

Perception of the Italians about the compatibility between science and faith: the results of a survey

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Are science and religion compatible or incompatible for the Italians?

This is the question to which the *Scuola Internazionale Superiore per la Ricerca Interdisciplinare* (SISRI; Advanced School for Interdisciplinary Research; www.sisri.it) tried to answer, with a survey - actually the first of its kind in Italy - commissioned to a company called Format srl and performed in October 2013 using a "Computer assisted telephone interview" (CATI). The sample of 1000 people, representative of the Italian population residing in Italy, encompasses different geographical areas, genders (males or females), age ranges, levels of education, marital statuses, numbers of household members, socio-professional positions.

The full results of this investigation have been recently published, in an extensive form, by the Italian Journal of Human Sciences, *Paradoxa* (M. Bonato, P. Risso, M. Crudele, "Cultura scientifica e vita religiosa degli italiani. I risultati di un sondaggio", *Paradoxa* 8 (2014), n. 3, pp. 116-133). Here we offer a synthesis in English.

Three main questions were asked to the interviewees: one question concerned the origin and evolution of Human beings, a second one about the origin of the Universe and a third question aimed to know if the interviewees were practicing their religion. The first two questions were formulated specifically to study the public perception of the conflict between the so-called "scientific truths" and the "truths of faith", while the third one was useful to distinguish the subjects between "people that don't believe in God", "believers in God that practice their religion" and "believers in God that do not practice their religion".

The three questions that were asked are listed below, with the corresponding possible answers.

Question 1) With regard to the origin and evolution of Human beings, with which of the following statements do you mostly agree?

Proposed answers:

- a. The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life...and it has been made possible with God's intervention.
- b. The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life...without God's intervention.
- c. God created Human beings from nothing in their present form about 10.000 years ago.

Question 2) With regard to the origin of the Universe, with which of the following statements do you mostly agree?

Proposed answers:

- a. The Universe was created by God and science can explain its origin.
- b. The Universe was not created by God and science can explain its origin.
- c. The Universe was created by God and science cannot explain its origin.

Question 3) Which of the following statements best describes your religious life?

Proposed answers:

- a. I am a believer in God and I practise my faith weekly or so.
- b. I am a believer in God and I practise my faith few times during the year.

- c. I am a believer in God but I never practise my faith.
- d. I don't believe in God.

The answers proposed for the first two questions characterize three well-defined positions of:

- openness towards scientific truths and narrowness towards transcendence ("The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life...without God's intervention" for the first question, "The Universe was not created by God and science can explain its origin" for the second one);
- openness both towards scientific truths and transcendence ("The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life...and it has been made possible thanks to God's intervention", "The Universe was created by God and science can explain its origin");
- narrowness towards scientific truths and openness towards transcendence ("God created from nothing Human beings in their present form about 10.000 years ago", "The Universe was created by God and science cannot explain its origin").

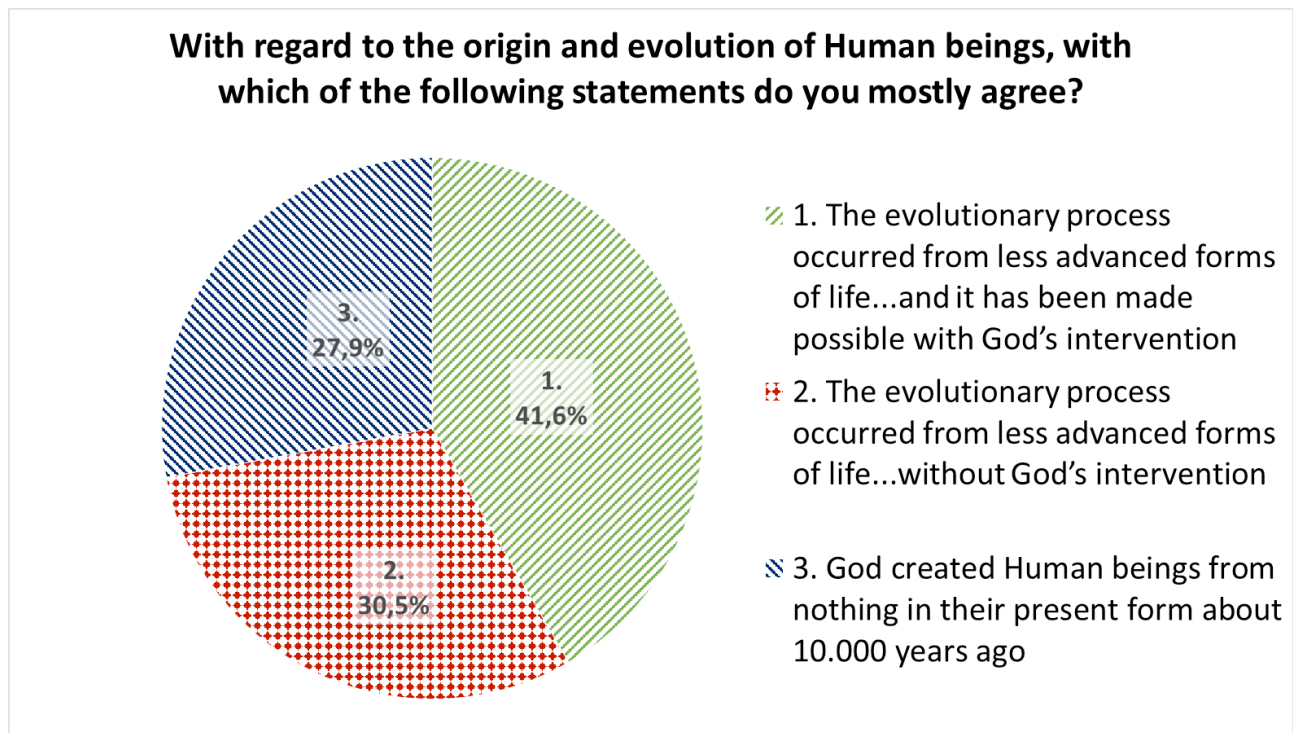


Fig.1 – Results to the question about the origin and evolution of Human beings (SISRI survey 2013 about Italian society).

Regarding the question about the origin and evolution of Human beings, the relative majority of interviewees (41.6%) believe that the evolutionary process that led to the appearance of Human beings on Earth occurred from less advanced forms of life and it has been made possible thanks to the intervention of a creator God ("openness towards science/openness towards transcendence" position). In second place, the 30.5% of interviewees say that the evolutionary process took place from less advanced forms of life, but without any intervention by God ("openness towards science/narrowness towards transcendence"). Finally, the remaining 27.9% think that God created Human beings from nothing in their present form about 10.000 years ago ("narrowness towards science/openness towards transcendence").

With regard to the origin of the Universe, with which of the following statements do you mostly agree?

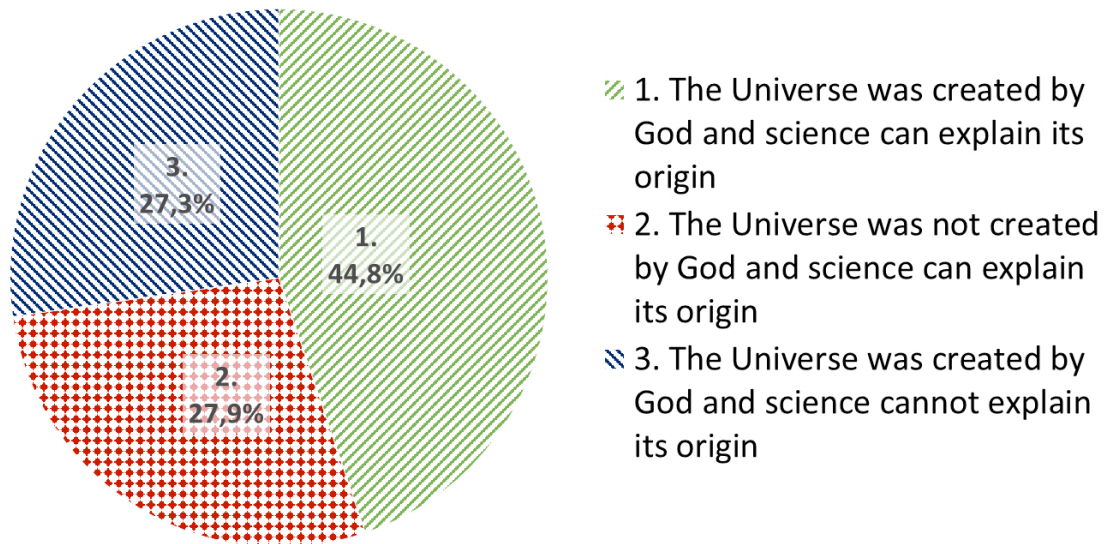


Fig.2 - Results to the question about the origin of the Universe (SISRI survey 2013 about Italian society).

The results for the second question were consistent with those obtained for the first one. The majority (44.8%) of the Italian interviewees think that the Universe was created by God and that science can explain its origin ("openness towards science/openness towards transcendence" position); the 27.9% believe that the Universe was not created by God and that science can explain its origin ("openness towards science/narrowness towards transcendence"); the remaining 27.3% of the sample believe that the Universe was created by God and that science cannot explain its origin ("narrowness towards science/openness towards transcendence").

Therefore this survey presents an Italian society in which the majority of people accept the scientific truth about the origin of Human beings and the Universe and, at the same time, show openness towards transcendence, believing that God had some role in the evolutionary process of the human race and that God is the Creator of the Universe. For both questions, the percentage of Italians who refuse a scientific explanation about the origin of Human beings and the Universe is the smallest fraction of the sample.

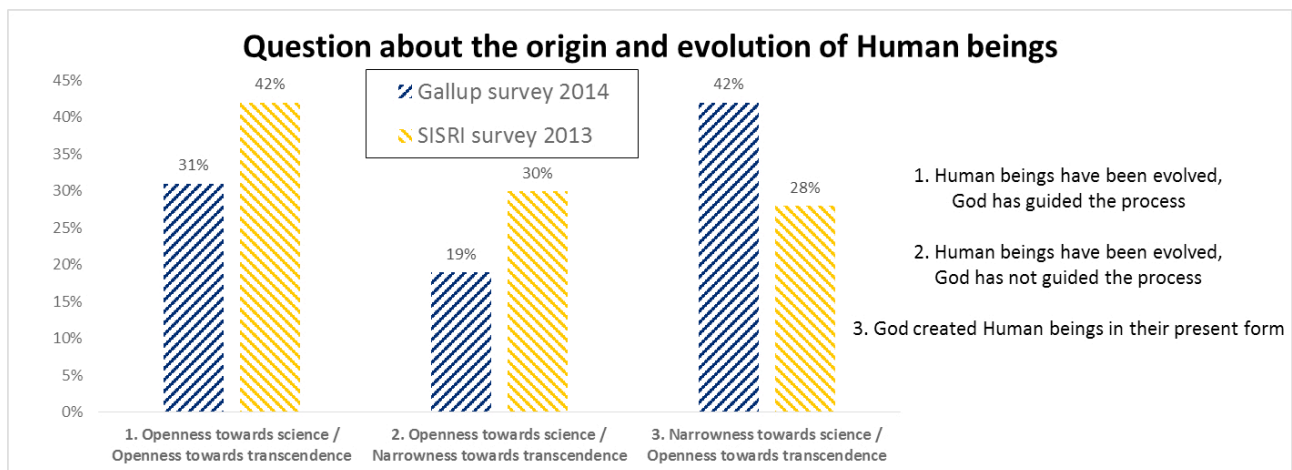


Fig.3 – Comparison between the results of the SISRI survey 2013 (yellow bars; about Italian society) and those of the Gallup survey 2014 (blue bars; about American society), concerning the question about the origin and evolution of Human beings.

These results are quite surprising, especially when compared with those of a similar survey, the "Gallup Survey", conducted on a representative sample of the American population for 12 times, from 1982 until 2014. In the latter survey, there is not a question about the origin of the Universe, but rather a question about the origin and evolution of Human beings very similar to the question asked in the SISRI survey. In the 2014 Gallup survey, the majority of interviewees (42%) belongs to the category of people with "narrowness towards science/openness towards transcendence" ("God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10.000 years or so"), whereas approximately 31% of interviewees chose the answer of "openness towards science/openness towards transcendence" ("Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process"), while about 19% of interviewees belongs to the category of "openness towards science/narrowness towards transcendence" ("Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process"). In the other 11 polls on the same question, asked by Gallup in different years since 1982, the results are very similar to the survey done in 2014, with the three positions always sorted in the same order.

The results from the American survey, in contrast with the Italian results, show that in the American society there is a "less" scientific view to account for the origin of humans. In fact, the debate between "evolutionists" and "creationists" is much more vivid in the United States than in Italy.

Which of the following statements best describes your religious life?

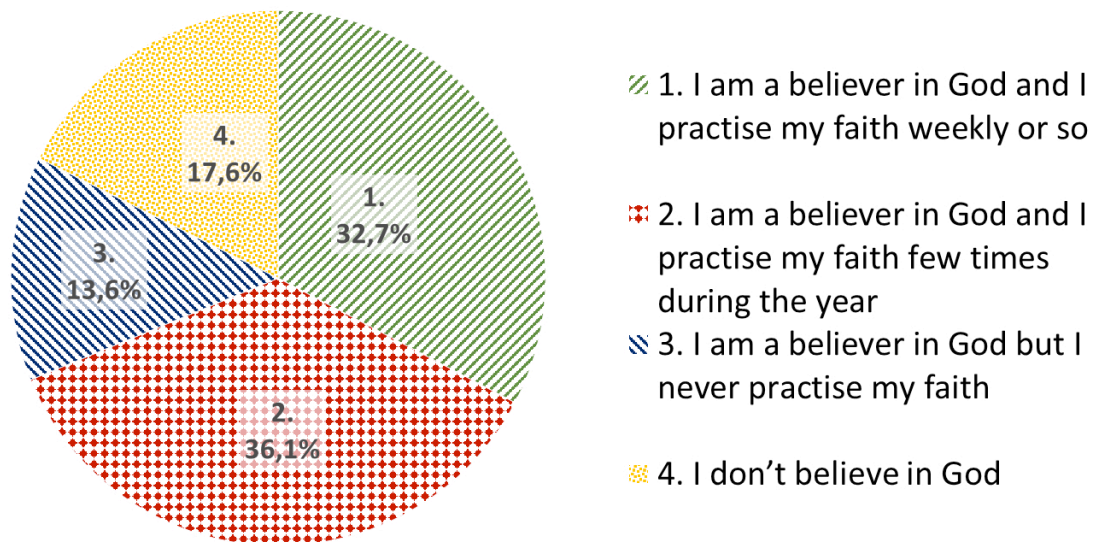


Fig.4 - Results to the question about the religious attendance (SISRI survey 2013 about Italian society).

Concerning the SISRI survey question on religious attendance, the 36.1% of the sample population (the relative majority) claims to believe in God and to practise the faith a few times during the year; the 32.7% to believe in God and to practise the faith weekly or so; the 17.6% to do not believe in God; the 13.6% to believe in God but not practicing the faith.

By comparing these last data with the answers to the first two questions in the SISRI survey, it emerges that the majority of people who practise occasionally the faith (a few times during the year) are more in agreement with the position of the Catholic Church about the origin of humans and the Universe, that is "the evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life...and it has been made possible through God's intervention" and "the Universe was created by God and science can explain its origin". It is important to point out that the majority of interviewees in the SISRI survey are Catholic (according to recent polls ~86% of people residing in Italy are Catholic), while the situation is different in the USA, where Catholics are only about 22%. Recent studies¹ show that Catholic doctrine, unlike many other Christian or non-Christian religions, is fully compatible with the biological theory of evolution and with the cosmological Big-Bang theory. In the SISRI survey, the majority of those who practice more assiduously their faith instead chose the answers "God created from nothing Human beings in their present form about 10.000 years ago" and "the Universe was created by God and science cannot explain its origin", showing to be more in agreement with American citizens. Comparing the two sub-samples of believers in God that practise their faith, we note also that people who attend occasionally the religious services are in general younger and with a higher educational qualification than people who practise more often their faith. These two factors, age and level of education, have a primary influence in the opinion of the interviewees on these themes.

In the sub-sample of believers that do not practise their faith ("I am a believer in God but I never practise my faith"), the majority of people show openness both towards scientific explanation and transcendence in the question about the origin of Human beings, and show narrowness towards scientific explanation in the

¹ See e.g. "The MIT Survey on Science, Religion and Origins: the Belief Gap", Lee, E.; Tegmark, M.; Chita-Tegmark, M.; 2013; <http://space.mit.edu/home/tegmark/survey/survey.pdf>

question about the origin of the Universe. The totality of people who do not believe in God choose, as expected, the narrowness position towards transcendence, in both questions.

Finally, the portion of interviewees with higher educational qualifications (e.g. having a University degree), is mainly represented by believers in God who practice their religion a few times during the year (42%). The majority (about 48%) in this sub-sample belongs to the category of who is open both to transcendence and science, thus believing that science and faith are compatible.

The results of this survey show that the majority of Italians accept the scientific explanation about the origin of humans and the Universe and, at the same time, acknowledge an explanation that transcends the nature and the scientific method. This is particularly encouraging for all those organizations, such as the SISRI School, that from years endorse a serious dialogue between science and faith, with the aim to achieve a systematic and rigorous unity of knowledge. Much work remains to be done, to reach also the people that are afraid or diffident towards the scientific explanations, and to show the treasure of interdisciplinary studies in the description of reality and in the search for truth.

Question about the origin and evolution of Human beings													
	Age						Religious attendance				Educational qualification		
	18 – 24 years	25 – 34 years	35 – 44 years	45 – 54 years	55 – 64 years	> 65 years	Believer who practise occasionally their faith	Believer who practise assiduously their faith	Believer who do not practise their faith	Non- believer	None/ primary school certificate	Junior high school diploma	Degree/ higher
Openness toward science/openness toward transcendence ¹	41.9%	42.8%	38.3%	50.6%	35.3%	40.7%	39.1%	64.8%	39.7%	0.0%	32.6%	40.4%	47.8%
Openness toward science/narrowness toward transcendence ²	47.7%	32.9%	39.9%	23.9%	40.7%	14.0%	5.8%	18.6%	31.6%	100.0%	16.3%	26.6%	33.3%
Narrowness toward science/openness toward transcendence ³	10.5%	24.3%	21.8%	25.6%	24.0%	45.3%	55.0%	16.6%	28.7%	0.0%	51.1%	33.0%	26.2%
Total (absolute value)	86	152	193	176	150	243	327	361	136	176	92	203	450

¹The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life, and it has been made possible with God's intervention

²The evolutionary process occurred from less advanced forms of life, without God's intervention

³God created Human beings from nothing in their present form about 10.000 years ago

Table 1. Distribution of the answers to the question about the origin and evolution of Human beings within the age, religious attendance and educational qualification classes.

Question about the origin of the Universe													
	Age						Religious attendance				Educational qualification		
	18 – 24 years	25 – 34 years	35 – 44 years	45 – 54 years	55 – 64 years	> 65 years	Believer who practise occasionally their faith	Believer who practise assiduously their faith	Believer who do not practise their faith	Non- believer	None/ primary school certificate	Junior high school diploma	Degree/ higher
Openness toward science/openness toward transcendence ¹	50.0%	52.6%	32.1%	54.5%	43.3%	42.0%	46.2%	70.4%	31.6%	0.0%	37.0%	37.4%	48.2%
Openness toward science/narrowness toward transcendence ²	39.5%	32.2%	36.3%	27.3%	34.0%	11.1%	6.7%	11.4%	29.4%	100.0%	14.1%	25.1%	27.3%
Narrowness toward science/openness toward transcendence ³	10.5%	15.1%	31.6%	18.2%	22.7%	46.9%	47.1%	18.3%	39.0%	0.0%	48.9%	37.4%	24.9%
Total (absolute value)	86	152	193	176	150	243	327	361	136	176	92	203	450

¹The Universe was created by God and science can explain its origin

²The Universe was not created by God and science can explain its origin

³The Universe was created by God and science cannot explain its origin

Table 2. Distribution of the answers to the question about the origin of the Universe within the age, religious attendance and educational qualification classes.