



Religion and mystical experience

The St Mary's Centre has been coordinating a set of international studies on mystical experience within contemporary societies. The new study on mystical experience among Italians was completed during March.

Leslie J Francis has been working with Professor Giuseppe Giordan, a sociologist of religion at the University of Padua, and Professor Giuseppe Crea, a psychologist of religion at the Salesian Pontifical University of Rome, on a new survey comparing the openness to mystical experience among churchgoing and non-churchgoing Italians. The text of the paper reporting the findings for the study was finalised in Padua during March.

This study set out to explore 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 proposed focusing on one aspect of spiritual experience well established within the research literature namely mystical experience, and employing 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 three core demographic variables among Italian participants, namely sex, age, and religious practice, differentiating between two expressions of religious practice, namely public (worship attendance) and private (personal prayer). 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 & 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.

The findings and conclusions of this study are subject to all the normal caveats associated with self-report measures.