while 65% of monthly attenders reported high importance

or quite high importance for losing their everyday self in a greater being the proportion fell to 31% among non-attenders. There were other items, however, on which the gap recorded between non-attenders and monthly attenders was much smaller. For example, while 66% of monthly attenders reported high importance or quite high importance for being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder, so did 61% of non-attenders; while 48% of monthly attenders reported high importance or quite high importance for feeling their everyday-self absorbed in the depths of being, so did 44% of non-attenders. Moreover, there were some items on which non-attenders gave higher endorsement than monthly attenders. For example, while 18% of monthly attenders reported high importance or quite high importance for being in a state of mystery outside their body, the proportion rose to 23% among non-attenders; while 27% of monthly attenders reported high importance or quite high importance to losing a sense of time, place and person, the proportion rose to 37% among non-attenders.

The data presented in table 3 also offer a way of describing and interrogating the sense of mystical experience perceived and recognised by Italians living outside the sphere of worship attendances. Over half of non-churchgoing Italians participating in the survey recognised the importance of the first mark of mystical experience to their life, the sense of *ineffability*: 59% gave high importance to experiencing something they could not put into words; 59% gave high importance to being aware of more than they could ever describe; and 50% gave high importance to feeling moved by a power beyond description. The second mark of mystical experience, *noesis*, is more problematic for the unchurched to grasp in the way in which it has been captured in the MOSR. While 70% gave high importance to sensing meaning in the beauty of nature, they were less comfortable with the notions of knowing they were surrounded by a presence (22%) or hearing an inner voice speak to them (26%). The third mark of mystical experience, *transiency*, was well recognised by the unchurched, although they were less comfortable with the expression of the experience in the technical

language that the MOS employed in one item. While 62% gave high importance to sensing brief glimpses into the heart of things, and 51% gave high importance to experiencing passing moments of deep insight, the proportion fell to 24% who gave high importance to having transient visions of the transcendental.

The fourth mark of mystical experience, *passivity*, as operationalised by the MOS, is also grasped in its simplicity by the unchurched: 61% gave high importance to being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder. Yet the proportions fell to 22% who gave high importance to being grasped by a power beyond their control and to 23% who gave high importance to being in a state of mystery outside their body. The fifth mark of mystical experience, *oneness*, resonated less well with the unchurched. Between one third and two fifths gave high importance to feeling at one with all living beings (42%), to sensing the unity of all things (37%) and to feeling at one with the universe (32%).

The sixth mark of mystical experience, *timelessness*, resonated with nearly half of the unchurched, in the sense that 46% gave high importance to sensing the merging of past, present and future. The proportions, however, dropped to 37% who gave high importance to losing a sense of time, place and person, and to 21% who gave high importance to being conscious only of timelessness and eternity. Like the notion of the transcendental (within transiency) the notion of eternity (within timelessness) seems to have been problematic for the unchurched. The **seventh** mark of mystical experience, *true ego*, also appeared problematic to the unchurched as captured by the MOSR. Thus, 44% gave high importance to feeling their everyday-self absorbed in the depths of being, but the proportions fell in terms of being absorbed within a greater being (35%) or losing my everyday self in a greater being (31%).

## Discussion

This study has applied the notion of openness to mystical experience, as developed within the psychology of religion and operationalised by the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised developed from Francis and Loudon (2000), to attempt to illuminate the problem of the Italian situation, as conceptualised within the sociology of religion, at a time when Catholic identity remains strong but Catholic practices are declining. In light of the inadequacy of both the secularisation theory and the religious market theory to account for the oddity of the Italian case, commentators like Giordan (2007, 2010), Palmisano (2010), and Palmisano and Pannofino (2017) described the change that is taking place within the religious field in Italy in terms of 'spirituality'. It is to this notion of post-secular spirituality shaped within the sociology of religion that the new data shaped by the psychology of religion and provided by the present study speaks.

As Palmisano and Pannofino (2017) observed, the language of spirituality seems to highlight how the boundaries between religion and secularism are flexible, and it is not possible to establish clear borders between the two fields. In addition:

even non-believers and atheists, while rejecting belief in any concept of divine, undertake individual research paths which they consider as spiritual. The existence of porous borders between spirituality, church religion and secular positions is such that it would be more productive to talk about their relative areas of overlap instead of three distinctly separated domains. (Palmisano and Pannofino 2017, 143)

Post-secular spirituality highlights how the concept of spirituality challenges both the traditional concept of religion as well as that of secularism, pointing out that there are areas of overlap between the two fields. The mystical-spiritual experience, with nuances and different languages, emerges from our research as a common element between churchgoing and non-churchgoing Italians.



As already mentioned in the introduction, to many Italians their relationship with Catholicism, the majority religion, is a complex relationship which remains in the background of their personal and collective identity. This relationship with Catholicism often has more to do with the culture and with the history of the nation than with a more specifically religious dimension. What is new, however, is that the relationship with the sacred is no longer measured exclusively in terms of belonging to one's religion of birth, and even less in terms of attendance at Sunday mass; the relationship with the sacred is rather cultivated in a personal, autonomous way that we may define as mystical or spiritual. And in such a perspective the differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers often reduce almost to vanishing. The new data generated by the present study demonstrate that, on some specific experiences (that we have defined as mystical), those who do not go to church claim to have the same perceptions as those who do.

This, of course, does not mean that the distinction between those who practise regularly and those who do not disappears. Rather, the search for the meaning of life in an increasingly secularized and complex world seems to connect the two groups, and this search gives way to new experiences about the presence of the sacred in everyday life.

However, as Garelli (2016), Palmisano (2016), Palmisano and Pannofino (2017), and Palmisano and Todesco (2017) have recently highlighted, an outcome of the process of 'soft secularization' that has characterised Italy in the last decades, may be the growing percentage of atheists especially among the young; but again such distance from the Church and the denial of the existence of God, do not mean automatically closing the door on the important matters of life, and not even the loss of ability to imagine and perceive the sacred, however you want to define it. Such search for meaning, carried out both inside and outside the Catholic field, leads to a search for 'alternative spirituality', mixing together items of

religious Eastern traditions as well as typical features of new religious movements (Garelli 2016).

Within the context of this rapid transformation of religion in Italy, the mystical or spiritual perspective plays an important role. The research data we presented, however, lead us to consider the relevant question of the language of such experience, as it is perceived and thematized. Which vocabulary does the Italian religious sensitivity (which must inevitably deal with the massive presence of the Catholic culture) provide for the social actors in order to define their relationship with the sacred? And how does such language develop differently depending on whether such actors are churchgoers or non-churchgoers? Or, and this is a thing that seems to be confirmed at least in many respects by the outcomes of the research, are there terms that are capable of describing the mystical experience both of those who regularly practise and of those who do not practise the religious rites?

The language of mystical or spiritual experiences is spreading in Italian society and culture. As noted by Palmisano:

expressions like ‘spiritual not religious’, ‘inner healing’, ‘mind-body-spirit’, ‘holistic practices’ have become part of everyday language. The spiritual breakthrough is affecting many spheres of social life: the workplaces (some companies have introduced yoga sessions and autogeneus training for their employees or rooms dedicated to meditation), the health care system (with the proliferation of spiritual paths that intersect in various ways with the medical paths, as in the alternative medicine), fitness (with the introduction of soft therapeutic practices and disciplines enhancing the idea of slowness and the respect of limits, as yoga, tai chi chuan, pilates), personal wellness (for instance the spas propose a wide range of holistic treatments: ayurveda, plantar reflexology, hot stone, reiki), and catering (slow food

culture and the increase of natural cooking, macrobiotic, vegetarian and vegan diets).

(Palmisano 2016, 182-183)

Clearly within the various ambits described above the reference to spirituality takes different and varied contents and meanings, but it is nevertheless undeniable that meditation in the breaks during working hours, as well as choosing not to eat meat, can open up space for mystical or spiritual experiences that go beyond sheer materiality, and can put churchgoers and non-churchgoers in touch with the sacred. Reflection on the meaning of life (and the practices that may be connected to such reflection in a more or less explicit way), go beyond the importance granted to Church, or to prayer, or to obedience to the norms of Catholic ethics. The data we have put forth seem to show that among Italian people a non-secular worldview persists, and this outcome confirms what was highlighted by Palmisano (2016) when he speaks of ‘alternative spirituality’ of young Italians, where reference to the official religious institutions has given way to freedom of choice. For these young people, belief in the personal God of Christianity is replaced by belief in a supernatural force that can take the feature of an ‘inner divine spark’, a ‘cosmic energy’ and ‘sacred nature’. The indicators of ineffability seem to be in line with this sensitivity of young Italians, as well as the data on sensing meaning in the beauty of nature. In the case of our research it is a sensitivity that interests more than half the people who do not practise religious rites.

### Conclusion

This study set out to explore **the contribution that could be made from the perspective of the psychology of religion to illuminate a problem established within the sociology of religion, the oddity of the Italian situation. Specifically the study examined** the nature and the extent of the persistence of spiritual experience among churchgoing and non-churchgoing Italians. As a way of operationalising this research agenda the study **focused** on one aspect of spiritual experience well established within the **psychology of religion**, namely mystical

experience, and employed the operationalisation of this construct through the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised (MOSR). This operationalised research agenda was further focused by the specification of three clear research aims.

The first research aim was to produce and to test an Italian translation of the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised (MOSR). Data provided by 1,155 Italians between the ages of 14 and 80 years have confirmed that this objective has been largely met in terms of the three core psychometric tests employed. Principal components analyses confirmed a single strong principal component for the 21 items of the instrument. Tests of internal consistency reliability generated a satisfactory alpha coefficient of .89, while the item rest-of-test correlations confirmed the contribution being made to the homogenous scale score by each individual item. Examination of levels of item endorsement across the whole sample confirmed differential discrimination among the items. In terms of those psychometric properties the Italian translation of the MOSR can be commended for further use.

The second research aim was to explore the association between scores recorded on the Mystical Orientation Scale Revised and religious practice among Italians, differentiating between two expressions of religious practice, namely public (worship attendance) and private (personal prayer), while also taking into account the two personal factors of sex and age. The data found significantly higher scores recorded on the MOSR among females than among males. This is consistent with the well-established sex difference in religiosity with Christian and post-Christian contexts, as documented and discussed, for example, by Francis (1997) and Francis and Penny (2014). The data found no significant differences in scores recorded on the MOSR across the four age groups analysed: teens, twenties, thirties, forties, and fifty and over. The lack of age differences deserves further investigation, especially in light of the observation that religious practices may be more prevalent among older Italians (Vezzoni and Biolcati-Rinaldi 2015). The data found significant associations between

religious practice (both public and private) and scores recorded on the MOSR. Those who prayed at least weekly recorded higher scores than those who never prayed. Those who attended worship at least monthly recorded higher scores than those who never attended worship. This suggests that spiritual experience may be higher among churchgoing than among non-churchgoing Italians.

The third research aim was to take a more detailed look at the 21 individual items of the MOSR in terms of the levels of endorsement given by those who never attend worship in order to explore whether such scrutiny might generate deeper insight into the spiritual experience of non-churchgoing Italians. Two main insights emerged from this analysis: an insight into the spiritual experience among non-churchgoing Italians and an insight into the limitations of the MOSR for assessing mystical orientation among non-churchgoing populations.

In terms of spiritual experience among non-churchgoing Italians, inspection of the individual items confirmed that item endorsement was generally lower among the non-churchgoing than among the churchgoing. Yet this endorsement was often not *much* lower. Among the non-churchgoing, 70% gave high importance to sensing meaning in the beauty of nature; 62% gave high importance to sensing brief glimpses into the heart of things; 61% gave high importance to being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder; and 59% gave high importance to being aware of more than they could ever describe. Such statistics demonstrate that there are spiritual experiences of which the non-churchgoing are well aware.

In terms of insights into the limitations of the MOSR, the pattern of responses made by the non-churchgoing draw attention to those items that receive particularly low endorsement. The non-churchgoing are disinclined to speak of being surrounded by a presence, of hearing an inner voice speak to them, of having transient visions of the transcendental, of being in a state of mystery outside their body, of being grasped by a power

beyond their control, or of being conscious only of timelessness and eternity. The inclusion of items such as these in the MOSR that draw on language and concepts shaped by conventional religious discourse may be particularly unattractive to non-churchgoing Italians today. A further revision of the MOSR is needed to explore the potential for operationalising the seven core characteristics of mystical experience identified by Happold (1963) without recourse to language and concepts shaped by conventional religious discourse. The challenge is now, in part, identifying the right concepts and language through which to access more fully the spiritual and mystical orientation of non-churchgoing Italians.

Although the findings and conclusions of this study are subject to all the normal caveats associated with self-report measures, there are also strengths that emerge from employing well-tested and recognised instruments which have met standard criteria of reliability and validity as tested and established in the documented publications referenced in the introduction to this paper. Future studies shaped within the sociology of religion to explore the religious and spiritual landscape of contemporary Italy may well wish to take perspectives shaped by the psychology of religion into account.

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Table 1

*Mystical Orientation Scale: Scale properties*

	factor	<i>r</i>	% high
<i>Ineffability</i>			
experience something I could not put into words	.45	.40	68
feeling moved by a power beyond description	.53	.48	53
being aware of more than I could ever describe	.38	.33	63
<i>Noesis</i>			
sensing meaning in the beauty of nature	.45	.39	77
knowing I was surrounded by a presence	.61	.54	39
hearing an inner voice speak to me	.63	.57	39
<i>Transiency</i>			
seeing brief glimpses into the heart of things	.61	.54	69
having transient visions of the transcendental	.67	.61	34
experiencing passing moments of deep insight	.57	.51	53
<i>Passivity</i>			
being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder	.47	.42	64
being in a state of mystery outside my body	.49	.44	20
being grasped by a power beyond my control	.53	.48	23
<i>Oneness</i>			
feeling at one with the universe	.62	.54	36
feeling at one with all living beings	.58	.50	48
sensing the unity in all things	.64	.57	41
<i>Timelessness</i>			
losing a sense of time, place and person	.39	.34	32
being conscious only of timelessness and eternity	.61	.54	25
sensing the merging of past, present and future	.53	.47	46
<i>True ego</i>			
being absorbed within a greater being	.64	.58	44
losing my everyday self in a greater being	.67	.60	45
feeling my everyday-self absorbed in the depths of being	.58	.52	44
% Variance = 31%		Alpha = .89	

Note: factor = first factor of unrotated principal components solution

*r* = correlation between individual item and sum of other items

% high = sum of high importance and quite high importance

N = 1,155

Table 2

*Mystical Orientation Scale: Mean scores by groups*

	N	Mean	SD	F	<i>p</i> <
<i>Sex</i>				33.12	.001
Male	538	65.56	13.24		
Female	617	69.94	12.59		
<i>Age</i>				2.42	NS
Teens	247	66.53	11.93		
Twenties	493	67.51	13.12		
Thirties-forties	199	69.08	13.20		
Fifties and over	216	69.29	13.96		
<i>Worship attendance</i>				27.07	.001
Never	366	65.74	13.13		
Less than monthly	447	67.84	12.36		
At least monthly	342	72.03	12.33		
<i>Personal prayer</i>				33.48	.001
Never	402	63.93	13.20		
Occasionally	372	66.63	12.13		
At least weekly	104	72.60	11.49		
Daily	277	72.30	12.68		

Note: N = 1,155

Table 3

*Mystical Orientation Scale: Item endorsement of attendance frequency*

	Never %	Monthly %
<i>Ineffability</i>		
experience something I could not put into words	59	76
feeling moved by a power beyond description	50	60
being aware of more than I could ever describe	59	66
<i>Noesis</i>		
sensing meaning in the beauty of nature	70	87
knowing I was surrounded by a presence	22	60
hearing an inner voice speak to me	26	54
<i>Transiency</i>		
seeing brief glimpses into the heart of things	62	80
having transient visions of the transcendental	24	50
experiencing passing moments of deep insight	51	59
<i>Passivity</i>		
being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder	61	66
being in a state of mystery outside my body	23	18
being grasped by a power beyond my control	22	24
<i>Oneness</i>		
feeling at one with the universe	32	43
feeling at one with all living beings	42	53
sensing the unity in all things	37	45
<i>Timelessness</i>		
losing a sense of time, place and person	37	27
being conscious only of timelessness and eternity	21	35
sensing the merging of past, present and future	46	44
<i>True ego</i>		
being absorbed within a greater being	34	52
losing my everyday self in a greater being	31	65
feeling my everyday-self absorbed in the depths of being	44	48

Note: N (never) = 366, N (at least monthly) = 342