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Religion, Illusion and their Future in the light of Psychoanalysis

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Riassunto

La religione, l'illusione e il loro futuro alla luce della psicoanalisi

L'autore richiama il fatto che alcuni recenti contributi di psicoanalisti di diverse scuole post-freudiane hanno spostato l'attenzione dalla questione dell'origine della religione come fenomeno storico-culturale al tema, più propriamente psicoanalitico, dell'atteggiamento personale verso la religione, quale è dato osservare nelle storie di casi clinici. Il principale guadagno di questa modifica è la possibilità di aggirare le dispute e le argomentazioni sul valore di verità delle credenze religiose. In vista di ciò l'autore, come molti altri, adotta il modello di "fenomeno transizionale illusorio", introdotto da Donald W. Winnicott. Mentre sottolinea l'importanza di questo concetto, ne approfondisce le ricadute positive e ne denuncia alcuni usi impropri. Con riferimento alla tendenza di alcuni autori a perseguire l'interazione della psicoanalisi con le neuroscienze, con la psicologia culturale e con la teoria dell'attaccamento, viene posta in discussione la promessa di questi tentativi circa la possibilità di una comprensione profonda della religiosità dei singoli individui. Infine l'autore critica il concetto e la stessa dicitura di "psicoanalisi della religione", proponendo la sua opinione in merito alla questione della verità della religione alla luce della psicoanalisi.

Parole chiave: Psicoanalisi, Religione, Illusione, Oggetti transizionali

Abstract

The author stresses that several recent contributions from psychoanalysts of different post-Freudian schools have shifted their focus of interest from the origins of religion as a historical and cultural phenomenon, to personal developmental paths toward religion as it can be observed in the case-history of individuals. The first benefit of this change is that all arguments about the truth value of religious beliefs can be avoided. To achieve this aim, the author, like many others, adopts the notion of the "illusory transitional phenomenon" introduced by Donald W. Winnicott. While the importance of this concept is pointed out here, some problems that it entails are also analyzed. Another recent trend involves the interaction of psychoanalysis with the neurosciences, cultural psychology, and attachment theory. Examples are presented and critically appraised as to their potential for understanding religion in individuals. Finally the author criticizes the wording "psychoanalysis of religion", delineating his position on the question of religious truth in the light of psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis Religion, Illusion, Transitional objects

I do not know if you have detected the secret link between the *Lay Analysis* and the *Illusion*. In the former I wish to protect analysis from the doctors and in the latter from the priests I should like to hand it over to a profession which does not yet exist, a profession of lay curers of souls who need not be doctors and should not be priests.

(letter from Freud to Pastor Oskar Pfister on the Nov 25, 1928)

Introduction

The title of this essay echoes both the title of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and psychoanalyst and pastor Oskar Pfister's polemical reaction in his essay *The illusion of a Future* (1928). The idea of illusion grew up in the friendly discussion between the two, and this had a considerable impact on psychoanalytic tradition (see Kepler Wondracek, 2003). It also started an important debate about the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. As my title suggests, the question about the general concept of illusion and its application to religion (see Aletti, 2004, 2010; Eigen, 1981; J. W. Jones, 1992, 1997a, 1997b; Lerner, 1992; Meissner, 1984; Wulff, 1997) is still open to future investigation (see Aletti & De Nardi, 2002; Belzen, 2009; Black, 2006a, 2006b). Reflecting on the existing situation, could allow us to identify some trends in action and to speculate on how the debate may develop. Of course by moving from an observation of current facts to a desirable or projected future, one is operating with subjective preferences. Thus, this article also reflects my personal orientation, which comes both from my forty-years of clinical practice with patients (most of them believers and some even religious professionals) and from my critical review of this topic in the literature of the last three decades (Aletti, 2012; see also Pinkus, 2012).

My contribution presumes some knowledge of the vast amount of literature that I am referring to. It begins "in medias res" (in the middle of) an ongoing debate on the value and the specificity of psychoanalytical literature on religion. As Freud, in the phrase I quoted as *esergo*, I insist that it is of capital importance, to defend psychoanalysis both from "doctors" and "priests" The former reduce psychoanalysis to a mere psychiatric therapy; the latter include not only those who use psychoanalysis as a *Weltanschauung*, frequently in terms of its pseudo-apologetic function, but also those who attempt to play the role of guru, life-coach, or sociologist. Psychoanalysis is a functional and temporary relationship established

by means of an exchange of words, within a special setting, and pregnant with affects (transference and countertransference). Although such a definition requires further clarification, it is enough to highlight an essential element: that psychoanalysis is positioned at the level of interaction between language and affect (see Aletti, 1998, pp. 18-26).

The relationships among religion, depth psychology and psychoanalysis in particular, form an important part of the literature on the psychology of religion, even if, nowadays, controversies abound.

On the one hand, some researchers believe they could acquire a deeper and "truer" understanding of religion (Kaplan & Parsons, 2010; Westerink, 2009). On the other hand, results from these studies are often criticized by most psychoanalysts because they did not emerge from empirical research nor from individual case histories. Added to this, so-called "psychoanalysis of religion" (I will shortly explain my criticism of this expression) has undergone several important evolutions in recent years, such as a better integration with the development of psychoanalytic models, as well as a clearer delineation of religion as a personal experience.

Extensive and significant reviews argue over the current relationship between psychoanalysis and religion (Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Heimbrock, 1991; J. W. Jones, 1991; Wulff, 1997). In particular, the critical essay, by Corveleyn and Luyten (2005) presents an up-to-date overview of several psychodynamic approaches to religion, topics recurrent in the literature, and methodological problems linked with the necessity of an empirical verification of the theories. My aim here is not to present another similar overview, but rather to propose new perspectives which can involve other topics and new methodologies. In pursuing this goal I will discuss: 1) new models of psychodynamic psychology. In particular I will underline how influential the shift of perspective from drive to relation has been during the "post-Freudian era" (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), and 2) the proper ob-

ject of the psychology of religion, and the limits and tasks of the psychological and psychoanalytical investigation of religion/spirituality.

Some psychological sub-disciplines have influenced the evolution of both psychoanalysis and psychology of religion. In particular neuropsychology (see Aletti, Fagnani & Rossi, 2006), cultural psychology (see Belzen, 2006), evolutionary psychology and attachment theory (Kirkpatrick, 2005a, 2005b, 2006) have played an important role as well as so-called postmodernist epistemological perspectives (Blumenberg, 1974; Lyotard, 1979).

These theoretical positions help to indicate the individual's personal religion as the proper object of the psychology of religion, thereby overcoming the question about the truth of ontological assertions within religion. I would like to point out, however, that psychoanalytic research on religion is possible only within the individual process of analytic treatment, not outside of it (Aletti, 1998; Fossi, 1990; Rizzuto, 1979; Vergote, 1983, 1990). As my personal contribution, then, I will try to demonstrate how Winnicott's model of illusory transitional phenomena, applied to an individual's religion, can adequately respond to these new demands and perspectives.

From religion as a general cultural phenomenon to a personal one

In the last few decades, the progressive shift within clinical practice and psychoanalytic theories from a drive perspective to a relational perspective (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983) has provided new opportunities for understanding individual attitudes toward cultural and religious experiences.

The literature about this subject is considerable (for an open and wide overview of different post-freudian models see Aletti & De Nardi, 2002; Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Black, 2006b; Finn & Gartner, 1992; Heimbrock, 1991; Jacobs & Capps, 1997; Wulff, 1997, pp. 258-471).

Religion, with its relational valence, has re-awakened the interest of psychologists and psychoanalysts. Their focus is currently on personal religiousness and not on religion as a general cultural phenomenon. At this point, the position of practitioners have remained more or less unchanged: "In regard to method, the psychoanalytic understanding of religion remains dependent on introspection and

empathy; in regard to content its domain remains the human unconscious as manifested in the field of religion" (Heimbrock, 1991, p. 85).

At the same time, discussions about the complex human phenomenon of religion and its origins, causes and evolutionary goals become less relevant, as do inquiries concerning the psychological "explanation" of religion. Such reductionist intentions, which pervaded the psychology of religion, were even encountered in psychoanalytic interpretations for a long time, as we can see in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). This reductionism was the cause of a long period of sterile controversies between some religious professionals, scholars of religion and psychoanalysts. Similar controversies sometimes shifted the focus of discussion to the validity of psychoanalysis as an instrument of psychological enquiry.

The split object of psychoanalytic investigation on religion (namely as a general-cultural phenomenon or a personal-individual experience), in a certain sense, reflects the distinction between "applied" psychoanalysis versus "pure" psychoanalysis and related theoretical questions. Many issues exist with respect to the "applied" field. Its theoretical justification is the presumption of an analogy between individual psychical processes and the psychical functioning of groups, society and cultural phenomena (see Freud, 1921: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*). This last essay, with which Freud himself was not really satisfied, tried to formulate in theoretical terms an idea that had already found expression earlier. Consider *Imago* (1912), whose subtitle proclaims it a "Journal for the Application of Psychoanalysis to the Humanities". This is the reason why Freud's first essay on *Imago* (which will become the first of four essays in *Totem and Taboo*), is based on another analogy: "Some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics." It is known from Freud's correspondence that he was unhappy with this work, and uncertain of its content (see E. Jones, 1953, chapter 14). In the introduction he admits to some confusion about the analogical method adopted in the essays: "They represent a first attempt on my part at applying the point of view and the findings of psycho-analysis to some unsolved problems of social psychology [*Völkerpsychologie*] [...] I am fully conscious of the deficiencies of these studies [...] An attempt is made in this

volume to deduce the original meaning of totemism from the vestiges remaining of it in childhood – from the hints of which emerge in the course of the growth of our own children” (Freud, 1913, pp. xiii-xiv).

Nowadays, many psychoanalysts tend to dissociate themselves from this analogy (namely that society and culture reproduce phases and processes observable in the psychoanalysis of individuals, see Badcock, 1980). Instead, the trend is to emphasize that authentic psychoanalytic knowledge is founded solely on the relationship between analyst and patient inside a definite setting, as was subsequently systematized in models and theories. These have only a heuristic value, measurable in the capacity to understand further psychic facts in other treatments. By the same token, numerous essays on the psychology of religion cannot be considered psychoanalytic works because they only provide an exegesis of Freud’s opinion on religion (something like: “what he really meant is...”), on its consistency and acceptability from historical, philosophical, moral and theological perspectives. Least psychoanalytic are those polemical works which claim to find causes and motivations for Freud’s polemic against religion in his personal life or perhaps in his neurosis as, for example, Meissner (1984) and Zilboorg (1958, 1962) did. Sometimes such works contrast with what is evoked by the word “psychoanalysis” in contemporary culture. In fact for many decades the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion was cluttered with polemics between representatives of psychoanalysis and the churches (with reductionist claims from one and pseudo-apologetic demands from the other).

Likewise, the essays on the influence of Judaism in Freud’s personal life (Krüll, 1986), in his cultural training (Gay, 1987; Magnani, 1996) and finally on his theoretical formulations (Bakan, 1958; Klein, 1985; Robert, 1974; Yerushalmi, 1991) should not be considered psychoanalytic works. The same could be applied even to the influences of Christianity (as in the famous case of Freud’s Catholic nanny, see Vitz, 1988; see also Zilboorg, 1958, 1962), the Enlightenment and positivism (Magnani, 1996) on Freud’s scientific views and his approach to the psyche. I would also hesitate to accept the so called “psychoanalytically based social psychology of religion”, delving into a phylogenetic perspective of the origin and the truth of religion (Hood, 1992, p. 141, see also Hood, 2010).

These works, as discourses on psychoanalysis and its founder can frequently be very interesting, they are however not truly psychoanalytic essays. In fact, they were produced by philosophers, theologians, sociologists and historians, or by psychologists or even psychoanalysts outside of their clinical activity. It must be admitted that some of Freud’s work on religion could be of great interest to historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists. But, what really interests psychologists are the issues surrounding the psychodynamics of religion, which are, in a sense, “ahistorical” (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991, p. 92).

From the truth of religion to the truth of the subject

Nowadays, the debate tends to steer clear both of any general questions on the origin, validity, and truth (Aletti, 2000, 2013, August; Black, 1993; Blass, 2004) of religions and of general polemics about psychoanalysis (scientific, heuristic and therapeutic values, cultural matrices). Psychoanalytic observation should be limited only to psychoanalytic discourses. Therefore, the religious patient’s speech must be treated as another patient’s speech, without blind spots or privileges (Rizzuto, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b; Shafranske, 2002). It seems very important to focus on individuals, on their narrative, on their own representation of God, and on their relationship with the divinity, as expressions and, eventually, as reformulations of the libido, during psychoanalytic treatment. Because of its methodological neutrality, psychoanalysis does not know another God than that of psychic reality: this is part of the psychoanalytical perspective, aiming not at the “material truth” but at the “historical truth” (Freud, 1939), that is to the processes of the subjective experience of the individual, in the culture he belongs in. Thus, to think that as analysts we are able to know nothing about God (the God of actual reality; see Meissner, 2001) would rest on the presumed existence of an epistemological area unrelated to psychoanalysis. This question cropped up already in the correspondence between Freud and Pastor Oskar Pfister (Freud & Pfister, 1909-1939). Generally speaking, when analysts belong to both fields (i.e. to both a theological field and psychoanalytical field), this might not allow them to cross into the area of psychoanalytic “neutrality”. If it is true that psychoanalysts recognize the patient’s choices

and thus his attitude toward religion (belief or unbelief) with a 'benevolent neutrality' (as Freud said; see also Milanese & Aletti, 1973, pp. 9-20), this is possible because the analysis deals with psychic objects, not real objects. The same applies when reference is made to the believer's God (not God but a mental representation of God). It should be observed that in this case, Karl Barth's distinction between "religion" as a human construction investigable by human sciences on the one hand and "faith," which has divine origins, on the other, becomes meaningless: since faith is part of human experience, it can become an object of psychological research. A patient's possible conviction about a direct intervention of God in his psyche will be an object of analysis as much as any other subjective certainty. If on the other hand psychoanalysts suppose that God intervenes in their interpretations, then they have not properly grasped psychoanalytic epistemology and technique.

In the last few decades, the focus of observation on religion has moved away from considering its truth content (as if that could be verifiable) or conceiving of it as sublimation or repression of drives, and toward regarding it as a relational modality (Kernberg, 2000). This shift opened up a path to considering religion as a system of internal objects, which have the function of "containing" the feelings, thoughts and fantasies arising in individuals who practice a religion. Like internal objects, in psychoanalysis religious objects do not have an external and material existence; rather they have a heuristic function (Black, 1993). Even if the extrapolative use, by this author, of the concept of internal object may be questionable, it has brought religious experience back into the psychoanalytic arena. When psychoanalysis refers to religiosity, it is interested not in religion *per se*, but only in the psychic functioning.

The attention aroused both by Vergote's *Psychologie religieuse* (1966) and *Dette et désir* (1978) and by Leavy's *In the Image of God* (1988) is reflected in the official journals of international psychoanalytic institutions (Wallace, 1991). Reviews of these works contributed to religious experience being brought back into psychoanalysis. It was in fact improperly subtracted during the period of polemic debate among supporters of different ideologies (both "religious" and "psychoanalytic"). Then the broad discussion that arose following publication of Rizzuto's works (1979, 1996, 1998a, 1998b) was decisive (Beit-

Hallahmi, 1995, 1996; Finn & Gartner, 1992; Jacobs & Capps, 1997; McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1984, 1987). Moreover, the question "*Does God Help?*" in clinical activity has been raised again in an articulate and extensive book edited by Akhtar and Parens (2001) in which they conduct an extremely rigorous and frank debate on personal religion and the relationship with God during psychoanalytic treatment. The theme of religion and spirituality in analysis is raised by Rizzuto (1979, 1993, 1996, 2001a) and Shafranske (1996) with many examples of clinical cases, some of which involve religious professionals (Rizzuto, 2004a). Some years ago an international conference took place in Italy for the purpose of finding new clinical-hermeneutic perspectives; it was attended by psychoanalysts of different schools, ranging from a classic Freudian perspective of drive psychology and its recent Lacanian evolutions, to Ego psychology, Object relations theory and Self psychology (Aletti & De Nardi, 2002).

Instead of presenting a complete outline of all the approaches that depth psychology can take to religion I will employ the approach toward religion of some psychoanalytical models; they correspond to the purpose of this article, since they delineate new perspectives which bring the mental functioning of religion back into the general discussion of psychical processes.

I would like to add by way of preface that the variety of models proposed from psychoanalysis should not cause surprise because they are only psychological textitmodels. As such, they do not pretend to give an exhaustive explanation of the psyche; they claim neither to be true nor to reflect reality. They have only some heuristic or pragmatic-interpretative ambition to make it easier to understand some mental aspects of the extremely complex phenomenon of belief (or unbelief) which is, as psychoanalysis teaches, certainly over-determined: "The religious significant – symbols, metaphors, the words God or creator, and so on – are themselves multidimensional, and the inner desires, feelings, and representations of the subject are over-defined" (Vergote, 1993, p. 85).

In this essay I have decided to present a few paradigms and illustrate only one (Winnicott's transitional illusory phenomenon) for two practical reasons: a) that model seems to exemplify the whole discussion b) it allows a presentation sufficiently ample and therefore understandable even for non-

psychoanalyst readers. I would like mention only one other prolific approach: that of the Ego Psychology school. Freud's drive model (an intrapsychic model based on drives and unconscious fantasies and their conflicts and vicissitudes) was integrated with an interpsychic and cultural model by Ego psychology. Erik Erikson was the most representative of this approach, even referring to religion. Erikson's epigenetic paradigm of psycho-social identity development (which integrates Freud's observations about psycho-sexual development) was applied to read the most important religious leaders' life like Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Gandhi (Erikson, 1969). It provides useful perspectives on individual religious development, as Hetty Zock (1990) underlined and Ana-María Rizzuto (1979) investigated in her research. This paradigm emphasizes the dynamics of religious development across the entire life cycle and its link with personal identity development (Erikson, 1950, 1959), pointing out the ambivalent outcomes of religious attitudes, as they refer to the individual observation of religious development.

Between “knowing” and “believing”. The model of illusion

One of the most prolific genres of post-Freudian psychoanalysis on religion might perhaps be linked to Freud's work *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). According to Freud, that *illusion* was religion and its future would be to vanish from human history with the progressive advance of science.

Illusion is a belief founded on wishes rather than on empirical observation and verification, thus, it is impossible to give an opinion of its reality value: according to Freud, illusion is not a delusion, and it is not necessarily false; illusions cannot be proved and also cannot be refuted. With regard to religious illusion, psychoanalysis is “an impartial instrument [...] If the application of the psycho-analytic method makes it possible to find a new argument against the truth of religion, *tant pis* for religion; but defenders of religion will be by the same right make use of psychoanalysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines” (Freud, 1927, pp. 36-37). Freud's preference is certainly a scientific vision of the world; psychoanalytic knowledge would place itself on the scientific side, against illusions “derived from human wishes” (p. 31). But post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking takes over Freud's distinction

between “knowing” and “believing,” consequently between “scientific” and “religious” visions of the world.

Firstly, Pastor Oskar Pfister (1928) argued that each scientific construction is necessarily supported by a “desiring dimension” of “thinking,” that is to say, by an illusion in the Freudian sense. A bit later, Lou Andreas Salomé (1931) claimed that illusions are original and not reducible to explanations in rational language.

Lou Andreas Salomé fundamentally rethinks the concept of illusion, which will prove useful in understanding some basic human experiences, in particular of an aesthetic, erotic and religious kind (see Aletti, 2002, 2004).

With these two psychoanalysts a real change of perspective occurred. Rather than seeing an opposition between “knowing” and “believing,” they came to view the later an aspect of human mental life: in the relationship between human beings and the world the new perspective emphasizes the subjectivity, creativity and fantasy complementary with a scientific worldview. This trend found many expressions in contemporary British psychoanalysis, in particular with Bion's “faith” concept. According to him it is through “acts of faith” that an analyst can “see” and “feel” some phenomena about which he is sure, even if he cannot express them by means of current formulations (see Neri, 2005).

Winnicott argues that such “believing”, as a dialectic moment of “knowing” becomes a constructive element of a wider concept of *illusion*, as a bridge between inner and outer world (see Eigen, 1981; Turner, 2002). I will focus on this model because it seems heuristically rich and able to provide an answer to many epistemological, methodological and technical questions concerning the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion.

The Winnicottian perspective: Religion as an “illusory transitional phenomenon”

In Winnicott's works, the concept of illusion becomes central. Here, object relations theory focused on a dual and bi-personal context. He describes the vicissitudes of “primary emotional development” in terms of processes which, when taken together, may be summarized as a developing capacity to distinguish between the self and the external world, and to

elaborate a rudimentary image of the self, of reality, and of the relations between them.

In this context of structural and relational complexity, the concept of illusion highlights the tension of the subject with regard to an object which is given to him: “The baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathexed object” (Winnicott, 1969/1971, p. 89). Reality and illusion are not in contradiction. Rather, illusion is the germinative and inchoate context in which internal and external reality is built.

The transitional experience is a fundamental step in an individual’s process of growth; it refers to “an intermediate area of experiencing,” i.e. “the use made of objects that are not part of the infant’s body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality” (Winnicott, 1953/1971, p. 2). Winnicott analyzes the complex relations between what is perceived as subjective and what is perceived as objective. This happens in adulthood as well as childhood.

“No human being is free from strain of relating inner and outer reality [...] the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience [...] which is not challenged [...] This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play” (Winnicott, 1953/1971, p. 13). According to Winnicott, culture and within it, art, religion, and science, follow the goal of uniting what is subjective (internal) and what is objective (external) and in some way perform the function of a transitional phenomenon (see Aletti, 2007).

After Winnicott, many researchers applied the concept of the transitional phenomenon to religion with many stimuli, but this also presented some problems. A good example is Paul W. Pruyser’s work in which, beginning from the etymological meaning of illusion as *in-ludere* (to play) he sees the “illusionistic world” interposed between the “realistic world” and the “autistic world,” as a “world of play of the creative imagination in which feelings are not antagonistic to thinking” (1977, p. 334). In this outline, Pruyser considers art, religion and even science as functionally equivalent to transitional phenomena in the individual’s mental economy. But with Pruyser, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Winnicott’s model, there begins a possible misunderstanding that can be found in successive authors; this is to consider the transitional phenomenon as a process which happens at a conscious level, joining subjectivity to

objectivity (often understood, respectively, as individual and social), such that the innovative model of Winnicott, which joins the inner to the outer world, risks being reduced to an issue of social psychology.

The ambiguity in considering the mediation between two elements as an example of the “transitional phenomenon” becomes clear among those authors who talk about concepts and ideas of a “transitional” God. A concept cannot be “transitional”, because it cannot be a cathexed object. By the same token, a fetishistic use of the religious object refers to a drive investment which twists the transitional use. The erroneous reduction of the transitional model to a sort of bridge between individuality and collectivity appears clear in authors who study – occasionally following a confused “psychotheological” approach (McDargh, 1993) – the idea of God transmitted by ecclesiastical institutions or the assimilation of theological doctrine about the efficacy of Grace on real human life (Meissner, 1987, 1997). In particular the real efficacy of God in psychic life during psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Meissner, 2001), may fall outside the concern of psychology as an empirical science. Sometimes this is based on psychoanalytic theoretical misunderstandings and technical psychoanalytic errors (Thomson, 2001).

Ana-Maria Rizzuto’s well-known work is more rigorously psychoanalytic and closely linked to clinical practice than that of many other authors who follow the Winnicottian model (see Aletti, in press). She considers the representation of God to be an illusory transitional object (in Winnicott’s terms). She brings back the representation of God to the dialectic between representations of the self and those of primary objects, and shows their formation, transformation and utilization during the life-cycle (Rizzuto, 1979, 1998b, 2001b).

She stresses vigorously that object representations and the representation of the self are composite memory processes, mainly unconscious and pre-conscious, which interact with each other. They originate from the bio-psychic adaptation to the environment. The representation recalls, with an ego organization, memories of each level: beginning with visceral, sensorimotor, perceptual, iconic, and later, also conceptual memories. During psychoanalytic treatment, the representation of God may in some cases reveal itself in a peculiar manner, even with primary

dynamic processes which contributed to forming the patient's most recent representation.

Rizzuto supports her theoretical formulations with examples from many clinical cases showing how, during treatment, relations and representations change as a consequence of modifications in object relations and in transference (Rizzuto, 1979, 1992, 2001a, 2009). This is because – according to Rizzuto (2001a, p. 26 – “the analyst is a transference and real object, occupying *locus parentis* (a position that facilitates the revival of intense emotions bestowed by the analys and upon the divine representations)”.

In addition, Rizzuto emphasizes the indispensability of believing in a general sense (not religious), on both a conscious and an unconscious level, for a normal working of the mind (Rizzuto, 1996-1997, 2002, pp. 435-436). As a psychoanalyst, she is more interested in human mental functioning than in the content of beliefs; Rizzuto (2006), knows that this believing function is necessary to religious faith but is not sufficient to structure it in the subject's mind. This leads us to a discussion about the specifics of psychoanalytic inquiry into personal religiosity.

From believing to religious faith. Psychodynamic processes

Some authors with an interest in psychoanalytic theory supported the argument of continuity between the human experience of trust and religious faith. For example McDargh (1983, 1993) argued that, without any continuity solution, faith in God originates from the basic trust structured in early infant relationships with parents; he seems to confuse the search for a metaphysical transcendent reality with the need for self-transcendence of one's own limits that is present in every interpersonal relationship (McDargh, 2001).

I think we must be careful: the terminology could induce some misunderstanding of this topic. In fact, many psychoanalysts consider some experiences such as “basic trust” (Erikson, 1950), “faith” (Bion, 1970, 1992), or a “secure base” (Bowlby, 1969, 1988) fundamental for mental orthogenesis.

There is no doubt that relational psychoanalysis sees “faith” as a psychological phenomenon absolutely central to personality development (see J. W. Jones, 1997b; Rizzuto, 1996-1997, 2002a, 2002b; and also the work of the theologian Zock, 1999). Winnicott's psychology in particular is a “deep phenomenology of faith” (Eigen, 1981, p. 413; see also Lerner, 1992).

We should remember, however, that what really matters in Winnicott's view of individual development is “believing in” something (“in anything at all”, Winnicott, 1968, p. 143). Believing itself is more important than the specific contents of the belief (which might – but need not – be of a religious nature). The relationship between basic trust and the faith of a believer must, therefore, be carefully considered. A basic belief can structure even a psychologically healthy atheism (see Aletti, 2002).

Other authors who, in the wake of Jacques Lacan, have intertwined psychoanalysis with other humanistic disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, phenomenology and the history of religions, also support the indispensability of believing for both personality development and the construction of cultural phenomena. In this way Julia Kristeva, beginning from a vision of psychoanalysis as a narrative story in a context of trust and love (Kristeva, 1984, 1985), opens a perspective to a “pre-religious” and secular “need to believe” that is both essential for each human person and fundamental for religious belief (Kristeva, 2006, 2010).

Even Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, another Lacanian psychoanalyst, recently addressed the topic of the similarities and dissimilarities between faith and psychoanalysis and discovers, within the need to believe, both “a source and drive genesis which is not necessarily expressed with faith in the divine.” Rather, its outcomes are multiple and some can even be dangerous; this need can give rise to forms of blind certainty that may end with pathological delirium or religious fanaticism. This risk of increasing “belief” is not absolutely negative, but rather underlines the strong vitality of the unconscious “need to believe” which can also exteriorize itself in an enthusiastic scientific discovery, as occurred with Freud and other early analysts, during the initial construction of the psychoanalytic adventure (Mijolla-Mellor, 2004).

These notes on the ambivalence of “faith” and on the connections between the development of personal identity and religious identity underline a need for some issues which psychoanalysis must still confront, in both clinical practice and theory. These revolve around the relation between the unconscious and the conscious: the representation of God and the concept of God; formation and transformation of divine representation and the conscious adherence to faith; and finally the need for basic trust and religious

faith in a personal God (see Aletti, 2002). The expression “unconscious representation of God” could be problematic, not only from a nominalistic perspective. I think it is culture which offers the name of God within all religions. The name of God, culturally received (“found” in Winnicott’s terms), meets the individual’s unconscious object representations. In relation to these, according to principles of economy and ego syntonic/dystonic, an attitude toward religion is structured (Aletti & Ciotti, 2001). But I prefer to think of unconscious object relations not as pre-oriented by culture, but as informal “representational magma”, and thus a-religious (Aletti, 2005).

Certainly, the real faith felt by religious believers is much more definite than an unconscious representation; it is irreducible to mental processes of individual believing, in particular in Christianity. Psychology does not study religion as such, but rather human beings and their relation to religion in their culture during the construction of identity. The attitude toward religion and the construction of religious identity are observed by psychology as functions of an individual’s structure, processes, conflicts and their outcomes.

The psychological assessment of religious identity involves a double reference: both to processes of religious identity construction (beginning from object representations) and coherence with a cultural view of personal religion (Vergote, 1999; see also Aletti, 2011). It deals with a dialectic, continually changing, with no pre-oriented outcomes as a function of the multiplicity of individual and cultural elements. Certainly religion, in its concrete structure, is based on a mixture of a “need to believe” (which I define as *a-religious*) and cultural religious givens (Belzen, 2003, 2006; for the incidence of Christian Catholic givens see Rizzuto, 2004a, 2004b).

These questions are elucidated very well by Antoine Vergote. His work is a psychoanalytic view of personal and incisive revisions within classical and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Vergote underlines the relationship between subject and his cultural, symbolic and linguistic environment. Vergote (1974a), taking into consideration the heuristic value of psychoanalysis as a means of understanding the fundamental structures of human beings (Huber, Piron, & Vergote, 1964; see also the collection of texts by Vergote edited by Corveleyn & Hutsebaut, 1998). Thus, psychoanalytic inquiry

seeks the significant “archaeological” structures upon which each symbolic organization, especially religion, is established. Psychoanalysis as archaeology of theology (Vergote, 1974b) extends to the possibility (although not the necessity) of faith. From this ambivalence derives a refusal to use psychoanalysis for any apologetic purposes or religious coping. Illuminating the intimate junction in healthy persons between the affective-libidinal body and the language system with its capacity of speech-acts, psychoanalysis manifests a structural analogy with religious belief. This explains both the possible (religious) pathologies and the possible psychologically positive effect of religion; it also justifies the rejection of any functionalistic therapeutic use of religion as a “coping procedure” (Vergote, 2002, p. 4). Vergote argues that human components sustain very well both faith (truth, trust and engagement) and mental health, but that the instrumental use of religion as a coping mechanism destroys the real truth of religion and its beneficial characteristics (Vergote, 2001a).

He prefers not to use the Winnicottian term “illusion” and adopts it only for the specific phase of infant transitional experience: illusion creates a psychological *humus* in a person which can become the soil where love and adult experiences of art and religion grow (Vergote, 1993, 2001b). According to Vergote, the value of religion does not reside in its utility. As in all sciences, the goal of the psychology (of religion) is truth. It aims neither to lead toward God nor toward non-belief. It sheds light on mental aspects (conscious or unconscious to a greater or lesser degree) of both religious and anti-religious convictions. Through the same careful search for truth, psychology of religion is useful for believers and non-believers. For believers there is a certainty: inasmuch as psychology explains the human truth, it makes human beings more able to find the motivations behind their belief, making them more autonomous and aware (Vergote, 2005).

From an interdisciplinary comparison to recognizing the specificity of the psychoanalytic approach

Psychoanalysis knows that its practice is linked to the cultural environment in which both patients and analysts are engaged and other psychological sub-disciplines are involved. My intention is to provide

some examples of the current debate on psychoanalysis and religion in a highly condensed form. In the following paragraphs my concern is rather to express my personal view that these disciplines, although useful for scientific research, could never replace the work that is done in the psychoanalytical relationship between psychoanalyst and patient, “on the couch”.

Psychoanalysis and neurobiology

The interaction between psychoanalysis and biological science has always been difficult. First of all they came from two “closed” and polemical scientific worlds. But even when exchanges occurred, different methodological views and conceptions about what is meant by “knowing” set limits on them (Greenfield & Lewis, 1965).

Nowadays, the search for correlates between psychoanalytic assumptions and neurophysiological phenomena is occurring predominantly outside the environment of psychoanalytic practitioners (see Tramonti, 2003). The supporters of so-called “neuropsychanalysis” are few; they include Mark Solms (see Kaplan-Solms & Solms, 2000; Solms & Turnbull, 2002; and Modell, 1993).

Psychoanalysis, which recognises the complexity of the interaction network between body-brain-mind (see e.g. the “drive” concept), tends to safeguard, even in the specific field of psychology of religion, the peculiarity of the psychoanalytic approach which focuses on the subject holistically, as an agent of mental activity both conscious and unconscious. The subject-person represents both complexity and unity of individuals with their idiosyncratic specificity and intentionality of mental acts. By contrast, “reifying” the psyche leads toward annihilating it and reducing it to something else: neurology, chemistry, etc. Human facts, divested of meaning, become something organic and animal. These limits of the neurological perspective are well denounced by an acute neurologist such as Oliver Sacks, in his autobiographical testimony in *A Leg to Stand on*. It is a fascinating exploration of the physical basis of personal identity. He maintains that “Neuropsychology is admirable, but it excludes the psyche”. As a living creature, the human being, is by nature an active agent, a subject of his/her own experience, not an object. It is precisely this subject, this “living I” which is not taken into consideration (Sacks, 1984). It is clear that each relational experience, like all psychic experiences,

necessarily has some corresponding factors at the brain level. To outline a vision of the neurological organization of mental functions, such as “repression” or “reality test”, does not necessarily mean to adopt an organic vision.

Psychoanalytic reading, derived from its heuristic models of “understanding” (*Verstehen*), is not commensurable with the kind of “explaining” (*Erklären*) provided by neurobiological processes. It is indubitable that without neurological structures repression could not be possible nor could affective interaction, and least of all a transference relation. But psychoanalysis has a place downstream from the complex human experience that allows verbal interaction, and it does not study only one of many levels of speech relation: psychoanalysis looks at its syntax and perhaps also its semantics more than its functional and instrumental conditions (Aletti, 2006).

Psychoanalysis and cultural psychology

Psychoanalysis is a functional and temporary relationship established by verbal interaction within a special setting, permeated by affects (transference and countertransference). Psychoanalysis is placed at the level of linguistic-affective interaction (Aletti, 1998, pp. 18-26) inside a cultural symbolic context (Belzen, 2001, 2006, 2010).

Religious experience arises from the intersection between intrapsychic, interpsychic, relational and cultural components. This means that individual religious experience grows up and can be observed only inside a specific cultural symbolic context, both in a synchronic dimension (with regard to religious traditions belonging to different cultures in the same historical period) and a diachronic dimension (with regard to the historical evolution of one religious tradition) (Belzen, 1997).

Cultural psychology (of religion) meets some emergent indications of modern general psychology (Belzen, 1999). Phenomenological, hermeneutical, narrative, critical-anthropological, constructionist approaches emerged as a consequence of a critical awareness of the loss of knowledge derived from both an emphasis on “empirical” research and a generalization of abstract psychology on a *homo psychologicus*. But it would be impossible for a psychoanalyst to accept a de-culturalization of the personal religious experience. Psyche links the neurobiological and cultural components of the human organism,

its wishes and its conflicts with the cultural environment. And psychoanalysis knows no other God than the one the subject “talks about” in a defined culture. To give a name to God happens in a symbolic context (see Aletti, Fagnani, & Colombo, 1998).

Psychoanalysis and post-modernism

According to different thinkers, we now inhabit the post-modern era. The concept of the “postmodern”, which is derived from aesthetic, philosophical and socio-cultural matrices, has been introduced progressively in all sorts of literature and applied to various human activities, becoming an elastic and comprehensive though ambiguous category.

Postmodernism is described by J.-F. Lyotard (1979) as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Enlightenment, Idealism, Marxism); this concept can be useful to psychological inquiry because it suggests some social and cultural characteristics of contemporaneity which can influence the development of psychological sciences.

According to postmodern thought, which rejects the notion that metaphysics and knowledge reflect reality, the truth is both an asymptotic path and a hypothetical autobiographic narration. Mental representation is a psychical fact, not an external one. This concept of truth and in general the relation between subject and object has greatly stimulated the interest of psychology.

Psychology is not extraneous to the success of “postmodern” thinking, mainly in the forms of Freudian psychoanalysis with its unconscious components about subjective behaviour, its surmounting of an objectivistic vision of physical reality, and its proposal of a representational mind. In the last few decades, some issues of “postmodern” culture certainly contributed to releasing psychology from naturalistic-scientistic and objectivistic pretences, toward hermeneutic and narrative positions.

As for psychoanalysis, hermeneutic and social constructionism have helped to surmount the theoretic rigidity typical of metapsychic constructions; also, they have remarked on the attention toward the interpersonal and empathic context of analytic discourse, which helps to overcome the vision of the “neutrality” in analytic relationships as distant and “aseptic.”

But psychoanalysis, as opposed to some extreme positions taken by “postmodern” philosophers, is

defended by its concrete clinical reality from the temptations of a radical constructionism and relativistic ontology, because of the attention paid to the *hic et nunc* of therapeutic interaction (Holt, 2001). According to me, the idea of extreme postmodernists that every theory, including empirical paradigms, is anchored to (and united with) the socio-cultural environment leads neither to relativism nor to the conclusion that it is impossible to share analytic practice and theory, as, for example, Hoffman (1998) and Stern (1985) affirm. An object may be observed from one point of view or several points of view. But no object can be observed without a point of view, as John R. Searle (1983) has noted in his theory of the intentionality of mental states.

Psychoanalysis and attachment theory

The psychoanalytic environment, during the last two decades, has showed some weak but increasing interest in attachment theory. Attachment theory was previously popular in the field of empirical research on the development of both infant and adult relationships. Nowadays the theory, elaborated by Bowlby in the Sixties on the early relationships between mother and infant (see Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), is richly structured and applied to many contexts of psycho-social life (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Nevertheless it was rejected by many important psychoanalysts (firstly Anna Freud) because it was considered too far from psychoanalysis in the way it reduced object relations to real and concrete contacts and neglected internal mental work (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Nowadays, other authors are open to an interchange or integration between psychoanalysis and attachment theory. One researcher thinks this is possible only in theory and not in clinical practice (Gullestad, 2001). Others, after a comparison with object relations models, identify a common nucleus in the two approaches. In particular Peter Fonagy (2001), using the concept of “internal working model” originally presented by Bowlby, proposes a bridge between the topics of internal representations and empirical observation of external behaviours. More recently there was an application of attachment theory to religion (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1999; Granqvist, 1998, 2009). According to this approach, attachment is a psychological system of evolutionary adaptation in which religion would arise (Kirkpatrick, 1998a, 2005a). This perspective of evolutionary psychology,

scarcely empirical (as has been revealed by Watts, 2006), is considered useful by those looking for a common theory in the field of psychology of religion (Beit-Hallahmi, 2006; Luyten & Corveleyn, 2007). With regard to psychoanalysis, some authors propose attachment theory as a place where psychoanalytic concepts could be empirically validated by case studies of individual histories (Granqvist, 2006a; for many controversies on such commensurability see Granqvist, 2006a, 2006b; Rizzuto, 2006, see even Wulff 2006; Luyten & Corveleyn, 2007).

I myself have argued elsewhere that attachment is only one component of relational mental organization and thus of the relation with God and that psychoanalytic and attachment theory could be complementary without any reductionism, since they focus on different aspects of the same phenomenon. The problem in applying attachment theory to religion lies in explaining how physical-biological attachment and psychological attachment are related, and whether such attachment is generally commensurable with the relationship with God. From a relational point of view, it should be better specified what kind of connection exists between attachment to other human beings in childhood and in adulthood on the one hand and attachment to God on the other, in particular to the Christian God (Granqvist, 2009). In addition, psychoanalysis faults attachment theory for not paying more attention to individual mental development, its processes, conflicts and outcomes. In particular the attachment models proposed to explain relationships with God (in continuity – “correspondence,” or discontinuity – “compensation”; see Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998b) sometimes appear too rigid. Through evolutionary psychological hypotheses (linked to attachment theory) developed by some scholars (Kirkpatrick, 2005b, 2006), the human psyche seems to have been coerced into omninclusive, anthropological-social and philosophical theorizations which are too far from the understanding of real individual mental functioning.

Psychoanalysis and empirical validation

The topic of empirical validation of psychoanalytic constructs and paradigms is one of the most tormented areas in the whole history of psychoanalysis, beginning with distrust of Freud’s first intuitions

by psychiatrists and physicians in general, and ostracism of Freud himself.

Currently, very diverse positions coexist within the field of psychoanalysis and religion. There are those who believe an integration of classic psychoanalytic approaches, namely combining the case study method with psychodynamically inspired empirical research (Corveleyn & Luyten, 2005; Luyten & Corveleyn, 2007), is both possible and desirable. In line with this, as I argued just above, some authors propose attachment theory as an area where psychoanalytic concepts could be empirically validated. Again, some concepts of attachment theory derive from psychoanalytic theorization, even if many people (including myself) disagree with those (Granqvist, 2006a, 2006b; Wulff, 2006) who hold that attachment theory is in fact a form of object relations theory. In my view it is based more on “real” relationships than the inner world. According to some (Huber, Piron, & Vergote, 1964; Rizzuto, 2006) it is impossible to have an empirical validation of psychoanalysis with an experimental methodology. Interpretation of psychoanalysis is not pre-dictive but post-dictive. Furthermore, psychoanalysis is explicated inside the analyst-analysed relationship, unique and unrepeatable for its complexity. Therefore, other authors (like me) suggest that we should consider them two different approaches, empirical and psychoanalytical, which lead to different views about human religiosity. The scientific experimental method can illustrate aspects and variables definable operationally in a research project. This research on common religious characteristics in a group of people can explain only general categories. A psychoanalytic observation studies in depth, with a longitudinal view, conscious and unconscious motivations and the personal story which a subject utilizes to attribute sense to his experiences. This allows a deeper inquiry about idiographic characteristics of personal religious experience (Aletti, 2003). However it is important to remember that the psychoanalyst’s knowledge derives from the subject’s words: namely the language, its gaps, lapses, and redundancies. For example, the psychoanalyst does not know directly the patient’s object relations. He hears the person’s speech on his or her historical relationships (past, present, future). Only interpretation and reconstruction, within a transference/countertransference context in an affective relationship, provide the psychoanalyst with a link

to the patient's object relations. The analyst, with a knowledge of both his personal experience and clinical practice, will be able to tolerate, better than an empirical researcher, the absence of a structured and exhaustive knowledge about the individual. Vergote's comments on Lacan's work are valid for all psychoanalysis: "What analyst could lay claim to a completed doctrine if he defines human beings by the gulf between signifier and signified and by a quest for truth that is asymptotic?" (Vergote, 1970, p. 29).

The question of religious truth in the light of psychoanalysis

The question of religious truth has recently resurfaced in international literature also with reference to psychoanalytical theory, I must be clear that according to me, as I stated at the beginning of this contribution, many issues are false problems, produced by misunderstandings on epistemology and methodology both of psychology of religion and psychoanalysis.

The wording "in the light of psychoanalysis" in the title of this paragraph is no accident. I believe the most used concise expression "psychoanalysis of religion", as well as "psychoanalyst of religion", is inappropriate and can also be misleading for at least two reasons. A) On the one hand, psychoanalysis is not interested in religion as such nor in its philosophical or theological truth. Psychoanalysts don't focus on religion as a cultural organized phenomenon, or on its origin and history, or on its social or evolutionary role. Psychoanalysis should be limited to the experience of the individual, i.e. to dynamic processes involved in the internal representation of God. B) On the other hand, the analysis never applies to the patient's one isolated attitude (in this case, the one toward religion). Every psychoanalysis is the analysis of a person, in his complex individual wholeness. Clinical psychoanalysts point out, however, that psychoanalytic research on religion is possible only within the individual process of analytic treatment, not outside of it.

I'm used to summing it all up, by saying that psychoanalysis doesn't aim at the truth of religion but at the truth of the subject: not at the truth of the belief but at the truth of the believer (Aletti, 2010). It aims at constructing a personal identity and, within such an identity, maybe also religious identity (or

atheistic identity, or any other position between these two extremes).

In fact, numerous publications are occurring predominantly outside the environment of psychoanalytic practitioners and cannot be considered psychoanalytic works as they only provide an exegesis of Freud's writings on religion, (for instance, "what did Freud really mean. . .) or on its consistency and acceptability from epistemological, historical, philosophical, social, moral and theological perspectives. Similarly, I would also hesitate to accept the so called "psychoanalytically based social psychology of religion", delving into a phylogenetic perspective of the origin and the truth of religion (Hood, 1992, p. 141; see also Hood, 2010).

The latest example of such an improper and misleading – for sure not psychoanalytical – way to meet the issue is the paper by D. E. Kronemyer (2011), "Freud's Illusion: New Approaches to Intractable Issues". The author aims at confuting Freud's reasoning about religion as an illusion "using concepts derived from current work in analytical theology" and by exposing five kinds of erroneous "tacit presuppositions" that – he suggests – are hidden in the reasoning itself. The outcome is a conglomeration of quotations and cross-references that embraces evolutionism and thermodynamics; hardly any reference is made to psychoanalytical works, with a number of serious misunderstandings of the thinking for example, of Freud, of Rachel B. Blass (2004) – and, lastly, mine –, among others. There is little psychology of religion in this contribution and no psychoanalysis at all.

Erroneously, Kronemyer includes Blass among the ones that state "the question of God's existence should be 'bracketed' because it no longer is relevant or meaningful" (p. 260). Actually Blass supports the opposite view and answers him: "This a gross misrepresentation of my view" (Blass, 2012, p. 170). In an article published in 2004, meaningfully entitled *Beyond illusion: psychoanalysis and the question of religious truth* Blass, in fact, had strongly disagreed with "the new psychoanalytic approach to religion" (p. 617). She observed that, in the last few decades, psychoanalysis and religion seemed to have found a positive reconciliation thanks to the reassignment of religion to Winnicott's perspective of illusion. That way, both psychoanalysis and religion gave up what should be a core mission for both of them: "the passionate search for truth".

Actually in the last few decades, the focus of observation on religion has moved away from considering its truth content (as if that could be verifiable) or conceiving of it as sublimation or repression of drives, and toward regarding it as a relational modality, following and applying object relations theory.

According to me, Blass seems not to perceive Winnicott's distinction between object-relating and the use of an object (Winnicott, 1969, pp. 86-94). It is not the object that is transitional, but the use of it. I agree with her that, for the believer – God is “real” means that He is “actual”. But that's irrelevant as far as psychoanalysis is concerned. The psychoanalyst is not interested in the truth or falseness of the contents of the religious illusion. Once agreed that illusion is considered as playing of the subject with the reality, an illusion is true as such (that is psychic function). That's all that matters. Not the existence of God, but the *belief* in His existence.

Blass wonders what is left, in the view of “Winnicottians”, of the firm belief of the believer in the unquestionable truth of his faith: “my religion is true”. What I think is left is the discourse expressed by the patient: to be acknowledged, to be interpreted, to which a meaning should be given in the psychic organization of the mind of the patient. No different from what we have to do with a memory of a rape by an uncle (whether it is true or false) or with the declaration of love for the analyst or with the dream of being *Little Red Riding Hood*. Psychoanalysis is not interested in the actuality of the narrative of the patient, but in the motivations beyond, in the unconscious processes and in the meaning the narrative expresses and reveals. To sum it all up, psychoanalysis is not interested in the semantics, but in the syntax of the narrative of the patient (Aletti, 1998). That's why the issue about the truth-value of the belief of the patient has hardly any importance at all. The point is not the evidence as Beit-Hallahmi thinks, when he says: “when you start looking for evidence you discover the same amount of evidence [that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Roman time] that we have for Krishna (or for Adam and Eve)” (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001, p. 224; for a fuller discussion, see Beit-Hallahmi, 2010). I basically agree with this affirmation of Beit-Hallahmi but that is not the issue; my point is that, to know that a given religion is true or truer than others is not interesting to the psychoanalyst. The right question we should pose is which mental representation such

a belief is based on for the specific patient in his own cultural “milieu”.

Rejecting the point of view of the “newer analytic approaches” (Blass, 2004, p. 626), and not appreciating the difference between the object and the use of the object, Blass doesn't see how a subjective experience of Transcendent could occur without an actual transcendent object.

As Rizzuto says (2009): “The new view of psychoanalysis opened the way for exploring religion from a psychoanalytic point of view by focusing on subjective experiences of some transcendent nature without the need for a transcendent object” (p. 42).

It is not God that is transitional (in His actual existence or inexistence) but how a person uses Him. The psychoanalyst observes that the psychological relevance of faith is in the desire of the existence of God (not in the proof of its contents). From a psychoanalytical view, the point of faith is in the dynamics of believing. What matters is not the content or belief, it is the process of the believing. The psychoanalyst focuses on how, not on what; on the process, not on the content.

An article by David Black (1993), *What sort of a thing is a religion? A view from object-relations theory*, offers an analysis of the problem of the truth of religion in the light of the object relations theory. Black suggests avoiding considering religion as a phenomenon that could be empirically proven with scientific demonstrations and theoretical reasoning; in his views, religion should be seen as a system of internal objects, which have the function of “containing” the thoughts, desires and even delusions arising in individuals who practice a religion. Like internal objects in psychoanalysis, religious objects do not have an external and material existence; rather, they have a heuristic function during the treatment (Black, 1993). Unlike the analytical objects, they arise from within a historically and culturally given tradition, a tradition within which man can express his relational endowment and reality. An analyst can judge their long-term effects on the patient, not their real existence.

According to Beit-Hallahmi (and also to me, to some extent) in some publications interpreting religious behaviors in the light of the object relations theory, psychoanalytical reasoning and apologetic aims blend inextricably. Amongst the non-psychoanalysts, some psychologists, religious pro-

fessionals and committed religionists have seen it as a way to re-establish the value of religion, also for apologetic purposes. “There is a faint, sweet aroma of apologetics that hangs over the writings” (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992, p. 121) as a new way to defend religion, with some “empathy and sympathy with religious believers and religious beliefs” (p. 121), embraced by people who seem to be more “religious psychologists” than “psychologists of religion”.

But the application of the object relations theory is not a mere point in a sterile discussion between religious insiders and outsiders. Nor is it “especially tied to or conducive to pro-religious sentiments or religious apologetics” (p. 122). Maybe someone thought it could be a further point in favor of the faith because of the underlining of the “believing” as intrinsic dynamics of the development of the personality, but the relationship between the believing in general and the religious faith (moreover Christian) is far from being direct or automatic and should be analyzed carefully, with no apologetic drifts.

However, though not taking any particular stand on the ontological truth of the contents of the belief system, psychoanalysis should not neglect the *belief content*, regardless of its actuality. The psychoanalysis of a believing person must take into consideration whether he/she believes to have an interpersonal relationship with a father figure or whether his/her perception is of being one with the Whole. The same applies to whether one believes in the material efficacy of prayer, whether the sacraments of the Catholic church bring one really in contact with God, or whether one strongly believes to belong to God’s chosen people.

Sadly enough, the issue of the truth of religion is also stimulated by the presumption to say everything about religion. But, in fact psychoanalysis doesn’t say what religion is (neither in fact does it want to say what psyche in itself is). It simply studies its functioning. The need to say what psyche is actually drives some scholars to look for help and support in other disciplines, different from psychoanalysis and far from its epistemological field.

Psychoanalysis, although practiced from inside the dual analyst-analyzant relationship, can offer a valuable contribution to the psychology of religion. A thorough comparison among several clinical cases allows theoreticians of psychoanalysis to detect typical and recurrent dynamics and psychical processes,

which may lead to a cautious formulation of interpretative models. This work helps the psychology of religion by offering clues and themes for empirical quantitative research.

Bearing in mind the prospect of the possible evidence psychoanalysis could offer about the truth, not of the *religion*, but of the *person* (whether believer or not), a full methodological neutrality – without apologetic stretching or psychologistic reductionisms – should be embraced. That is: defending psychology, respecting religion (Aletti, 2012).

The psychoanalyst investigates the psychic dynamics and doesn’t make statements about the truth-value of religion or about the ontological existence of God: such choice shows respect on the one hand, for the neutrality about the patient’s values – which is mandatory for the analyst – and, on the other hand, for the principle of the methodological exclusion of the transcendent, introduced by Theodore Flournoy (1902) as an essential requirement for the psychology of religion. The point is that the psychoanalyst has no access to God, but he has access – via and only via the narrative of the patient – to the latter’s representation of God. God is not an object of the psychoanalytical work, but the psychic process involved, certainly is.

Therefore, it looks puzzling that among the psychologists of religion there are so few practicing psychoanalysts, and such a vast majority of believers or religious professionals vs. non-believers or atheists.

A point like this could elicit a fruitful debate especially inside associations dedicated to the psychology of religion. Is there any reason for the majority of the members (and scholars as well) to be religious insiders or religious professionals?

On the other hand, if the psychology of religion is a psychological in nature discipline aimed at studying the structure and the processes of the functioning of the mind respecting its own inner experiences and its own religious culture, why has it so little space in universities and why so little attention is paid to it by mainstream psychology? Why do so few psychoanalysts take part in the debate about the psychology of religion? Why the psychoanalytical literature of the main international associations seldom shows clinical cases where at least some reference is made to the experience of the patient toward religion? Maybe because the attitude toward religion hardly surfaces in the narrative of the patient on the couch? If that’s the case, is it really so because religion is mean-

ingless in the experience of the patients? Or in the experience of the analysts? Or patients don't mention it because they think the analyst wouldn't approve, or could consider it meaningless or insane? Is the issue scotomized by the patients or by the psychoanalysts? What role do transfert and counter-transfert play?

Maybe, we can't answer these questions here and now. But, at least, they can stimulate some thinking and rekindle the debate.

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