

Theoretical paper



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# Defending psychology, respecting religion: The distinctiveness of the psychology of religion

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### Riassunto

#### Qualificare la psicologia, rispettare la religione: La distintività della psicologia della religione

Si presentano alcune considerazioni a riguardo della psicologia della religione quale settore specifico e autonomo di indagini psicologiche. Si sostiene la necessità, da una parte, di definire correttamente l'oggetto di studio, la religione e, dall'altra parte, di difendere l'approccio psicologico, in quanto psicologico, dal riduzionismo neurobiologico o dall'annessionismo psico-sociologico. Ciò che interessa lo psicologo della religione non è la religione per sé, ma ciò che accade nella psiche/mente dell'uomo quando si relaziona alla religione che incontra nella propria cultura. La religione dell'individuo si distingue dalla spiritualità, dalla ricerca di significato, dalla mindfulness per la sua caratteristica peculiare: la convinzione soggettiva di essere in relazione con il Trascendente. Questa convinzione si manifesta in credenze, sentimenti, relazioni, atti cultuali, comportamenti normati. Da una parte ciò riguarda strettamente il vissuto individuale, dall'altra trova realizzazione in una cultura specifica con forme religiose istituzionali ed un linguaggio simbolico-culturale determinato sia nel tempo che nello spazio. Ciò richiede una prospettiva psicodinamica e clinica della psicologia della religione, accanto a quella socio-culturale. L'attuale successo della psicologia sociale della religione viene ripensato criticamente nelle sue opportunità e sfide.

**Parole chiave:** Psicologia della religione, Religione vs spiritualità, Neuroscienze, Psicologia sociale

### Abstract

Some remarks about psychology of religion meant as a specific and autonomous domain are reported. The need of defining the object of investigation (religion) in a proper way and of defending the peculiarity of the approach (psychology) against the neurobiological and sociological reductionisms is stressed. The psychologist is interested not in religion itself, but in what occurs in human mind when religion is encountered within a culture (that is, religiosity). It is argued that religion is different from spirituality, search for meaning, mindfulness and so on since it is characterised by the subjective conviction to be in relation with the Transcendent. Such a conviction is expressed in beliefs, feelings, interpersonal relationships, rituals, normative behaviours. On one hand these aspects concern individual experience and, on the other hand, they are instantiated in a specific culture, with its own institutions, symbols and language, which develop in a given spatial-temporal context. This implies that a clinical and psychodynamic perspective, beside the sociocultural one, has to be taken into account. The current success of the social psychology of religion is critically examined by considering its potentialities and limits.

**Keywords:** Psychology of religion, Religion vs spirituality, Neurosciences, Social psychology

## Looking for Distinctiveness

Today, the “return to religion” is strongly emphasized by social media. Terms such as “de-secularization” and “post-secularization”, “return of the soul”, “need to believe” are often reported in newspapers and magazines. Religious fundamentalism, with the associated political claims, is an issue which is addressed in TV broadcasts. Post-transcendent spirituality, “religion after religion” (Hood, 2012, p. 110), and “religion without God” (Dworkin, 2013) are topics which are debated in web forums. In this context there is a renewed interest in what psychology can say about the “religious” (including religion, religiosity and spirituality, but also atheism, superstition, and fundamentalism). The attention currently paid to the psychology of religion is also motivated by the fact that such a field is now considered part of mainstream psychology.

But not everything that is said and written about the “religion”, even by some psychologists, can be considered as genuine psychology of religion. In our paper we would like to share some reflections – which might be divergent from the common approach and which we hope might be provocative – about the psychology of religion as a specific and independent research field within psychology. The distinctiveness of the psychology of religion implies, on one hand, the respect of the specific psychological methodologies and, on the other hand, the acknowledgment of the specificity of the cultural manifestations of the different religions, each considered in its cultural context (Aletti, 2012b).

For example, the application of a psychological model to issues concerning religion can be aimed at further confirming a psychological theory which has already been verified in other fields, not-involving religion. It might be the case of a study about the impact of gender differences in the teenagers’ attitudes towards prayer which could not be more than a developmental psychology study focused on cognitive aspects. Similarly, investigating changes in neurological processes concurrent to mental activity during meditation can be aimed at understanding how the brain works, but not how religious meditation affects personality. As a further example, a survey on pilgrimages can be only a study of social psychology applied to a tourism destination of devotion (Lourdes, Medjugorje, Mecca, the Santiago route and so on);

it would be a study belonging to the psychology of religion only if it investigates the specific feelings experienced by people and how their devotion influences others experiences and personality processes.

The debate on the definition of the object of the psychology of religion is broad and articulated (Aletti, 2010, pp. 29-47; Belzen, 2005). We will try to express our point of view, although we will not have space enough to argue in detail. The psychology of religion is the branch of psychology which investigates – using psychological paradigms, methods, and tools – what is psychological in religion. It does not investigate religion as such, but the personality of the believer, his or her experiences and the interactions of those experiences with the whole mental life. The psychology of religion does not explain the essence and origin of religion as the psychology of language does not explain what language is. Human beings do not create religion, as they do not create language: they acquire it through the interaction between their minds and the cultural environment. If, on one hand, the psychologist must take into account the status of religion as an aspect of culture, in which the person interacts, on the other hand the psychological approach focuses on the experience of the subject.

There is therefore a need to clarify what is specific in religious experience to avoid reducing it to more general processes and attitudes. In other words, the specificity of religious experience, compared to other kinds of experience, has to be stressed. From the point of view of the subject, believing in a supernatural entity involves processing certain beliefs (about the existence of a deity, the immortality etc.), sharing unique experiences (feelings of inner peace, mystical states etc.), and taking special behaviors (praying, taking part in rituals etc.). So, have these beliefs, experiences, and behaviors something specific which make them parts of a different category, or are they forms and manifestations of broader types of beliefs, experiences, and behaviors? The belief in a divine being has the same connotations as the belief in the existence of controversial entities like UFOs or the Lockness monster? Is the personal experience of the believer when he or she feels to be in special relationship with the deity similar to consciousness states experienced through other non-religiously connoted practices such as the state of flow, mindfulness, or reverie? Does belonging to a religion involve atti-

tudes and behavior – from both an individual and a social point of view – which are analogous to those associated with sharing a given political ideology or to militancy in a social organization?

The distinctiveness of the psychology of religion seems to depend on the specificity and irreducibility of the mental phenomena related to the experience with the divine; otherwise it would risk being “broken up” into a series of sections of the psychology of consciousness, cognitive psychology, psychology of emotion, social psychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and so forth.

Obviously, the subjective belief of being in relationship with a transcendent being or agent cannot be anchored to the demonstration of the existence of an external reality, which is different from the perception or subjective belief or faith. The existence of God cannot be proved by the psychology, as Flournoy (1902) claimed by formulating the principle of the methodological exclusion of the Transcend: God is excluded from psychological inquiry, both as an object of study and as an interpretation or explanation criterion of mental phenomena.

### Psychology of Religion and/or Psychology of Spirituality

Recently in psychology the topic of religion has been assimilated to that of “spirituality”. Perhaps this is an attempt to defend the psychology of religion and offer through a more trendy name, a version of the psychology of religion which is more acceptable to the modern mentality, especially the psychological one, and in particular the American one. This raises the question whether the assimilation of religion to spirituality is not likely to produce a lack of distinctiveness. From a conceptual point of view, in fact, there may be a spiritual life – involving meditation, compassion, altruism etc. – even in those who do not believe in a supernatural being, and, conversely, a religious orientation is not necessarily accompanied by a particular spirituality.

The question of the relationships between religion and spirituality is extremely controversial: the two concepts are considered by some to be synonyms. According to other investigators they are intersecting, whereas others claim that they are opposed. According to some, the distinction between religion and spirituality corresponds with the distinction between

institutional and personal, between external and inner, between beliefs and emotions, between truth and authenticity. These distinctions often shift from a descriptive to an evaluative approach, and then in ideological considerations on society and religion. The so-called “post-modern spirituality” (a suggestive expression which however lacks conceptual clarity) seems to consider the transcendent as an inner psychic reality, a psychological feeling of belonging to an invisible reality, which exceeds the totality of observable things and the world of everyday experience, without including the cognitive postulate of a transcendent and personal God.

Someone (Paiva, 2005; Westerink, 2012), for the sake of conceptual clarity, proposed the distinction between theistic spirituality (which corresponds to the psychology of religion) and non-theistic spirituality (which corresponds to the psychology of spirituality). Others, like Salander (2012), more radically argue that the concept of “spirituality” is unnecessary and confusing. This opinion seems to be worth sharing since the concept of “spirituality” – widespread in the American literature but most criticized in Europe – has so many and such different meanings. It is used to denote the public or private devotion to God, the subjective and inner experience of self-transcendence, the dedication to the humanist values of brotherhood and solidarity, meditation and the practices addressed to the inner discovery of the true self, the techniques to enhance the human potential, the capacity to give meaning to life, the search for physical and psychological well-being, the respect towards animals (with associated food practices such as vegetarianism), the ability to “think positive” in every life event etc. Used in so many senses, the concept of “spirituality” is no longer useful. With reference to the fairy tale by Andersen, it would say that the emperor, if not quite naked, is certainly badly dressed!

We think that it is necessary to distinguish religion from spirituality and that the latter tends to lead to a general, vague psychological attitude. We think that it is necessary to distinguish between the universal search for meaning and that specific response, neither necessary nor universal, to the search for meaning that is the religious response. In our Western culture religion is that specific answer to the general search for meaning according to which the Transcend-

dent is the source of meaning and the ultimate value. Such a response has specific connotations (beliefs, symbols, rituals, ethical principles) according to the different historical and cultural, linguistic, and symbolic contexts (Antonietti & Iannello, 2013). What is discriminating in this definition is the relationship (religion) that the believer has with the transcendent, the “radically Other” (R. Otto). The reference to the transcendent implies, according to Gordon W. Allport, the identification of an absolute value, which acts as the core element of the “comprehensive philosophy of life” that is essential for a mature sentiment (Allport, 1950, pp. 67-70). A religion which is really “intrinsic” is dynamic, comprehensive, productive of consistent morality, and fundamentally heuristic.

The openness to the transcendent, that believers ground in religious values, is available for atheists in humanistic values, which play the role of a “replacement” of the absolute, even though they are qualitatively different from religion, in spite of being functionally similar to it. Believing in a personal relationship with God the Father is different from believing in an ideology, a mission, a destiny, or a feeling of being immersed in everything around us. (With this comment Allport already envisaged a possible solution to the problem of the relations between religion and spirituality. Unfortunately his theoretical background is ignored by many of those who mention the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction in religion, that is reduced to a sociological survey tool.

This option of defining as religious only the attitude to make reference to the Transcendent helps to clarify the subject of the psychology of religion while limiting the field. It leads us to exclude that religion, meant as the subject of the empirical psychology, is an “inner” dimension of personality or an anthropological *proprium*, as philosophers argue when they speak about the alleged homo religious or a specific form of “intelligence” (Emmons, 2000). It also prevents us from identifying religion with an inner “religious sense” or “spirituality” or a search for ultimate meaning (“ultimate concern”), or that it is a dimension of personality, a kind of a sixth factor next to the big five. It also prevents us investigating a generic “average religion” or religious sentiment (which would – according to some – underlie all the different cultural and historical forms of religion) and, consequently, to develop tests of religiosity which

should be valid in all cultural and symbolic contexts regardless of the historical and geographical aspects.

Many prefer to think of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon, historically (and geographically) bounded, which human beings approach with all the aspects of their personality and their personal story.

On the other hand thinking of religion as a response to the need for meaning it implies that people sometimes speak of religion as a meaning system. Psychology should preferably put the emphasis on the religiosity of the individual as a religious meaning making, to emphasize, again, the decisive importance of the subjective process in the appropriation of the cultural phenomenon. The expression “meaning system” stresses the institutionalization and sedimentation of beliefs, meanings, worship, and community organization, whereas the expression “meaning making” emphasizes the creative component that establishes the religiosity of the individual.

### Psychology: In defense of the Autonomy

It seems appropriate to defend the psychological approach against the neurobiological reductionism and the sociological annexionism.

Once established that the religious disposition towards reality has its own specificity as compared to other forms in which individuals and communities are open and enter into a relationship with the world, the challenge is to understand if the psychological investigation concerns a level that is irreducible to the one explored by the neurosciences. Claiming that prayer or meditation, as everything that occurs in the mind, has a neurobiological counterpart is trivial. However, in order to identify such a counterpart, psychology is still necessary to define and describe the mental phenomenon of which neurosciences try to identify the concurrent biological process. Mental experience of mind, even if it were an illusory experience (as an epiphenomenon of brain processes), it is something that happens to someone and as such deserves to be taken into consideration, even if the intention was to not to stop at the description in mentalistic terms but to go beyond in order to discover the corresponding brain processes (Antonietti, 2008).

Having established that psychological descriptions are necessary to match mental experiences and neurobiological processes, we must wonder if, once

you set the psychological definition of the mental phenomenon to be investigated, such a definition can then be discarded and only the description of the concurrent neurobiological process has to be kept. In the scientific investigation of material things it makes sense to proceed from appearance to a deeper reality which is assumed to be objective, independent from our senses. In contrast, in the case of the mind it is not possible to move from appearance to an alleged deeper reality, because the subjective appearance is the essence of the mental (Antonietti, 2006). For instance, painfulness is not a contingent property of pain; painfulness is the essence of pain. If you feel a pain, the sensation of pain is in all respects what you feel; it makes no sense to say that pain is actually a brain process.

The correspondences between psychological phenomena and neurobiological processes are usually mentioned as evidence supporting the specificity of mental attitudes. However, such specificity can often be supported in other ways. For instance the reduced distinction of the boundaries between the reality and the self and the lack of spatial orientation which accompany meditation – which, according to D’Aquili and Newberg (1998), are correlated with a reduced activity in the posterior parietal lobe – were already well known on the basis of psychological investigation. For example, in the case of the epilepsy of the temporal lobe, neurobiological data prove that a “religious” experience such as that of these patients is special with respect to everyday life because the brain is in a special state when it occurs. But this type of experience was already known to be special, independently of neurobiological data, since thoughts, interests, attitudes, and behaviours testified abundantly in favour of its specialness. It comes as no surprise that a special psychological experience is accompanied by a special neural state (Antonietti, 2005). It could instead be interesting to discover that – the example is completely fictitious – the patients in question systematically show, during an epileptic seizure or between seizures, either a N1 neurobiological activation or a N2 activation. This could be the evidence of two different forms of “contact” with the divine that had not been revealed at a psychological level. A more detailed reconstruction of what patients experience or think could thus lead us to identify a psychological contact characterized by the

sensation of understanding the mystery of reality (a predominantly intellectual contact) and a contact characterized by the sensation of serenity and beauty (a predominantly emotive-aesthetic contact). The differentiations suggested by neurobiological data would need however to be proved on the psychological level by introspective accounts, analysis of attitudes, assessment of facial expressions, study of linguistic expressions, and so on (Antonietti & Iannello, 2011).

With regard to the approach of social psychology to religion, one might wonder whether, how and in what social psychology of religion qualifies itself within social psychology and is distinguished, for example, from social psychology of other ideological systems (Deconchy, 2011). Psychology of religion is not social psychology applied to religious events and behavior, as well as social psychology could be applied to other observable behaviors in politics, education, family, advertising, and so on.

If, on the one hand, psychology of religion involves the reference to a cultural phenomenon which is defined as “religion” (institutionalization of beliefs, worship, organization, symbolic language), on the other hand it is essential the phenomenological understanding of the intentionality which is constitutive of mental experiences concerning religion and their interaction with other experiences, processes, and dynamics of personality. Moreover, even the recent book *Religion, personality and social behavior* edited by Vassilis Saroglou (2014) shows the need to connect the religious attitude (even though it manifests itself in socially visible behaviors, as it relates to culture, language, symbols) to the psychology of personality.

Surveys concerning traditional socio-demographic indicators – attendance at the services, belonging to a group, self-reported religious involvement, and adhesion to beliefs – are only the preliminary steps of the investigation of religious experience and seems to be inadequate to grasp the true dimensions of religiosity, its psychic motives, its effects. The ease of the use of tools that allow investigators to reach a large number of respondents (such as online questionnaires) does not guarantee, however, researchers about the methodological correctness and validity of the conclusions of their studies meant as pieces of “psychology of religion“. Psychology of religion requires constant attention to combine the

“quantitative” approach with an interpretative, “phenomenological” perspective, in compliance with both the specific and distinctive intentionality of religious conduct (towards the Transcendent) and the peculiarities of the environment and the cultural context in which it occurs and is institutionalized as a cult, ritual, organization.

### Toward a Psychodynamic Approach

This draws attention to the psychodynamic personal attitude towards religion. Religious individuality is built across a process of personal appropriation which involves both recognition and distance, differentiation and otherness with respect to the specific form of religion which people meet in the culture they live in. The great pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1953) taught us that the child “creates” the mother that he or she finds (that is to say, that woman was already there, but she was not the “mother” of that child until the child enters into a relationship with her, recognizing her as different from himself). You could apply this idea arguing that in religion “the believer creates the God that he or she finds”. That is to say that our relationship with God and our religiosity are structured in a complex “potential space” which is also a function of the personal context, starting from primary emotional experiences. We are not born as fully religious, but we become so through a constant exchange and co-building with the surrounding cultural environment, the interaction between the internal and subjective world and the real world outside us (Aletti, 2005).

This dynamic and constructivist view gives the reason for the many expressions of religion, of its acceptance or rejection, and also of many processes and conflicts that occur when human beings approach religion within their own cultural environment. The model would explain, for example, the fact that the personal attitude of the believer is always in dialectical tension with the institutionalized forms of religion (dogma, worship, organization), carving out an “intermediate zone” between subjectivity and objectivity. The model also takes into account the interaction between religious rites and symbols and the personal process of sense making, which may explain both the adherence as the negation of belief, as well as its use in de-viated and per-verse and/or creative and innovative forms which go beyond the current

symbolic institutional systems (Aletti, Fagnani, & Colombo, 1998).

Hence the need of a dialogue with theology for the knowledge of the contents of religion that are investigated from a psychological standpoint. In this respect the sense of alienation denounced by the believer when he or she realizes the traits with which psychologists, sociologists and philosophers describe his or her faith is worth considering. On the other side, people playing relevant roles in the Church (such as pastors and theologians) express their disapproval when reading reports of psychological studies that appear to them to be irrelevant or fragmentary since they fail to grasp what is really the essence of “their” religion. Researchers must pay attention to this criticism. The ongoing dialogue with both believers and theologians helps psychologists to deconstruct their conceptual categories and to continuously test the validity of their research instruments, although they are consolidated tool (Aletti, 2012a).

The lack of research on concrete religious behaviors and the prevailing focus on general, abstract concepts such as “religion”, “spirituality”, “fundamentalism” and their structural dimensions is one of the difficulties that the psychology of religion faces today. We must pay attention to the fact that religions are not equal. They are equal in the sense that they all have the same right to be practiced and recognized; although they are very different in their system of beliefs, their symbolic language, and as a consequence of this, in their roots and in their interactions, with psychic structures and processes. Therefore psychologists of religion should refrain from their research on abstract concepts (religion, spirituality, fundamentalism etc.) made with samples, based on easy-to-reach college students and should observe more closely the daily practice of religion. In other words, they must go inside churches, inside synagogues, inside mosques. This is not to increase their faith, but simply to become true psychologists of religion!

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