



6. The lived religion of Rome's Roman Catholics

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Abstracts

The Author reflects on a segment of the complex and multifaceted experience of Italian Catholicism provided by the analysis of the life stories of 29 Roman Catholics from Rome, gathered during the year 2016. Socialisation appears to be the fundamental mode of transmission of religious values, together with a personalization and re-elaboration of religious beliefs.

Keywords: Catholicism, Rome, culture, socialisation, family

La Autora reflexiona sobre un fragmento del complejo y multifacético catolicismo italiano a partir del análisis de 29 historias de vida de católicos romanos recogidas durante el 2016. La socialización aparece como el modo fundamental de transmisión de los valores religiosos, junto a una interiorización y reelaboración personal de las creencias religiosas.

Palabras clave: catolicismo, Roma, cultura, socialización, familia

L'Autrice riflette su un frammento del complesso e poliedrico mondo del cattolicesimo italiano a partire dall'analisi di 29 interviste a cattolici romani, raccolte nel 2016. La socializzazione si conferma modalità fondamentale nella trasmissione dei valori religiosi accanto, però, ad una interiorizzazione e rielaborazione personale del credo religioso.

Parole chiave: cattolicesimo, Roma, cultura, socializzazione, famiglia

Introduction

Many sociological studies of religion have been conducted, particularly in recent years, focusing on religious pluralism, modernity, the concept of *lifestyles*, models of action and relations characterising the ways of life of social groups and actors. The analyses carried out, including research and in-depth investigations of the Italian reality, pro-

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vide a vision of a Roman Catholic world in evolution, while continuing to provide the country's social and cultural life with a "solid hard core".

The 29 interviews administered in Rome in 2016 and commented on here, describe a variegated religious reality which cannot, of course, claim to represent the complex reality of Italy's or Rome's Roman Catholic world, but, rather, «open a window» upon a number of different interwoven, interlinked life experiences and situations (Ammerman, 2014: 9). These religious narrations and stories concern people in whom the sacred and the profane coexist in a «spiritual reality» (Ivi: 9) which cannot be easily interpreted in terms of univocal categories referring to religious or "secular" ambits.

In his latest essay *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (2014) [translated into Italian as *Sugli altari della modernità* and published in 2017] the recently deceased Austrian sociologist Peter L. Berger confirmed the new paradigm by which to interpret the religious reality existing beyond secularisation (a term now going out of use), as a "pluralist" set of beliefs and ethical values which coexist and interact reciprocally. This view is shared by Luigi Berzano, who has pointed out how, in this *post-secular* epoch, religion has not vanished but undergone a transformation (Berzano, 2017: 20-21), a discontinuity mode within the historical, traditional religions featuring a differentiation and plurality of religious practices.

Furthermore, the pluralism of the RC religious experience, its relationship with the worlds of Islam, Judaism and Protestantism which emerged from the interviews, reveals issues and observations about Italian society where many spheres of society and the environment interlock in terms of Parsons's concept of «interpenetration» (Vespasiano, 2015: 142); here the case discussed is that of religion, where different references, including those of a personal and cultural nature, are taken into consideration.

In some of the lifestories narrated by the Roman Catholics living in Rome interviewed here, the religious experience, the lived religion described was the outcome of a religion-related cultural *habitus*: a personal reality, which later assumed community, parish and, in many cases, association and church-movement proportions. One's *habitus*, as sociologist Bourdieu pointed out, produces forms and attitudes that be-



come stories: lifestyles originating from socialisation processes leading to integration (Berzano, Genoa, 2017).

Almost all of the interviewees (27 out of 29) confirmed that family and home socialisation (parents and grandparent who were believers) acted as a significant source of educational preparation for adherence to the Roman Catholic belief, though they later elaborated on it within the ambit of their new family set-up or within that of their future institutional relational (work) and leisure-time networks (volunteer activity). This form of sharing with friends and, in some cases, with fellow workers, may also contain the concept of «diffused religion», a category analysed and studied by Italian sociologist Roberto Cipriani, beginning as long ago as the late 1980's; a concept surpassing American scholar Robert N. Bellah's concept of «civil religion» (Cipriani, 1988: 71-72).

The rapport with the institutions does not involve static but porous environments and is based on a logic of individual and shared experiences which merge to transform communities and life habitats in areas where the Roman Catholic experience is at work. The concept of secularisation, the word «which has become ambiguous and is used ambiguously» (Luhmann, 1991: 217), no longer represents the correct way of interpreting the world of Italian Roman Catholics and that of our 29 interviewees. The sociologist Berzano, with his *post-secularity* concept, identifies a «new spiritual availability that living in secularity generates» (Berzano, 2017: 20-21), a diversity of behaviour patterns and lifestyles produced by secularization. Our interviews confirmed this thesis.

One is inclined, besides, to agree with the scholar Marco Rizzi who, in an essay published in 2016, while confirming the existence of a secularised Europe, observes that religion is still a significant mode of western social life which maintains a «political and social legitimacy of its own» (Rizzi, 2016: 46). A number of Italian sociologists unanimously emphasise the «pluralism» of contemporary representations of the religious paradigm in this country; some of their analyses though different are nonetheless complementary (Berzano, 2017; Cartocci, 2011; Diotallevi, 2017; Garelli, 2006; 2016; Pace, 2016).

Dealing with the sociology of religion means, therefore, having to take a broad view of the situation, beginning with socialisation within the family which, in most cases, determines the belief of Roman Catholics during adulthood though it also produces openness towards other religions (Pace, 2016). Some of the interviews reveal that ecumenism



and a relationship with Islam are experienced in positive terms, above all by young members of church movements (Focolarini¹, Neocatecumenali² and Meic³). Getting to know members of other religious persuasions directly, in some cases due to mixed marriages, can help defeat prejudice and “ignorance”, (meaning «not knowing») regarding those who follow a different religion so that they may no longer be perceived as an obstacle to the Roman Catholic faith.

Immigration is perceived by our interviewees as a problem or as a reason for fear (of terrorism and of Isis), yet, once again, direct knowledge (adoption of foreign children or experiences at school) deflates prejudice and xenophobia. The reality of immigrant labour along with the steady rise in the contribution made by foreign enterprise to increases in Italy’s Gdp, might well help lessen fear and ignorance (Boeri, 2017; Lazzari, 2015).

The faith of Rome’s Roman Catholics also finds comfort, support and corroboration in a number of social networks, the Internet and *Radio Maria*, an Italian RC radio station into which many of our interviewees tune regularly. Of particular interest is the case of a person who, with reference to Pope Francis, downloaded from the web a text which was extremely critical of the present pontiff to the extent of actually calling him the Antichrist. The new media confirm their role as important and significant socialising agencies for Roman Catholic believers: the appropriate education and preparation of people might help regulate news, which too often pose problems of authenticity and interpretation (Sloman, Fernach, 2017). Pope Francis is greatly appreciated by the 29 Roman Catholics from Rome who were interviewed during our survey, especially for the simplicity of his language and the immediacy of his message; positive views were also expressed in relation to previous Pontiffs, especially Pope John Paul II. One interviewee criticized the latter for his (alleged) right-wing political positions. The

¹ *The Focolare Movement*, an international organization based on ideals of unity and universal brotherhood, founded in Trent, Italy, in 1943 by Chiara Lubich as a Roman Catholic movement which remains largely such though it has strong links with other Christian and non-Christian denominations as well as with non-believers.

² The *Neocatechumenal Way*, or, simply *The Way*, is a charismatic movement operating within the Roman Catholic Church, set up in 1964 by Kiko Arguella and Carmen Hernandez.

³ *Movimento ecclesiale di impegno culturale* [Ecclesial Movement For Cultural Commitment] set up in 1932 by a group of Italian RC intellectuals and still active today.



length of his pontificate, especially for the more elderly interviewees, made of him a "lifelong companion" of great significance to Catholics.

Below we shall examine the topics outlined above, mentioning a number of keywords which corroborate the findings of previous reports. In addition, prayer and attendance at mass are modes of conduct that characterise the Roman Catholics interviewed, as do, of course, belief in the dogmas of Roman Catholicism like the Holy Trinity. In some cases we came across a certain degree of confusion regarding concepts like incarnation and reincarnation as well as non-belief in the virginity of Mary.

1. Religious socialisation

Socialisation is confirmed as one of the most significant means by which the social identity of people is built up (Dubar, 2004). An analysis of people's religious experiences cannot but take into consideration the cultural as well as the functional element in the Luhmanian sense of the term, which requires that functionality be interpreted through the constitutive processes of meaning. A system cannot be understood without reference to the environment to which a person belongs and which determines lifestyles, a set comprising «status, power structures and religious ethics» (Berzano, Genova, 2017: 26).

The words of one interviewee – aged 48, married, once a member of the girl guides – seem to echo this important consideration. According to her, «her cultural background was fundamental» to her membership of the Roman Catholic church, «had I been born in a Moslem culture I imagine that I would have become a Moslem». This appears to confirm that fact that the «cultural history» of a country, cannot be «denaturalised», for example, by the presence of «great mosques» because, «Italy is a Roman Catholic country». Religion cannot be instrumentalised «to trample on the freedom of others». This same interviewee also points out how it is possible to kill in the name of religion, referring, obviously to the special brands of terrorism and religious wars which avail themselves of Islam as their «fundament».

A 45-year-old man, who, like the majority of the interviewees consulted, was born into a Roman Catholic family, recalls that all the members of his family «adhered to the precepts of Catholicism, also



because accustomed by our grandparents to attend mass. I even used to call my grandmother mamma». Two significant points emerge from these words – as well as from those of other interviews – the importance of socialisation and the significance to socialisation of women, mothers and grandmothers, as transmitters of religious values. The death of these female figures was, in the case of the aforementioned interviewee, followed by «an estrangement from, a sort of refusal» of religion, although, later on, «upon seeing a priest engaged in social activities with children and young people, not the usual bigots, I began to question myself».

Over and over again the observations regarding their life courses reveal how important to the 29 Roman Catholic interviewees their cultural *habitus* had been. Alongside the female «transmitters» of religious values we find “others”, including priests, who had a significant impact upon the personal interiorisation of the interviewees’ life stories.

The survey confirms the analysis presented by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), published in Italian as *La realtà come costruzione sociale* (1969). The living world in which we are immersed is a symbolic, cultural universe which, however, each person elaborates, making it his/her own. Thus, each one’s experience is individual and irreparable. Furthermore, the construction of personal identity involves a fundamental kind of ambiguity: «it is, at once, singular and plural; it feeds on interiorised values intended also as objects of desire» (Lazzari, 2015: 45-47).

When elaborating personal faith as the basis of «social action» one tries to understand reasons that make «social commitment satisfactory». «I lacked a reason for helping others», continued the 45-year-old interviewee, «Helping other people or providing them with care is not the same as loving them; to help and to love are different. Help without love is different: we need strong motivations to drive our actions, even when providing voluntary service». Again, according to the same interviewee, faith and religious experience can provide a motive, «the Christian is a follower of Christ and, in this regard I feel no different from a Protestant. What interests me is to follow and try to imitate Christ».

The individualisation of one’s religious pathway, as discussed by Ulrich Beck in *A God of One’s own* (Italian translation, *Il Dio personale*, Beck, 2009: 109), does not seem to lead to a «privatisation of relig-



ion» but to a «reflexive modernisation», meaning that the values and rules handed down become an individual and personal «communicative rationalisation», something highlighted also by Habermas (2009: 82). Recognition of other religions means acceptance of the existence of different modernities (*Ivi*: 88).

This is confirmed by the words of a 28-year-old married woman, belonging to the Focolare Movement who, although she came from a family of believers, at 17 took «a sabbatical year» from her Catholic *habitus*, to «understand whether my faith had been imposed by the family or whether it was a personal choice. That was an important time in my life because it brought me into contact with my spiritual part». So, her relationship with other religions, as a multicultural expression of contemporary reality, did not pose an obstacle, but became an enrichment of her pathway of life, enhanced also by her experience in India, a country where many religions are separated, in some places even divided, according to membership but nonetheless in communication with one another: «There exists, however, a reciprocal relationship between the different neighbourhoods, each one collaborating and contributing to economic, personal, relational growth».

2. The values of Italy's and Rome's Roman Catholics

The trends emerging from the latest survey regarding values in Europe carried out in 2008-2009 in the 27 Eu member states and in a further 20 neighbouring countries (Rovati, 2011), are borne out by the lifestories of our interviewees and appear to corroborate the notion that values change more slowly than opinions, in many cases coinciding with cultural judgements expressed by the people interviewed. Values also become principles which forge individual *lifestyles*, in a process of socialisation which, in the present era of «weak ideologies» becomes central to personal and collective pathways (including religious ones) (Berzano, Genoa, 2017: 57).

Work continues to be a central issue for Italians, young and old alike, even more so at a time of crisis like the present. The words of the Roman Catholics interviewed by us underline how, in many cases, religious faith can be experienced, lived coherently, as commitment in the



work place, a space shared for several hours a day with others representing different beliefs, even unbelief.

For a 42-year-old bachelor, member of a Catholic association, the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment (Meic), the work place may be one of “mission” where one may bear witness, a place where the *Beruf* (vocation) indicated and examined by Max Weber can express itself and should characterise the life experience of each person. Work, even the most technical of professions, «may serve the truth of facts». According to the interviewee in question, however, it may often prove difficult to respect the norms and the high economic costs of health and safety legislation. The qualitative aspect of work depends on a set of various factors; and «serving the truth» with colleagues is part of what it means to be a Catholic Christian. This conviction is also reflected in the experience of an upper-class 50-year-old woman, one of the two Roman Catholics from Rome who received no direct religious socialisation from her family (her father was an atheist), even if one female figure, her grandmother emerges, along with two priests, who later contributed considerably to her religious education. Rationality played a significant role in her choice to believe, underlined by enrolment in the *Comunione e liberazione* [Communion and Liberation] movement. In the practice of her profession as a chartered accountant she asserts that «taxes must always be paid because there is a moral obligation to do so. Money cannot be more important than God». Even at times when her work imposed difficult choices, this interviewee sought coherence between faith and life, which, in her opinion, cannot be experienced as something disjointed from religious meaning. «One of the major faults, even of Catholics, is the strong sense of individualism of contemporary society». Morality informs one's actions, one's reward comes from «doing things well».

In the life stories of the Roman Catholics interviewed, the importance of the family as a foremost values emerges, for young and old alike, meaning both the family into which one is born (parents) and that which one sets up (through marriage). This is confirmed also by the survey on European values (Rovati, 2011) supported by both quantitative and qualitative data and referring to family as both life experience and as a value. The values of honesty and brotherhood, as one 48-year-old interviewee put it, are associated with «empathy, justice and social equity».



Those interviewed in Rome insisted on coherence between faith and the values professed by a person. They belong to «that heritage and those values which one must adhere to within the spheres of work and friendship» sustains one 49-year-old bachelor of modest social extraction. If one goes to mass on Sunday morning one cannot behave badly: «otherwise it would be like wearing a fake suit».

Love for others, emergence from oneself and living «in a social way» is an important value for Cristina, as well as for several other interviewees; «the idea that another world may exist». This love goes hand in hand with freedom, but also with accountability for one's own choices: another important point underlined by those interviewed. This can be put into practice, again in the work place, as in the case of one 56-year-old woman, a teacher in a Salesian school, who follows the teachings of Don Bosco.

Our qualitative analysis, although the survey was administered to a number that cannot certainly represent the universe of Roman Catholics living in Rome and in Italy, agrees nevertheless, even with the *survey* on the values of Italians carried out some time ago (Rovati, 2011). Commitment, social responsibility, sharing «strong values» which continue to be such (family, friendship, work, and to a those still significant though to a lesser extent like ecumenism), are all related to the Roman Catholic faith, above all, to that of believers belonging to church associations and movements. Multiculturalism and accepting reception of foreigners is still a value, though they suffer, above all in the case of those who have no experience of them, from the fear and the acts of terrorism (also of Islamic origin), which, for some year now, have been affecting Europe. They also harbour the idea that welfare favours foreigners «rather than» Italians who are more entitled to it or, as a 65-year-old married woman from a modest social background puts it, «we risk providing reverse care. There is a silent invasion that is frightening. There are areas of Rome where the vast majority of the residents are Muslim, Pakistani, Indian, as are the shops». One should also remember, however, that the increasing number of «enterprises owned by 'new Italians', even during the years of crisis from 2008 to 2015», have made an important contribution to the country's wealth (Lazzari, 2016: 155-156). This represents a mode of integration, associated with work, useful in the battle against social deviance and exclusion (Boeri, 2017).



3. The lived religion of Rome's Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic religiosity and experience of faith of the interviewees are characterised by prayer, a mode expressed constantly by all those interviewed; the same holds for attendance at mass, frequently on weekdays too. The sacraments most frequently mentioned are Baptism, the Eucharist and Matrimony (for those who are married, of course): Confession is absent from almost all the answers.

For the male president of one parochial branch of *Azione cattolica* [literally Catholic Action] a 42-year-old unmarried engineer, «the religious dimension of life, which means meeting Christ, is the only reason for living and of self-identity». Good and evil are not at loggerheads, but are the result of Roman Catholic membership which renders our awareness of Christian teaching responsible. For another interviewee, aged 48, «the conscience of man is the law of God therefore man is not separate from God». In many of the interviews we came across sin and guilt, the outcome of man's wrongdoing and free will, his personal responsibility. Furthermore, many saw evil as estrangement from God not considered as a judge, but, in many cases, as our close companion during life, even in times of suffering and pain.

For the previously mentioned female interviewee, the ex-member of the Girl Guides, for example «God looks into the soul of each one of us and in his boundless mercy he will pardon everyone. There will probably be a form of justice quite unlike our worldly kind». Heaven, Purgatory and Hell are part of the «living experience» of Roman Catholics. In the words of another previously mentioned, male interviewee, however «not in allegorical terms, but as a dimension which we feel close to us».

In some of the interviews, health and illness, two inevitable conditions of life, are not considered either «divine blessings or maledictions». One young male interviewee, aged 25, holds that «at times, rather, the opposite is true because whatever our physical condition in life may be we should endeavour to live our faith». Faith helps and bestows deep inner serenity.

A sense of guilt is a modality which is not accepted because experienced «as an imposition not to do this or that». It is refused because it



is not the outcome of the elaboration of responsibly experienced personal choice, belonging to a faith which is also rationality.

The survey also revealed that the election of Pope Francis was welcomed by Rome's Roman Catholics who compare him favourably to previous popes, especially to John Paul II who is remembered above all for the World Youth Day. Besides, Pope Francis's Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy was experienced «with naturalness» claims a 28-year-old neocatechumenal woman married to a practicing Indian Moslem.

In this matrimony between people of different religions, based on reciprocal respect, this young woman has tried, when educating her two daughters, to find points of contact between the Roman Catholic and Islamic faiths, for example «we agree on the need to pay attention to poverty. What Pope Francis says and does is in keeping with the principles of Christianity and with what a pope should do. Francis delivers what the Catholic world needs». This interviewee also foregrounds an aspect of this papacy that is so unlike previous ones (though in continuity with them), that is, the risk that what Francis says may become the object of «instrumental political exploitation». This and other elements of the present pontificate are the object of in-depth scrutiny by many (Bova, 2016). Sociologist, Marco Marzano states that Pope Francis «is held in many cases to be the successor and not the betrayer, as many mistakenly claim, of the heredity of his Polish and German predecessors» (Marzano, 2016: 661). For one 53-year-old female interviewee «Francis seems to be a Pope who wishes to bring the Church back to care for the least of our brethren». This self-same idea is expressed by Roberto Cipriani when he writes about «attention to those who have been discarded by society and live on the margins, in poverty» (Cipriani, 2017: 330).

4. Conclusions

Concluding this examination of 29 Roman Catholics resident in Rome, it is possible to agree that religion «has reacquired space within the public sphere» (Stagi, 2017: 83), even in Italy. It may be considered a religion «in and of daily living» (Diotallevi, 2017: 29). The life stories presented in the survey confirm this. We witness, in Italy too, a drop in the numbers of older and younger people who practice a relig-



ion, though the category of the non-believers, another of society's «hard cores» is varied and complex (Garelli, 2016: 8-9), something that is confirmed by the studies of sociologists of religion like those quoted by Manuel Franzmann who claims that «each form of life-conduct rests on belief. Secularization does not resolve belief. It only transforms the *contents* of belief. That is why I proposed to use the notion of secular or secularized belief (or *faith*) instead of *unbelief*» (Franzmann, 2016: 2).

The Roman Catholicity revealed by the interviews conducted here is plural and polyhedral in all its nuances; it presents aspects that continue, though they also differ from the past ecclesiastic tradition which can no longer be proposed. In this instance too, it is possible to agree with Franzmann that we are dealing with «a puzzle of *secularity*» (Franzmann, 2016: 3), something already noticed by Weber and Berger. One needs to recall that Weber himself considered secularisation a process of «disenchantment, razionalization, and intellectualization» (Franzmann, 2016: 4), which leads us from a sociological point of view, to the interesting questions of a Catholicism which, for example, seems, in our country, to have broken off its direct relationship with politics. This hypothesis seems to have found confirmation among the subjects interviewed in our survey

Only two of the Roman Catholics interviewed by us considered politics in a positive light, while two others spoke of their negative experiences in that context, like the 48-year-old man who had become a card-holder of the Italian *Partito democratico* [Democratic Party] «with great joy» but is no longer a member today. For the young woman belonging to the Focolare Movement and who had provided help during the election campaign to her father a candidate for membership of the municipal authority and who failed by a single vote to be elected, political commitment «is a right and a duty». The experience proved negative, due, perhaps, to her honesty and rectitude.

The observations in this regard of one 48-year-old man are interesting. He speaks of «social policy» and considers it «correct when it promotes Christian ideas of life». His reference is to abortion and euthanasia, positions of vital importance when choosing the party to vote. These few references to the political ideas of the interviewees reveal differences within their positions which reflect the choices of Italians in general. Roman Catholics no longer sway political choices in



Italy, though, in one case, Christian values were said to be the element that caused the interviewee to vote for or against a party.

A recent Demos-coop survey carried out by sociologist and political scientist Ilvo Diamanti to examine perspectives and assess words and values which Italians cherish particularly, seems to agree with the opinions expressed by our interviewees. Work and voluntary service top the list of positive elements shared by most people in the Demos-coop survey along with the opinion that «despite everything, Pope Francis, is the only figure, the only person capable of arousing passion and hope» (la Repubblica, 2017: 1-3). The words which, however, again according to Diamanti, provoke the greatest contrast and division among Italian citizens are the Euro and the European Union (la Repubblica, 2017). It is significant that none of the 29 Roman Catholics interviewed by us mentioned either the Euro or the Eu, a datum significant because of its absence.

We live in a historical period where democracy is struggling, *disfigured* (Urbinati, 2014), is associated with a radical transformation of the great traditional political parties into post-ideological political movements (beyond right and left) and which fail to staunch the unstoppable decline in the legitimacy of politics. This reality is confirmed by the Roman Catholics studied here, who are not all that different from the rest of the general Italian population.

Globalisation, accepted but also criticized by citizens who feel oppressed and who often hold it responsible for economic recession and unemployment, has also encouraged Catholics to favour the «circulation and contamination of beliefs» (Pace, 2016: 219). The 29 interviews reveal, in fact, that even those who are members of ecclesial associations and movements also refer too to significant figures from other religions like Gandhi, or to oriental life experiences (yoga) belonging to different «living worlds». The relationship between food and religion underlined in some of the interviews is also interesting; a reality which identifies a religious system with the environment (Pace, 2016: 287).

The contemporary religious panorama, as Hervieu-Léger affirms can, therefore, be represented as «a scene in movement»; the centre around which individuals subjectively rework their religious experiences to find within themselves that mystical charisma already analysed by Weber (Hervieu-Léger, 2003: 125-126). The «pluralisms of collective systems of belief» have thus been strengthened (Hervieu-Léger, 2003: 146).



The survey carried out in Rome confirms and, therefore, adds further analytical elements to research which has already studied and examined the complex world of Italian Catholicism. It confirms the «social dimension» of Catholicism, how it transmits values through the family; it also foregrounds the existence of elements of «contamination» by other religious and cultural realities. The lack of reference to a project for Europe, increasingly in a state of crisis, suggests that the Eu and a united Europe no longer act as political references for Italian Catholics, thus posing questions to which, at the moment, it is difficult to provide adequate answers.

Might this not be one of the issues of a social nature to be undertaken by «the outgoing church» to which Pope Francis often refers (Theobald, 2016, 19)?

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