There were a couple of things Cristina knew for sure. She did not know which path her life would take, but she knew that either she would get married and establish a family or she would lead a (lay) consecrated life devoted to God:

There is that clarity that I started to have when I had the encounter with Christ. Around me society is full of people who don’t have a definite form of life, right? So many people who are not married, for a thousand reasons, who are not married but also not consecrated. [Before,] this wasn’t clear to me. I thought yes, everybody could do what they wanted to. But on the contrary: no, it isn’t like that. And that made me happy. That is a truth that I have discovered when encountering Christ, and that made me happy, because I said: “So much the better, there are two paths, and so much the better that no other paths exist, that there are no other possibilities.”

Cristina acquired this knowledge through her involvement with the Italian Catholic movement Comunione e Liberazione (CL), or through following the charisma of Father Luigi Guissani, as members of the movement often put it. Father Guissani began his work of “restoring a Christian presence” in 1954, in a high school in Milan, working within the structure of the established Catholic youth movement Azione Catolica, and in particular its female section, Gioventu Studentesca (GS). The movement was reconfigured during the 1960s and began using the name Comunione e Liberazione, first in publications and then at an inaugural conference in 1971. The movement’s reconfiguration was in response to critical events of the time, the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the student revolts of 1968. The reconfiguration also signaled the maturation of the movement, as young followers grew up and sought to pursue the religious, social and cultural experiences of GS in ways that were better suited to their adult lives. This led to the emergence of a (lay) consecrated pattern of life within the movement, known first as the “adult groups” and later as Memores Domini. Memores Domini take a number of vows, including the vow of chastity and obedience, and live together in same-sex houses. This manner of living is characterized by both a contemplative, monastic dimension, including daily hours of silence, and an emphasis on being “in the world,” which is expressed through a strong commitment to work, and hence to a professional life, as the context par excellence for keeping alive “the memory of Christ.”

I first met Cristina in 2000 in Milan, where I was doing ethnographic work on female piety and religious agency. Cristina was a visitor to the CL female student house where I was living at the time, and which resembled very much the house she lived in during her own student years within CL university community structures. Cristina had recently graduated in architecture, and she was approaching the moment when the contours of her life path would become clear. Her attraction to the life of Memores Domini was evident in our conversations, and this was not unusual: I regularly encountered such attraction among students connected to CL, particularly among women, who constituted the majority of Memores Domini.
Memores Domini follow a vocation. Within CL, following either a familial or a consecrated life is considered to be a vocation, yet the vocation of Memores Domini is more readily recognized as a religious vocation, as understood within the Catholic tradition, and includes not only a divine calling but also its subsequent verification with a spiritual counselor. Vocation was on Cristina’s mind when we met, and it became an important part of all our conversations, including an in-depth interview. When I later analyzed these interactions, I discerned a subtle but undeniable tension between my reliance on the language of choice when asking about the course of her life, and Cristina’s steering away from that language. Her uneasiness with the vocabulary of choice became most explicit when we touched on the question of work-life balance and the ways in which this is a particular challenge for women:

Yesterday I was speaking to a colleague of mine who said that the family is a vocation, just like work is, and that one has to choose: “either family or work.” This horrified me. As if I can choose family as a vocation! Already here the sentence doesn’t work: I choose the family as my vocation.

Vocation, Cristina insisted, belongs to a different realm than choice: one does not simply “choose” vocations. One might receive a vocation or discover it, be able to hear it calling or understand it, either slowly or in a split-second, willingly or unwillingly. One might accept it or fight it, but one does not choose it.

A young sociologist at the time, I was not yet specifically trained to account for Cristina’s understanding of vocation in a social scientific manner. Or rather, her understanding of vocation stood in sharp contrast to common social scientific
approaches that frame vocation as a “personal choice.” The latter, of course, adequately reflects how many people today understand vocation. The Young and Vocation, a recent study on contemporary ideas of vocation among a representative sample of young people (between the ages of 16 and 29) in Italy, shows that the term “vocation” generally evokes the idea of self-realization rather than imposition (79% to 8%, respectively), and a sense of satisfaction rather than renunciation (71% to 13%). Moreover, when Italian youth do connect vocation to its religious dimension, the religious call is interpreted as “a personal option that makes it possible to aim at a satisfactory self-realization.” These results must be understood, Luigi Berzano argues, in the light of postmodern society, where each individual is impelled to create her own biography.

Studies like these effectively document significant and indisputable societal tendencies in how individuals conceive of their life course. My concern, however, lies in the way in which the design of such studies is based on assumptions that are part and parcel of the tendencies they seek to document. This becomes clearer when a rational choice perspective—well established within the sociological study of religion—is used. In their study of the decline of religious vocations within Catholicism in six countries during the period 1965 to 1995, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke argue that the costs of Catholic consecrated religious choices have diminished only marginally, while their benefits have diminished significantly. Thus, vocations are in decline as a consequence of modifications in the advantages and opportunities of religious life—modifications that Stark and Finke associate with the Second Vatican Council. Within this framework, they suggest, the “vocation crisis” in the Roman Catholic Church might be addressed in two ways: either by reducing the costly aspects of these religious choices, or by reinstating the benefits. Stark and Finke show the cost-benefit logic at work in religious life, but they assume at the outset of their inquiry the universal nature of this logic.

Cristina’s claim that “the sentence doesn’t work” stretches beyond the words of her colleague and implies that, from her point of view, the paradigm of “vocation as choice” does not hold. Considering Cristina’s claim brings us to the long-standing question of how sociological categories, of both empirical inquiry and analysis, relate to the categories and meanings respondents use to make sense of their world. By taking Cristina’s refutation of “vocation as a choice” seriously, I do not mean to suggest that social scientific analyses should be confined to the categorical distinctions

Cristina’s notion of vocation is in fact ingrained in an understanding of her own capacity to act, which includes the deliberate attempt to make herself receptive to a divine calling, as well as the effort to prepare herself to respond adequately to what such a call might require of her.
that respondents make. Such a conflation of two distinct levels of social reality and analysis would indeed deprive sociology of its own logic, language, and level of theorizing and analysis, and hence its raison d’être. At the same time, it is widely accepted that empirical inquiries, in order to be methodologically sound, should engage categories that are meaningful to respondents and in which respondents might be able to situate themselves. This is where the problem lies: while Cristina did not consider vocation in terms of “self-realization,” as most respondents in *The Young and Vocation* survey did, the contrasting term used in the survey—“imposition”—also failed to adequately capture what she means. (It should be noted that about 13% of the respondents did not select either of these two terms.) What Cristina and others like her might understand by vocation gets “lost in social scientific translation,” since it does not fit smoothly into the survey questions and categories. This poses problems, not because Cristina represents a majority point of view on the matter; she does not. But it is important to ensure that minority views inform the ways in which empirical inquiries and analyses are set up, for a whole slew of reasons, and there’s one reason that stands out in this case. *The Young and Vocation* study documents the process of secularization, and the concomitant sacralization of personal life choices, given that the respondents seem to extend an idea of the sacred to the search for authentic existence.1 But its design struggles to adequately incorporate those experiences that are not based on a secular understanding of vocation. The secularization that the survey ends up revealing is, in other words, already at least partially predisposed by the survey’s design.

In sum, Cristina’s understanding of vocation cannot be reduced to a biographical choice, and neither is it simply the result of a cost-benefit analysis. This is not to deny that such analytical frameworks can highlight important dimensions of the social reality of vocation. But they do seem to miss, by design, the crux of what vocation entails for people like Cristina. What does it mean to approach vocation as an individual choice, we might ask, when the actor herself insists that her vocation cannot be adequately accounted for in such terms?

### Vocation and Sociology

The significance of vocation within sociology greatly exceeds the empirical studies on the matter.6 Vocation has intrigued sociology, Giuseppe Giordan argues,7 and this is related to its pivotal role in Max Weber’s thinking. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—Weber’s critical engagement with Marx in which he explores the importance of culture and the production of meaning in the formation of society—vocation is a protagonist in two ways. First, it plays a crucial role in accounting for how individual action relates to social transformation. Weber’s argument is well known: the Reformation, and in particular Lutheranism, brought about a modern understanding of vocation. Vocation, or calling, continued to be perceived as a divine ordinance, a task set by God, but it also came to include a positive valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs. Thus, everyday activities gained religious significance, as ascetic conduct was highly valued, particularly in the Puritan traditions, and labor became an ascetic technique par excellence. As a result, Puritan communities accumulated material wealth—the fruit of their labors—that in turn created a new social formation favorable to the development of capitalism. In other words, asceticism, “carried out of monastic cells into everyday life,” as Weber’s well-known wording puts it, played its part in building the modern economic order. Along the way, however, the meaning of vocation continues to shift.

This brings us to the second role vocation plays in Weber’s theory, i.e., as a crucial context in which to elucidate his understanding of
secularization. Weber traces the development of an “inner-worldly asceticism,” which is central to both a religious and a secular understanding of vocation. While, for the Puritan, asceticism is born out of a relation with God, the asceticism of the modern secular subject is removed from such a relationship and focuses instead on worldly aims. Vocation became secularized, to refer to a profession, an occupation for which an individual is particularly well suited, trained, or qualified.

What does this semantic shift in meaning of vocation, from divine calling to professional occupation, tell us about secularization? The relocation of vocation, or “calling,” to within the subject—as an inner inclination that might be uncovered and actualized—resonates strongly with Talal Asad’s discussion of the secular recrafting of “inspiration.” As the Bible went from “the letter of divine inspiration” to a system of human significance, Asad argues, the methods of the German Higher Biblical Criticism “rendered the materiality of scriptural sounds” and writings into something akin to a spiritual poem. Previously, the divine word was necessarily also material, and the inspired words were objects of reverence, which entailed that pious bodies were taught “to listen, to recite, to move, to be still, to be silent, engaged with the acoustics” of those words. The methods of Higher Biblical Criticism, in contrast, relocated the effect of words inside the subject, thus representing a move toward inner spiritual states independent of the senses. As a result, inspiration was no longer thought of as direct divine communication. This, Asad insists, involved a twofold shift: “all causation from outside the world of material bodies [is brought] entirely into that world,” and at the same time this “inside” was progressively reshaped. Vocation is recrafted in a similar manner, as it becomes an inner inclination or inspiration that might be discovered, and joins the universe of authenticity and the rhetoric of sincerity, in which the idea of being true to oneself is conceived as a moral duty.

THE TURN TO AGENCY

My interest in vocation stems from my interest in the conceptualization of agency, particularly in relation to gender and religion. Agency, in sociological parlance, is commonly understood in terms of choice, or rather, choice is central to the conceptual architecture of agency. Cristina’s refusal to consider vocation in terms of choice does not, however, imply that she is prepared to relinquish her sense of agency. Cristina’s notion of vocation is in fact ingrained in an understanding of her own capacity to act, which includes the deliberate attempt to make herself receptive to a divine calling, as well as the effort to prepare herself to respond adequately to what such a call might require of her. This could suggest that Cristina’s religious conception of vocation might also point to a different understanding of agency than the common one that hinges on the notion of choice.

Within established sociological reasoning, it might be argued that Cristina lacks agency to some extent. Cristina does not claim to be able to choose between what she considers the two fundamental patterns a life can follow; on the contrary, she refutes that choice. It could be argued that she is relatively alienated from her own agency and thus relates to the unfolding of her life course in a rather passive and docile way. One way of framing her outlook might be in terms of “false consciousness,” which implies that the material conditions and choices in her life remain obscured to her. Instead, she ascribes crucial moments in, and conditions of, her life to a source outside of her own will, consciousness, and power. Such accounts stressing the lack of agency have in fact been influential in the case of pious subjects, and of female pious subjects in particular. In sum, the capacity to act, as Cristina conceives, narrates, and represents it, is likely to be found lacking in agency, according to established sociological understandings of agency—and, this lack of agency is particularly gendered.
Alternatively, it could be argued that Cristina is exercising her free choice. The fact that she might be deliberating and narrating that choice through “vocation” could be seen as a strategy of authorization or justification, particularly in a situation where her social environment or her family might oppose such choice. This way of ascribing agency is related to a foundational impulse of feminist theory and women’s studies, which insists on valuing women’s voices and perspectives and affirming their agency. Feminist theory has indeed made women’s lives central to its analysis and is predicated on validating women’s perceptions of their own situation. This leads to a feminist insistence on women’s agency, which coincides with a new prominence of “agency” in social theory at large, to the extent that we can speak of a “turn to agency” in the last couple of decades. In many ways, this turn to agency remains vital for countering those accounts that deny (pious) women’s capacity to act. Yet this insistence on agency also brings its own set of questions and problems. Amy Hollywood has captured the critical conceptual problem in the following question: “how to take seriously the agency of the other . . . when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God?” What does it mean to fall back on an established sociological understanding of agency to make sense of a subject, when the subject herself relies on a very different variety of language to speak of her capacity to act? To keep insisting on her agency, while glossing over the difference she points to, replicates, in an uncanny way, the structure of the “false consciousness” argument: her alienation lies in thinking she is not exercising her choice, while in fact she is. And, both ways of accounting for pious women’s agency suffer from the fact that they rely on an already established meaning and sense of agency, fixed in advance, rather than on letting agency emerge through the analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being and acting.

One particularly productive way to approach this conundrum is found in Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety*. In exploring some of the conceptual challenges that women’s involvement in Islamic piety movements poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general, Mahmood looks carefully at conceptions of the self and moral agency that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement. The theoretical stakes in this approach lie in unpacking a set of normative liberal assumptions about human nature, notably through making her empirical material speak back to them. These include a conceptual critique of both common social scientific and feminist understandings of agency. Mahmood’s ethnography—as she considers the worlds and livelihoods of women involved in the piety movement in Egypt—prompts her to question the assumption that human agency consists primarily of acts that challenge social norms and therefore express some kind of resistance to social norms. Not only those acts that resist norms require agential activity, Mahmood argues; the capacity to act is itself to be found in the ways in which one inhabits norms. In order to theorize this agency in a way that renders visible the capacity of a subject who deliberately seeks to uphold certain norms to act, Mahmood turns to the realm of ethics and ethical self-fashioning, and to embodiment, which she approaches through the work of Michel Foucault and an Aristotelian understanding of habitus.

This provides a more adequate approach to Cristina’s understanding of vocation and, relatedly, her sense of agency. The desire that shapes Cristina as a subject is not one of self-realization, but, rather, is a desire to lead a life that pleases God. This desire includes acquiring an understanding of God’s will, which leads Cristina not only to study important texts as they are presented within CL (which also serves as an interpretative community for those texts), but also to shape her embodied self in a certain way. In order to receive a vocation, one must make oneself receptive, which Cristina does through prayer and regular moments of keeping silence, and through participation in the spiritual...
exercises of the movement. After receiving a vocation, moreover, as my current research shows, more complex agential activities take place. A calling can be accepted and embraced but also struggled with intensively. It needs to be “verified” with a spiritual counselor; that is, it is interpreted and bestowed with meaning in a context of social interaction and subsequently acted upon in various ways. Religious vocation, in other words, points to a particular shaping of the body and the senses that differs, we could argue, from what Charles Hirschkind has called the “secular body” and the secular sensory cultures through which it is constituted. In order to receive a vocation, one needs to be able to feel and hear or see in particular ways that are not necessarily recognized as secular. This underscores the point that established understandings of agency mobilize particular, secular understandings of the embodied subject.

To conclude: I have used the story of Cristina, who, more than ten years ago, was a young graduate at an important point in her life, to pose an epistemological question about the gap between established sociological concepts, such as agency, and a spectrum of pious livelihoods. During my time as a research associate in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program and as a resident of the Center for the Study of World Religions, I have been investigating this question further. In concrete terms, this means I have returned to doing fieldwork within CL, focusing this time on the lives of Memores Domini who took their vows. In theoretical terms, my work explores further the conflicted relationship of sociology to religion and piety, as well as to gender, and makes use of Mahmood’s rethinking of agency in terms of ethics and embodiment to unpack some of these tensions and to offer an alternative account of female pious livelihoods. It is not so much that such livelihoods need their own sociological accounts, I believe, but rather that sociology is in need of analytical tools and concepts, in addition to the sociological imagination, that are able to account adequately for more subjects and social realities than it currently does, especially when it comes to gender and religion.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 39.
5. Garelli, “Italian Youth and Ideas of Vocation.”

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