

Sezione monografica

Embodiment in Religious Resilience

Introduction

The Theme Section *Embodiment in Religious Resilience* takes its origin from a panel of the same title presented by the authors at the 18th annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), held in Pisa from August 30 to September 3. The panel was attended by scholars from various backgrounds, only a part of which is included in this volume. The panel aimed to explore the issue of Religious Resilience from the perspective of Embodiment, starting from the latest theories about the influence of embodied knowledge and practices on religions. The issue of Resilience was at the heart of the researches proposed at the EASR Conference, starting from the latest methodological developments on the theme in its relation to the religious sphere¹, and well defined in the Conference official website declaration as «the ability to counteract or absorb a process of transformation [...], an ability to find what best suits new environmental conditions; and an awareness of how to cope with a crisis»². Our purpose was to explore this subject in connection to the concept of Embodiment, which demands some methodological cautions concerning socio-cultural processes.

The intellectual history of corporeality has animated anthropological reflection since its beginnings, roughly from the first decades of the twentieth century onwards, through the famous works of Marcel Mauss, Mary Douglas, and others³. It has focused on many problematic issues, among which the

¹ J. Rüpke, *Urban Time and Rome's Resilience: Steeling Oneself against Disaster in Religious Practices*, in «Numen» 67 (2020), pp. 1-28.

² See <<https://www.easr.eu/conferences/past-conferences/2151-2/>> (08/2022).

³ M. Mauss, *Les Techniques du Corps*, in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1934; M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, New York 1966. It is impossible here to give an account of the entire 20th-century philosophical debate on the “body”, which involved, to name but a few relevant names, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It has reaffirmed the elusiveness of the subject and the extreme difficulty of treating it (on which see N. Crosseley, *Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology*, in «Body and Society» 1 [1995], pp. 43-63; A. Cavarero, *Corpo in figure. Filosofia e politica della corporeità*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1995; E. De Miranda, *Il corpo territorio del sacro*, Ancora, Milano 2000). The reference to Merleau-Ponty is also indispensable with regard to his phenomenology of perception (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1962), with which that process of re-appropriation of the body, already started in the 19th century by Western culture (just think of the work of Edmund Husserl, who was Merleau-Ponty's master), seems to have been accomplished: the body is no longer considered merely an object, but becomes the subject of man's process of knowledge and self-awareness. In this way, the dualism of thinking mind-thought object is overcome, and interiority and exteriority constantly dialogue and communicate in a circular and reversible movement. This effort of reversibility between the sentient subject and the perceived world, to constitute epistemologies starting from the body, is recognisable in Loic Wacquant's call for a shift from a sociology ‘of’ the body to a sociology ‘from’ the body (*For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood*, in «Qualitative Sociology» 38 [2015], pp. 1-11) and for a similar shift

crushing of the body on its biological dimensions as a passive receptor of processes of social shaping and relations of power appears to be the most evident approach, implicit also in the innovative perspective of Michel Foucault⁴. In recent decades a turn has renewed the historical-anthropological approach to corporeality and overcome the conception of the body as a mere bio-physical entity. A naturalist ontology moves towards recognizing the historical-cultural nature of corporeality, what Csordas calls “incorporation/embodiment”⁵.

The body, therefore, is now considered to be at the heart of the process of the social construction of the subject and the intersubjective production of culture, that is, of those meanings through which we symbolically shape reality and our experience of it⁶. If culture is increasingly thought as a process emerging from embodied experience, the same appears to be true for those cultural productions linked to the religious sphere. Recent studies have highlighted how embodied knowledge – that implies embodied and situated simulations of perception, action, and mental states – appears central to three aspects of religious experience in particular: religious visions, religious beliefs, and religious rituals⁷. In historical investigations, sources, mostly written or material, compel us to consider the lens through which the authors or the narrators read and relate their experience and the addresses of the document, the idea of the body that it involves and that it wants to convey.

Therefore, our approach aims to consider religious processes through their bodily interpretations and physical context, including not just corporeal states, but also environmental, social, ritual, and daily experiences connected with the religious framework. The anthropological view addressed is the one that considers the body not only as a symbolic field that reflects or re-produces hegemonic beliefs and values; it also represents a site of resistance to, and transformation of, imposed meanings.

from anthropologies ‘of’ the body to anthropologies ‘from’ the body by R. Malighetti - A. Molinari (*Il metodo e l'antropologia. Il contributo di una scienza inquieta*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2016) on which F. Fava, *Quando la scena dell'incontro è etnografica*, in C. Cremonesi - F. Fava - P. Scarpi (eds.), *Il corpo in scena. Tecniche, rappresentazioni, performance*, Webster, Padova 2018, pp. 11-20.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la Prison*, Gallimard, Paris 1975; Id., *Histoire del la Sexualité. 1. La Volonté de Savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1976.

⁵ T.J. Csordas, *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology*, in «Ethos» 18, 1 (1990), pp. 5-47; Id. (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994. Also unavoidable is the reference to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*: *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*, Librairie Droz, Genève 1972.

⁶ See F. Remotti, *Luoghi e corpi. Antropologia dello spazio del tempo e del potere*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1993; Id., *Fare umanità. I drammi dell'antropo-poiesi*, Laterza, Roma - Bari 2013; I. Quaranta, *Corpo, antropologia e dis-ordine sociale*, in C. Gianotto - F. Sbardella (eds.), *Tra pratiche e credenze. Traiettorie antropologiche e storiche. Un omaggio ad Adriana Destro*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2017, pp. 133-147: 136: «In altre parole, il corpo traduce e tradisce il nostro rapporto con l'ordine sociale».

⁷ H. Whitehouse, *Modes of religiosity: a Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2004; L.W. Barsalou - A.K. Barbey - W. Kyle Simmons - A. Santos, *Embodiment in Religious Knowledge*, in «Journal of Cognition and Culture» 5, 1-2 (2005), pp. 14-57.

Indeed, if different forms of religious beliefs and practices represent a powerful tool for coping with critical situations, embodied religious processes, or the idea of the body implied in religious discourses and practices, appear to be a productive field of investigation, as they allow us to address the issue of Resilience from the perspective of ritual behavior, physical habits, environmental conditions, and the body symbolism implied.

To open a fruitful field of investigation, the theme section hosts scholars dealing with different periods and cultural contexts, up to the present day, who have approached the proposed topic mainly from a historical-religious perspective to launch a debate also from a methodological point of view. Silvia Romani (Università degli Studi di Milano), presents a contribution on *The Resilience of Bodies in Myth and Polytheistic Religion*, through which she explores the intersection between body, sex, gender, and resilience in some mythical narratives from Greco-Roman antiquity, with a focus on those in which the creation of the female body is taken into account. With Luca Arcari (Università di Napoli Federico II, *Embodiment, Social Currency and Resilience. Judaism[s] and the Revelation of John in the Communicative Urban Market of Roman Asia Minor [1st-2nd cent. C.E.]*), the focus shifts to the Asian minor framework between 1st and 2nd cent. C.E.: the analysis of the seven letters of Revelation (Rev 2-3), together with some honorary inscriptions, becomes an opportunity to explore the intersection between embodied ways of communication, social currency and resilience in the reference context. In *The Idea of Contagion of Beliefs and the Strategies of Religious Resilience in Late Antiquity*, Tessa Canella (Sapienza Università di Roma), aims to explore some sources about the idea and the rhetoric of contagion as a widespread way of thinking about the transmission of religious doctrines, sins, and holiness in the late antique panorama; at the same time, the rhetoric of contagion seems to have offered a way of reacting to an ideological, spiritual, and philosophical framework that was constantly evolving. Maria Dell'Isola (Universität Erfurt, *The ascetic body in The life and conduct of the blessed and holy Matrona*), offers a contribution about the relationship between female asceticism and rejection of gender in late antiquity through the analysis of the hagiographic narrative "The life and conduct of the blessed and holy Matrona", where the ascetic body of the female saint is entirely shaped as a site of religious resistance. Sergio Botta (Sapienza Università di Roma, *The Ritual Construction of Devine Bodies in Ancient Mexico: the Case of the Tepictoton*) aims to investigate a form of embodiment in Mesoamerican ritual as a form of controlled relationship with the lacustric environment of Mexico Tenochtitlan. Thanks to an unusual field immersion in two French Carmelite monasteries, Francesca Sbardella (Università di Bologna, *Embodying silence. The resilient action of the "unspoken" in Catholic cloistered life*), proposes a phenomenological reinterpretation of Catholic monastic silence, in which the practice of silence, deeply rooted and expressed on a physical level, give sense to religious life and, at the same time, keep the system alive. Margaret Brady (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales,

Constructing a diverse community through embodied consistency: the case of the multi-layered “community” of a Tenrikyō center in a Parisian suburb), shows the intersection of the embodiment of particular social models via rituality and their transferal to broader social contexts through the analysis of the multi-layered “community” of the main European center of the Japanese new religion of Tenrikyō, located in a Parisian suburb.

Therefore, this thematic section attempts to open up a space for reflection on a theoretical issue that has not received the necessary attention in the Italian history of religions. Despite the variety of methodological approaches and contexts investigated, we wish that a careful look at ritual embodiment in connection with resilience may provide some relevant perspectives for future research.