Words and Worlds: Catholic Charismatic Prayer as Meaning-Making in Post-Modernity

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Praying So Hard You Faint

On the way home from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal service my friend and I attended, I was struggling to find the words to make sense of the bizarre experience we had just been part of. My friend managed to summarise our feelings in what I immediately knew would be the punchline of my Ethnographic Encounters Project: "Can you imagine praying so hard you faint?" She was genuinely surprised, as was I, to find that the members of the congregation of the Renewal in the Spirit (RnS in the Italian acronym[1]), a branch of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, meet weekly only five minutes away from my house, in a small Northern Italian town between Como and Milan. From the size of the two services I took part in, I gathered that a group of at least a hundred people out of the about 3,000 inhabitants of the town regularly attended, a number so high I was having trouble to coming to terms with. I was also raised in the same Catholic environment but, despite being familiar with the concepts of Christianity, I consider myself an atheist. In this sense, what I could not wrap my head around is the fact that, in spite of our geographical proximity and similar upbringing, this group of people and I had such different perspectives on the world. For them, in fact, Catholicism is not only a mere cultural background, but rather it is the very lens through which they filter their human experience and make sense of it.

In this ethnographic study, I will to try to understand the RnS's viewpoint on the world and investigate how it is possible that it co-exists to differing perspectives as mine. I will first analyse the service itself, using Coleman's (1996, 2006) notion of object-like words to argue that the RnS's practice of glossolalia, in virtue of its twofold nature of linguistic and bodily act, combines Leach's (2000) and Lewis' (1980) accounts of ritual, re-configuring the services I attended as both communicative and performative rituals. I will then use Berger's notion of religion as a world-building enterprise and his historical analysis (1969) to explain the dynamics of the Catholic Charismatic Movement in terms of the ongoing process of secularisation due to the capitalistic economic system. I will show that Berger's argument, according to which secularisation exposes the individual to a postmodern pluralism of meaning-making frameworks (1969: 134), gives some insight into the workings of the RnS. I will then argue that some of the practices in the service, such as the prayer "on" the individual believer or the emphasis on the communal aspect of the ritual, can be explained in terms of Berger's notion of world-maintenance (1969: 32).

Methodology

As part of my fieldwork, I attended two weekly services and interviewed the local priest who first introduced the RnS practices in the community. Since the services take place in my home town, my relation to my informants was one of relative acquaintance: I was immediately identified as "the (grand)son of..." and thus placed in my informants' social network. As a result, the disruptive potential of my presence as an anthropologist was mitigated by the fact that I was not considered a complete outsider. Nonetheless, my participation in the service did have an impact on my informants' behaviour: not only did they try very hard to be as inclusive as possible,

but they also spontaneously offered me instructions and explanations to make sense of their practices and tried to convince me to join their community in a warm but somewhat insistent way. For example, they referred more or less explicitly to my presence a few times during the service, either by thanking God for sending me as a potential new member of the congregation or by praying for my conversion. They also reserved two seats on the first row and welcomed my friend and me with an encouraging applause as we entered the worshipping place, a gesture which, disguised as an act of kindness, served to situate us in a position such that we could experience the service in a controlled way. Although I attended the first service with a friend of mine, I do not believe this had any particular impact on my research, except for the highlighting of gendered ways of approaching potential new believers. The assumption was that my friend and I were in a relationship, and that my (female) friend's decision on whether to join the community or not ultimately depended on my own (as a male), thus explaining why most attempts at convincing us to come back to the next service were directed to me. However, I believe this has more to do with ordinary gender role assumptions in any provincial Italian town than with the religious beliefs of the specific group I was observing.

As an atheist approaching the subject from an academic perspective, I am addressing the topic with what the literature on Anthropology Of Religion calls "methodological atheism" (Berger 1969: 100), in the attempt to explain the phenomena I witnessed from a socio-anthropological standpoint. As my informants repeatedly voiced their concern that I might think that they "belong to a mental asylum", I will try to report their perspective, on the basis of Wagner's notion of "relative objectivity" (1981), by being aware of my bias as a member of the atheist and academic culture. The descriptions and explanations of ritual provided below are thus a combination of both my informants' collective viewpoint and my own understanding of it.

Ritual and Words

During the service, the believers pray individually, aloud, and one at a time, with no set timeline or hierarchy. Any member of the community can express a spontaneous prayer at any time, inspired by the Holy Spirit, after each of which the congregation repeats a standardised formula to conclude the individual prayer and move on to the next one, while also supporting the individual believer who has spoken. At the discretion of those in charge of the musical instruments, songs are played every now and then, alternating free individual prayers with phases in which the whole congregation sing together. This pattern revealed itself to be effective in the creation of a sense of community of equals, as the services I attended ran smoothly and seemingly without a leader[2]. Not only did music fill the space and overpower single voices with a sense of shared prayer, but the repeated formulae also gradually merged the individual prayers with the communal effort to praise God. The spatial setting of the worship site, moreover, consisting of several rows of chairs facing the empty centre of a spacious room of the oratory, turned the congregation's focus to their own externalisations rather than to a physical object or person.

Later in the service, the Holy Spirit is invoked and, over the music, individual prayers overlap and ultimately become glossolalia (i.e. speaking or singing in tongues). At this point, in both the services I attended (and, I was told, in most services), someone fainted in some sort of religious ecstasy. As I was promptly instructed by some of the older believers, they were

"resting in the spirit" and I had to restrain myself not to offer help, until the woman who had spent about twenty minutes on the floor finally got up during the next phase of the service. Towards the end of this stage a man's voice overpowered the fading glossolalia of the congregation. He spoke in tongues as someone else translated his utterances in real time. However, this happened in only one of the two services I attended.

In the next stage of the service the believers randomly open the Bible and are inspired to read a verse aloud. About three or four of these are then written on a whiteboard in front of the congregation. The selected individuals then try to come up with an interpretation binding all of them. Different interpretations are publicly discussed, and the assembly decide on one.

Language is a main focus in the services. This attention to words is first expressed through the individual prayers, then in glossolalia, and finally in the use of passages of the Bible (the Word of God). In this sense, the ritual appears as a parable about the negotiation of meaning and the relation between meaning and signifier: meaning is initially dependent on the individual's expression, it is then lost during glossolalia (which instead solely focuses on the signifier), and is finally re-established communally. In the services I attended this last step was first obtained thanks to the real-time translation of the man's speaking in tongues (consisting, quite literally, in the binding of the signifier to its meaning), and then through the common interpretation of the words of the Bible. In the process, meaning is re-configured from a personal to a shared dimension; it thus becomes a relational notion, as it can only be established either through public discussion or by the collaboration of one who speaks in tongues and the translator. As Coleman points out discussing similar themes in the context of a Swedish Protestant church, the focus on the pure signifier in glossolalia strips language of its semantic component and makes it purely a physical act (2006: 169). The signs of language are turned into signs of the sacred, and they acquire an object-like status: they are received, not interpreted, by the believer, and in this sense they are identified as gifts in the Maussian sense (2002), binding the deity and the individual (Coleman 2006: 173).

In charismatic prayer, words (either meaningful ones or glossolalia) are thus perceived to do things, not only to convey meaning in virtue of their linguistic aspect. Their bodily dimension makes them acts as well as symbols, as the manipulation of meanings and signifiers alternatively stresses their performative or semantic content[3], oscillating between meaningful prayers and glossolalia[4]. I believe this particular use of language can offer some insight into the nature of ritual, especially expanding the debate between Leach's and Lewis' theoretical works. Whilst Leach explains ritual through the metaphor of communication, which can be summarised as ritual "says things" (2000 [1968]: 171), Lewis argues against this notion, arguing that ritual *is* performance (1980: 8). The charismatic experience of glossolalia combines these two aspects, as the act of communication itself becomes performance due to its embodied dimension. Developing such a theoretical intuition would mean providing a framework in which performance and communication can be understood dualistically, as communication itself becomes a performative act. Leach's parallel between ritual and language (2000: 170) and Lewis' comparison between ritual and theatre (1980: 33) would thus go together, suggesting theoretical developments in two opposite directions: a combined view of ritual would shed light on both how a bodily act such as speaking becomes communicative in the linguistic

sense and on how linguistic expression is grounded in its physical dimension.

Ritual and Worlds

The above interpretations of the ritual came to me upon reflection of the addressed themes and the relevant anthropological literature soon after attending the first service, and I was quite satisfied with them, as they placed my informants' seemingly irrational behaviour into my own theoretical framework. A deeper question, however, was still unanswered: why do these people feel the need to partake in such rituals? What motivates them to perform such acts once a week?

Berger's The Social Reality of Religion (Berger 1969) offers some insight in this direction. Berger defines religion as a society's "world-building" enterprise (*ibid.*: 3), meaning that religious beliefs and practices offer an order to the otherwise unstructured flow of human experience. According to the processes of (a) externalisation, (b) objectivation and (c) internalisation, humans first produce meaning, externalising themselves into the world (a), then perceive the meaning they themselves produced as an object-like, independent feature of nature (b), and finally internalise it as such and project the objectified structure onto their individual consciousness (c) (*ibid.*: 4). Religion is thus configured as nomos, a human-originated ordering of reality which assumes the characteristics of unchangeable natural objects; an attack on such an order is then perceived as a negation of reality itself and a threat to fall into anomy, namely the chaos of unstructured and meaningless experience (*ibid.*: 22). However, since this perceived objective reality is ultimately socially constructed, religion[5] needs to rely on some kind of legitimation, a process of "reality-maintenance" which ensures that the nomos is not threatened either on the objective or

on the subjective level (*ibid.*: 32), but that it is rather cosmised, i.e. understood as the intrinsic order of the very universe (*ibid.*: 37). A world-building entity's degree of objectivation depends on its "plausibility structure", i.e. the set of conditions that make a nomos stable and immune to threats (*ibid.*: 45). Berger argues that in the last few centuries religious legitimations have undergone a process of secularisation due to the rise of the capitalistic economic system, and their plausibility structures have thus been affected (*ibid.*: 107-109): religions are subject to a "crisis of credibility". What were historically monopolies of meaning are now challenged by a post-modern plurality of meaning-providing structures and sub-worlds, such as other religions, science, and so forth (*ibid.*: 126). Religions thus find themselves in a market-like situation (*ibid.*: 137) in which they are commodified and compete to be voluntarily acquired by an uncoerced clientele exposed to a plurality of world-defining structures (*ibid.*: 132-133).

Berger's analysis sheds light on the dynamics of RnS, interpreted as a world-defining structure in a post-modern pluralistic context. Not only does the post-modern[6] framework explain the co-existence and proximity of my worldview as an atheist anthropologist and the RnS's own perspective, but Berger's wider theoretical framework also offers a possible interpretation of the RnS's practices. If we accept the notions of "plausibility structure" and "crisis of credibility", we can identify some aspects of RnS services as measures undertaken for the task of reality-maintenance. Firstly, the weekly recurrence of the services falls into Berger's definition of ritual as a "reminder" (*ibid.*: 40) of the ordered world, made more compelling by the need for the world-maintaining legitimations where the plausibility structure is continuously challenged by the other potential sub-worlds of post-modernity (*ibid.*: 47). Such

a striving for reality-maintenance places the services' focus on building a common identity. Believers can ascribe themselves to a plurality of alternatives. For example, the charismatic community utilises the language of family roles, calling each other "brothers" and "sisters," to remind each other of the tightness of their group. On the other hand, elements of the services such as the stress on the creation of a communal voice, the music, the spatial orientation, and the presence of physical contact contribute to create what Turner calls "communitas" (1985: 96), or the unstructured and non-hierarchical experience of living communally that binds the participants of rites of passage in the liminal phase. If we consider the RnS service as the rite of passage between two states (see Turner 1985: 94), namely the pre- and post-renewal presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer, the very service can be interpreted as the liminal phase between them.

On some occasions, moreover, individual believers can ask the community to pray "on" them. This means that the congregation is informed that the member is facing a difficult situation in their private life, and as they are placed in the centre of the space, the "elders" lay their hands on them. When I witnessed this, the woman who was being "prayed on" started crying, and after a while one of the "elders" began speaking in tongues, while another translated the speaker's utterances, both inspired by the Holy Spirit. This phase of the ritual can be interpreted in Gluckman's (1963) terms as a mild form of "ritual of rebellion". The individual's personal problems are "rebellious" in the sense that they threaten the very nomos promoted by RnS, and their potential of falling into anomy is publicly acted out in order to re-establish the very order of the world, in another attempt at reality-maintenance.

In a broader sense, the emphasis on the RnS's communal identity can be understood in terms of a reaction to the process of secularisation, which moved religion from the public to the private sphere (Berger 1969: 146). As a result of the new status of religion as only one of the available sources of meaning in post-modernity, its striving for reality-maintenance is translated into a totalising projection of the private dimension onto the public sphere. Whilst, in fact, it is now impossible to re-establish the meaning-monopoly of religion, the RnS accepts its confinement to the private familial dimension (cf. the use of family-related language), but it expands it to the whole community, which then appears as an impermeable bubble of meaning. In this sense, its relationship to other meaning-providing structures such as science is not a form of negotiation, but it is rather the typically post-modern juxtaposition, as it is exemplified by a quote from the priest: "We also had a member who needed the assistance of an exorcist [...] but we thought that a psychologist's support is also very important".

Conclusion

I have tried to explain the Catholic Charismatic services I attended in two different ways. First, I suggested that the use of words and glossolalia can be interpreted as a form of social negotiation of meaning. I argued that the twofold nature of glossolalia, as both an expressive and performative bodily act, can point to a potential way to broaden our understanding of ritual, combining Leach's (2000) notion of ritual as language and Lewis' (1980) comparison between theatre and ritual. Second, I used Berger's historical and sociological analysis of religion (1969) to show that the phenomenon of RnS can be explained as the result of capitalistic secularisation and, as Csordas suggests (1995), of post-modernity. This post-

modern standpoint offers an answer to my original question, namely how is it possible that such different perspectives on the world such as mine and the RnS's co-exist in proximity. The presence of a plurality of world-building structures in the market-like, secularised, post-modern twentieth and twenty-first centuries means that a set of sub-worlds of meaning (religion, science, and so forth) compete to be chosen as commodities by free individuals. While we may still ask why it is the case that some choose one instead of another, I can at least claim to have described the kind of historical and sociological context in which that choice takes place.

NOTES

1. Standing for *Rinnovamento nello Spirito*.

2. Some of the more experienced members maintained the natural flow of the prayers by picking up the pace when energy faded or by encouraging other members to speak up, but they did so trying to hide their own intervention, thus giving the service an appearance of self-sustenance. It is important to note, however, that the priest did not have a special status relatively to the others, unlike in traditional, non-charismatic services.

3. Drawing from Coleman's argument (1996:108), I am alluding to philosopher J. L. Austin's Speech-Act Theory (1962), where the notion of "performative content" can be paralleled to his definition of *perlocutionary act*, while the notion of the semantic content of an utterance is built on that of *locutionary act*. What my fieldwork experience highlights is the peculiar occurrence of a perlocutionary act devoid of its locutionary aspect (*i.e.* glossolalia).

4. While it is true that glossolalia has a meaning to the believer, this is limited to their intention to pray and it is impossible to phrase it explicitly as in the case of the real-time translation. As its meaning corresponds to the speaker's intentional state, then, glossolalia can be interpreted as an *illocutionary act* from the speaker's perspective, but is understood as a perlocutionary one from the aware hearer's point of view (see Austin 1962).

5. As Berger often warns in his work, even though objectivated meanings can act back on their own producers, it is important not to forget that these do not exist independently of them. Here, I am using the abstract concept of religion for simplicity, but I am aware of this theoretical problem.

6. The identification of charismatic prayer (and thus the RnS) as a post-modern phenomenon comes from Csordas' work (1995:6). While not using the term "post-modern", Berger describes the same situation; it thus seemed relevant to add Csordas' terminology to Berger's analysis.

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