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# Psicologia della Religione e-journal

## Psychology of Religion e-Journal

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Agosto-Dicembre 2015  
vol. 2, fasc. 1-2

semestrale/six-monthly

August-December 2015  
vol. 2, issue 1-2

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Studies and research



## Psicologia della Religione e-journal

*Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione*  
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# Critical yet loyal: An exploratory study of Roman Catholics' commitment to their Church after the sexual abuse scandal

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### Riassunto

#### **Critico ma leale: uno studio esplorativo della fiducia dei cattolici romani alla loro Chiesa dopo lo scandalo degli abusi sessuali**

Questo studio affronta la questione della fiducia dei cattolici romani nella loro Chiesa dopo la crisi degli abusi sessuali. A questa domanda si risponde attraverso un sondaggio tra 131 cattolici. Si possono distinguere diverse dimensioni di fiducia: essere sconvolti dall'abuso, accusare la Chiesa di lassismo e di negligenza, aver fiducia nei media, perdere la fiducia nella Chiesa cattolica, dubitare della propria fede e prendere le distanze dalla Chiesa. Gli intervistati esprimono critiche alla Chiesa, ma anche fedeltà. Descriviamo un modello a quattro stadi della perdita di coinvolgimento: 1) conoscenza dell'abuso; 2) critiche alla Chiesa; 3) perdita della fede e 4) erosione dei legami con la Chiesa. Nelle donne e negli intervistati che conoscono vittime di abusi, l'erosione della fiducia si verifica più frequentemente. Negli intervistati con una preparazione teologica, la perdita della fiducia è relativamente minore.

**Parole chiave:** Cattolici romani, Impegno, Abuso sessuale

### Abstract

This study deals with the question of Roman Catholics' commitment to their Church after the sexual abuse crisis. This question is answered through a survey among 131 Roman Catholics. Several dimensions of commitment can be distinguished: feeling shocked by the abuse, accusing the Church of laxity and negligence, the trust that one has in the media, losing trust in the Catholic Church, doubting one's faith, and distancing oneself from the Church. The respondents express criticism of the Church, yet also loyalty to it. We describe a four-stage model of the loss of commitment: 1) learning about the abuse; 2) criticism of the Church; 3) loss of faith and 4) erosion of ties with the Church. In women and in respondents who know abuse victims, erosion of commitment occurs more frequently. In respondents with a theological background, loss of commitment is relatively minor.

**Keywords:** Roman Catholics, Commitment, Sexual abuse

## Introduction

### The Roman Catholic Church in a tight corner

In February 2010, the first news reports appeared about large-scale sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands. The abuse had taken place in Catholic boarding schools in particular. The reports shocked many people in the Netherlands. Up till then, abuse in the Catholic Church had not been unimaginable or unmentionable. After all, there had been attention to abuse in pastoral relationships before (Van Dam & Eitjes, 1994; Fortune, 1994; Hoenkamp-Bisschops, 1995). And people certainly did gossip about incidents in Catholic boarding schools, but until that time these had been seen as incidents and not as structural facts. Rapidly and unambiguously, the reports highlighted that abuse in the Catholic Church had not been something incidental. It had happened structurally as well as on a large scale. Likewise, it was rammed home that the Catholic Church had systematically covered up these excesses. After Canada, the United States and Ireland, among others, the Netherlands was the umpteenth country in which these malpractices came to the surface.

The exposure of the abuse in the Church resulted in the creation of a Commission of Inquiry, chaired by the former Education Secretary and Lord Mayor of The Hague, Wim Deetman. In March 2010, he was given a mandate for investigating sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, a mandate given by the Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands and the Konferentie Nederlandse Religieuzen (Conference of Dutch Religious, the umbrella organization of the Dutch Catholic religious orders and congregations).

In December 2011, the Commission published its final report (Deetman, Draijer, Kalbfleisch, Merckelbach, Monteiro, & De Vries 2011a; 2011b). They estimated that between 0.9 and 0.3 percent of Dutch people aged 40 years and older had experienced unwanted sexual advances prior to the age of 18, from someone active within the Catholic Church. 'Sexual abuse' has to be understood here in the wide-ranging meaning of the phrase. It varied from light to very severe, from once-only and isolated touches, voyeurism and exhibitionism to repeated and prolonged, wide-ranging sexual acts, penetration, coercion and physical violence. In institutes like boarding

schools, the risks of abuse had been twice as large as elsewhere. Regarding the incidence of abuse, the Commission did not find any differences between Catholic and non-Catholic institutes. The number of victims was estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000, of whom about 1,000 had been very severely abused. The abuse had been committed in the period 1945-1981.

In March 2013, the results were published of a follow-up inquiry specifically focused on violence against underage women (Deetman, 2013). The focus of this inquiry was on sexual, physical and psychological violence. The Commission stated that, in the main, the data from this follow-up inquiry did not differ from the findings of the earlier inquiry.

The Commission also concluded that the Catholic Church's leadership had failed grievously. In many cases it had not taken action. Perpetrators had repeated their offence on a large scale. In the Commission's subtle formulation, reporting to the police had not been part of the Catholic Church's governance repertoire. Even worse, in many cases victims and their parents had been actively discouraged from reporting to the police.

The exposure of the abuse in the Catholic Church launched a discussion about the nature of the abuse, the perpetrators' backgrounds, the consequences for the victims and the organization of a Church in which crimes were covered up. Reactions in the media made it obvious that the scandal was going to have consequences for the Catholic Church. Her credibility and integrity were at stake. Who would want to identify with an organization that presents itself as the keeper of morality, but in which abuse is taking place on such a large scale, the settlement of which is systematically kept out of the public eye? That would sorely try the loyalty of anyone who feels attached to the Church. However, little systematic research has been conducted into this issue, and in the Netherlands nothing at all.

The issue here is not the consequences for the abuse victims' attachment to the Catholic Church. These consequences have been described extensively (for instance: Terry et al., 2011; John Jay College, 2004; Rossetti, 1995; Rauch, 2009; Doyle, 2009; 2011; Fogler, Shipherd, Clarke, Jensen, & Rowe, 2008; Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney 2008). No, it is about the consequences for people who feel

attached to the Catholic Church, who are not abuse victims, but who feel hurt by being confronted with this problematic issue in the Catholic Church. We are thinking here of the faithful and clergy who are not involved in it in any direct sense.

### Commitment

In the literature, attempts can be found to characterize the group of people who are not directly affected, and to describe what has happened to them. Kline, McMackin and Lezotte (2008) call them 'secondary victims', because not only the actual abuse victims feel hurt, but these bystanders too. They feel violated because they have received the sacraments from priests who have perpetrated abuse. In this context, bystanders hardly distinguish between the perpetrators of actual abuse and the Church leadership who knowingly has covered up such incidents. The Church leadership too has violated a 'sacred trust'. Practices like remaining silent about the abuse and transferring the perpetrators are experienced as a sign of contempt from the side of the Church leadership.

Rossetti (1997) too calls people not directly affected 'victims'. In his view, abuse corrodes trust in the Church in its totality. Rossetti refers to the traumatization of those not directly involved. This, to him, is a reason for calling parishes and indeed the Church itself victims of sexual abuse. Rossetti, then, takes a step further than Kline, McMackin and Lezotte (2008). He contends that the victim concept applies not only to those directly and indirectly affected, but he believes it to apply at an organizational level also. To him, the parish and the Church are victims too. In this way, Rossetti expands victimhood not only to a wider circle of people – those indirectly affected – but also to another dimension – an institutional or organizational one.

However understandable this may be (we are, after all, dealing with problems that have a heavy impact), we believe that in this way the concepts of 'victim' and 'trauma' are being stretched too far. In doing so, the distinctions could be lost between, on the one hand, those actually hurt by sexual abuse and, on the other hand, those indirectly involved as well as the organization associated with it. This in turn could result in victimhood being trivialized. In Withuis' (2002) words: if too many people

call themselves victims, the price is paid by those experiencing the worst suffering. If everyone is a victim, no one is a victim anymore. Concepts like '(indirect) victimhood' and 'traumatization' are unsuitable for describing the problems of people not directly affected. In order to understand the consequences for those who are not victims, but who are closely involved in the Catholic Church and who suffer the adverse effects of the abuse scandal, we have to look for an alternative concept. In the present context, we propose to use the concept of 'commitment'.

The concept of commitment originates from industrial and organizational psychology. Following Meyer and Allen (1997), we define commitment as a psychological condition that characterizes an individual's relationship with an organization and that has consequences for the individual's decision to continue counting themselves as part of that organization. As a rule, the concept is used to describe an employee's relationship with an industrial organization. Although people who see themselves as members of the Catholic Church do not have a relationship with an industrial organization, their involvement with the Church can very well be described using the concept of commitment.

Commitment is a psychological state characterizing an individual's attachment to an organization. The opposite of commitment is alienation. Commitment refers to the individual's emotional ties, identification and involvement with an organization. People who identify with an organization tell themselves and others, "I am proud of this organization". They respect the organization's values, put their trust in them and want to act in accordance with them. They accept that the organization influences their lives (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). People with a strong commitment to the Church stay in it, because they value this organization and do not want anything else. They say, "I belong to this organization". They feel involved, they don't think about their membership nor do they doubt it. They have no intention to turn their backs on the Catholic Church or to otherwise distance themselves from it.

It is this commitment that is at stake when an organization is discredited, like in the present case, where the Catholic Church suffers reputation damage because of reports about abuse that has been

covered up by that same Church. Do reports about sexual abuse, and about the ways that the abuse has been dealt with in the Catholic Church, have consequences for the commitment of the faithful? Does it make them feel less attached to the Church, do they consider turning their backs on her, do they lose respect for this organization? These are the questions that we want to answer. We want to provide insight into the process of the reduction of commitment. Previous research (e.g. Rossetti, 1995; 1997) drew attention to the role of loss of confidence in commitment reduction. However, those studies did not help to understand the process of reduction of commitment. We want to contribute to filling this gap.

### **In the United States**

The literature about the consequences of abuse by Catholic clergy for the Church's faithful and co-workers is scarce. Some research has been carried out in the United States. Elsewhere, including in the Netherlands, it's better to speak about research fragments. What are the main findings?

Sexual abuse in the Church shocked the American Catholics. 78 percent of them called themselves 'ashamed and embarrassed for my church' (Davidson & Hoge, 2004, 15). There was also mistrust towards the Catholic Church. For instance, between 62 and 73 percent of Catholics thought that only the tip of the iceberg was visible and that much more was happening than was publicly known. Furthermore, two thirds thought that the Church was doing little to solve the problems. The Church was seen as mainly centering on her own image and as turned in upon herself. 72 percent even asserted that the bishops' failure to curb the abuse was a bigger problem than the abuse itself (Davidson & Hoge, 2004; Isely, 1997).

What were the consequences of all this for personal faith and for the attitudes towards the Church? For 11 percent of American Catholics, the abuse was reason for attending Mass less often, in 78 percent it did not affect the frequency of attending Mass and 7 percent attended Mass even more often. A roughly similar numerical distribution was found in response to the question about the consequences for financial contributions to the Church: 12 percent donated less, 81 percent donated the same and 7 percent donated more (Davidson & Hoge, 2004).

Davidson and Hoge (2004) also asked about the consequences for involvement in the parish. This involvement had decreased in 10 percent of parishioners, in 7 percent it had increased and in 81 percent nothing had changed. Earlier, Fox (1993) had found a considerably stronger decrease of involvement following reports of abuse by Catholic clergy. He found that involvement in the Church had decreased in 50 percent of Catholics, in particular among young people and those who were not much involved anyway. Fox's phrasing centered on involvement in the Church. 'Church' is a more abstract and wider concept than 'parish', the focus of Davidson and Hoge's (2004) research. Involvement in concrete parishes had suffered less from the abuse scandal than had the more abstract Church.

Trust in the Church and in priests had also suffered from the scandals. Rossetti (1997) investigated the consequences of sexual abuse for trust in the Church, in priests and in God. He distinguished between three types of Catholics. Catholics belonging to a parish or diocese where no perpetrators of abuse had been working (1); those who knew that in a nearby diocese or parish, but not in their own parish, an abuser priest had been working (2); and respondents who had known a perpetrator of abuse in their own parish (3). In respondents with perpetrators in their own or nearby parishes, trust in the Catholic Church and in the priesthood had decreased most. It is remarkable that trust in God had not decreased, not even when there had been perpetrators of abuse in one's own parish. The Church and her personnel were the targets of the decrease in trust.

### **In the Netherlands**

What are the consequences in the Netherlands? One year after the first news coverage in the media – still before the release of the Deetman Commission's report – more people appeared to have deregistered than in the previous years (Kregting, 2011). In 2010, there were 25 percent more deregistrations than in the preceding year. In 2010, 23,000 Catholics deregistered, in particular young people between the ages of 20 and 40 who could have been characterized as marginal members anyway. This was 0.6 percent of the total administrative membership figure. In 2009, this was 0.5 percent. In 2012, deregistrations were



back at the level prior to the exposure of abuse (Limburger, 2013).

A day before the release of the Deetman Commission's final report – 16 December 2012 – a survey was conducted among nearly 4000 residents of the province of Noord-Brabant (Trouw, 2011a). 86 percent of all respondents had lost trust in the Catholic Church. Of the 700 Catholics who participated in the survey, 60 percent had lost trust. 88 percent of all respondents thought that the Church had not reacted in a right way, whilst 67 percent of the Catholic respondents thought so. 23 percent of them were considering deregistration and 3 percent had actually deregistered.

Shortly after the release of the Deetman Commission's report, it was found that 80 percent of Dutch people maintained their belief that abuse in the Catholic Church is continuing (Trouw, 2011b). Of Dutch Catholics, fewer believed this: 50 percent. 38 percent of Catholics were surprised at the magnitude of the scandal.

## Method

### Instruments

In order to find out about commitment, we presented respondents with a questionnaire containing items about the following topics.

1. *Their appreciation of the media in respect of their news coverage regarding sexual abuse in the Church.* This topic (5 items) entailed issues like: did they (respondents) approve of the media paying so much attention to the abuse in the Catholic Church and did they think that the media were prejudiced in their coverage? Examples of items are, 'I think it is right that the media are paying attention to sexual abuse' and, 'The media are anti-Catholic'. The response possibilities to these items were: '1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither disagree nor agree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree'.
2. *The Catholic Church's reactions to the reports about abuse.* The 12 items regarding this topic covered the respondents' opinions about the ways in which the Catholic Church had reacted to the media reports about sexual abuse. Did they think that these reactions had been adequate, had the Church sufficiently accepted responsibility? Some examples of items regarding this topic are, 'The

representatives of the Church tell the truth in the media' and 'The Church is still denying what has happened'. Respondents could answer with: '1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither disagree nor agree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree'.

3. *How did respondents cope with the reports about abuse and with the consequences for their personal faith and for their attitudes towards the Catholic Church?* The 52 items regarding this topic were about the impact that the coverage about abuse has had on the respondents. How did they get to grips with it? Have they started to doubt their faith, did they distance themselves from the Church, did they still have trust in the Church? Some examples of items are, 'I feel betrayed by the Church leadership', 'I am attending church services less frequently than in the past' and 'I have less trust in priests and in other representatives of the Roman Catholic Church than in the past'. The response possibilities to these items were, '1 = Absolutely not true; 2 = Not true; 3 = Neither not true or true; 4 = True; 5 = Absolutely true'.
4. *The respondents' backgrounds.* Respondents were also asked about their demographic backgrounds: age, gender, marital status, educational level and profession. In addition, we also inquired about their religious backgrounds. Had they been baptized, married in church, did they pray, did they attend church services, did they feel attached to the Church? Finally, we also asked them if they knew victims and/or perpetrators of abuse in the Church.

### Fieldwork and respondents

The research was carried out in the spring of 2011. This was after the release of the Deetman Commission's first interim report (December 2010) and prior to the presentation of its final report (December 2011). Hence, it was long before the Commission published its report about abuse of underage women (March 2013).

The questionnaires have been answered by parishioners who were known to be strongly involved in the Catholic Church and to frequently attend services in Catholic churches. In addition, students of a Catholic theological faculty had been asked to participate.

131 respondents participated in the research. 45 percent of them were male and 55 percent female. 34 percent of participants were 45 years old or younger, 66 percent were older. 98 percent of respondents were baptized, 97 percent had made their First Holy Communion, 96 percent had made their Confirmation and 92 percent had attended church regularly in their youth. 49 percent of respondents attended church weekly and 27 percent attended about once a month. 51 percent prayed daily, in addition to attending church. For 73 percent, faith had always played – and continued to do so – an important role, and for 70 percent of respondents their faith was connected with the Catholic Church.

Let us compare our research data with data obtained from nationwide research in the Netherlands. 76 percent of Catholics in our sample attended church at least once a month. Nationally, between 9 and 10 percent of Catholics did so (Kregting & Massaar-Remmerswaal, 2012). 70% of our respondents felt attached to the Roman Catholic Church; nationally, 41 percent of Catholics felt closely attached to the Church (Bernts, Dekker, & De Hart, 2007). Furthermore, relatively many of our respondents married within the Catholic Church: 91 percent. In 2011, 4 percent of all weddings had taken place in a Catholic church (Kregting & Massaar-Remmerswaal, 2012). Hence, the percentage of church weddings in our sample was more than a twentyfold of the corresponding percentage in the national sample.

33 percent of respondents were studying theology or had done so in the past. 5 percent were working in a theology-related profession, for example as a pastor. Both groups together covered 34 percent of respondents. For convenience's sake, we will call this group 'theologians'. We will call the remaining respondents 'non-theologians'.

## Analysis and results

Three Principal Component Analyses (PCA) were carried out on the questionnaire's items. Here we present the main findings. A specification of the data per component can be found in the Appendix. Based on the PCA, we have constructed seven scales. 1. 'Feeling shocked' by the events in the Church: being sad; feeling deeply shocked; getting angry. 2. 'Accusing the Church of laxity': the Church should have intervened sooner, since that would have prevented

much evil; the Church has protected herself, and has hardly thought of the victims. 3. 'Accusing the Church of negligence': the Church has sufficiently accepted responsibility; the Church informs in a right way (both items had a negative loading); the Church denies what has happened. The distinction between laxity and negligence calls for some clarification. The accusation of negligence refers to the respondents' beliefs regarding the ways in which the Catholic Church and her representatives have acted following the reports about abuse: did the Church give adequate information; did she trivialize what has happened; did her representatives tell the truth? Laxity refers to (lack of) action taken against abuse as such: should the Church have taken action earlier; should the pope have reacted with more severity? 4. 'Trusting the media': the media are anti-Catholic; the media present a distorted picture (both items had a negative loading). 5. 'Loss of trust': decreased trust in the Church, in priests and in other representatives of the Church; feeling more attached to the Church (the last item had a negative loading). 6. 'Doubting one's faith': respondents have started to doubt their faith; they attended fewer services. 7. 'Distancing oneself from the Church': respondents considered deregistering from the Church or their parish. We will further discuss the results on the basis of Table 1. The reliability estimates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the research instruments are also included in Table 1. These range from .75 to .91, which is good (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Table 1: Commitment to the Catholic Church. Reliabilities, averages, standard deviations, percentages of low and high scores.**

	$\alpha$	A	SD	L	H
Shocked	.80	3.7	0.5	9	91
Church's Laxity	.75	3.8	0.8	11	89
Church's Negligence	.88	3.3	0.7	28	72
Trust in media	.76	3.3	0.8	27	73
Loss of trust	.91	3.0	0.7	53	47
Doubting faith	.84	2.0	0.6	93	7
Distancing from Church	.80	2.0	0.7	92	8

$\alpha$  = reliability; A = average score (1 minimal – 5 maximal); SD = standard deviation; L = percentage low score (< 3.00); H = percentage high score ( $\geq$  3.00).



The majority of respondents felt shocked, and almost as many of them accused the Church of laxity. They believed that the Church should have done more to prevent the abuse. A smaller number of respondents, but still almost three quarters of them, believed the Church's behavior to be negligent. About the same number of respondents trusted the media, the most important messengers regarding the abuse. There was a loss of trust in almost half of the respondents. Relatively few respondents distanced themselves from the Church (or are considering it) or were doubting their faith.

Did people's theological status, their gender, age, or knowing victims or perpetrators make a difference? We will discuss this on the basis of Table 2.

Theologians had a relatively strong commitment to the Catholic Church. We defined 'theologians' as respondents who were studying theology at a Catholic theological training institute, or who had completed these studies and/or were working within the Catholic Church. Theologians more often indicated feeling shocked by the reports about abuse, having less trust in the media, and less often deeming the Church to have been lax in her reactions than others. Furthermore, theologians less often had lost trust in the Church, they experienced less doubt of faith and they distanced themselves less from the Church.

Gender was an issue also. Women reported less commitment to the Church. More than men, they trusted the media, they more often believed the Church to have been negligent, they lost trust more and distanced themselves more.

Respondents who knew victims had less commitment than those who did not. In those who knew victims, we more often found the accusation that the Church had been negligent. They also showed more loss of trust, and they distanced themselves more.

Finally, we note that age was hardly a distinguishing factor. Commitment to the Church changed in young and old to the same degree. There was one exception. Older respondents (older than 45 years) more often judged the Church's reactions as being lax.

Knowing perpetrators had no correlation with any of the components of commitment.

What were the correlations between the various dimensions of commitment to the Church? We will discuss this on the basis of Table 3.

Feeling shocked by sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church was an independent category – see the correlations in the top row. It did not correlate with any other issue. In respondents who felt shocked by the abuse we did not find more accusations of laxity, negligence and so on, than in those who did not feel shocked or who felt shocked to a lesser degree.

Looking at the correlations higher than .40 in Table 3, we see two clusters, which we have marked in bold. The left hand cluster of correlations is about trusting the media and about accusing the Church of negligent and lax reactions. Respondents who trusted the media showed a higher frequency of accusing the Church of negligence and laxity.

The right hand cluster of correlations is about doubting one's faith and distancing oneself from the Church, about personal faith being in jeopardy and the weakening of institutional ties. Respondents who doubted their faith, also distanced themselves from the Church (or were considering this) and vice versa.

Furthermore, the role of loss of trust in the Church is interesting – see the column of italicized correlations in the middle of Table 3. Loss of trust in the Church correlated with accusations of laxity and negligence, and with trust in the media. Respondents who lost their trust in the Church trusted the media and accused the Church of negligence and laxity. Loss of trust also correlated with doubting one's faith and distancing oneself from the Church. The greater the loss of trust, the stronger the inclination to distance oneself and to doubt one's faith.

Finally, we see that some issues had hardly anything to do with each other. For instance, there was hardly a correlation between doubting one's faith and accusing the Church of laxity. Respondents who deemed the Church to be lax showed hardly more or less doubt of their faith than those who did not deem her to be lax. This is shown by the low correlation of .18.

## Conclusions and discussion

Commitment to the Catholic Church is under pressure. But not to the same degree in everyone and not equally strongly in the various components of commitment.

Three groups are standing out: the so-called 'theologians', women, and those who knew victims. The 'theologians' were a group that was most loyal and

**Table 2: Commitment to the Catholic Church. Average scores according to theological status, gender, knowing victims and age.**

	Theological Status		Gender		Knowing Victims		Age	
	Nt	T	M	F	No	Yes	Yng	Old
Shocked	3.5	3.9***	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.7
Church's Laxity	4.0	3.5***	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.9*
Church's Negligence	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.5*	3.3	3.6*	3.3	3.3
Trust in media	3.5	2.9***	3.0	3.5**	3.2	3.5	3.1	3.4
Loss of trust	3.1	2.7**	2.7	3.1**	2.9	3.4**	2.9	3.0
Doubting faith	2.1	1.7***	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.1	2.0	2.0
Distancing from Church	2.1	1.8*	1.8	2.1*	1.9	2.5***	1.9	2.0

Nt = non-theologian; T = theologian; M = male; F = female; Yng = young; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ .

**Table 3: Pearson correlations between dimensions of commitment to the Roman Catholic Church.**

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Shocked	.12	.06	-.11	-.03	-.11	-.11
2. Church's Laxity	-	<b>.62**</b>	<b>.42**</b>	<b>.62**</b>	<b>.18*</b>	.15
3. Church's Negligence		-	<b>.51**</b>	<b>.79**</b>	<b>.31**</b>	<b>.35**</b>
4. Trust in media			-	<b>.59**</b>	<b>.32**</b>	<b>.33**</b>
5. Loss of trust				-	<b>.45**</b>	<b>.52**</b>
6. Doubting faith					-	<b>.54**</b>
7. Distancing from Church						-

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .001$

faithful to the Catholic Church. We see larger differences in commitment between these 'theologians' and the other respondents (the 'non-theologians'), than between men and women and between those who did and those who did not know victims of abuse. When making these comparisons, we have to realize that among the theologians there were men and women, as well as respondents who did and who did not know victims of abuse. The partitions between the groups were anything but watertight.

Gender too was important in respect of commitment to the Church. Women's commitment was under heavier pressure than men's. In general, women are real or potential victims of sexual abuse more often than men (Gorey & Leslie, 1997). This may make women more receptive to reports about abuse and to the victims' predicament. Women are more likely to empathize with the victims, as well as more likely to stick up for them. They are also more likely to criticize perpetrators and agencies

that stick up for perpetrators or that offer them protection.

Furthermore, in respondents who knew victims of abuse in the Church, commitment decreased more strongly than in those who did not know victims. Abuse had more consequences when one personally knew victims than when one only had heard about it through the media.

In contrast to the United States, knowing perpetrators of abuse had no consequences for commitment to the Church in the Netherlands.

How does commitment develop in loyal Catholics after it had become public knowledge that sexual abuse had taken place? We will describe this using a tentative model. This model has a heuristic function. This means that it can be useful in further research into the development of loyal Catholics' commitment. We have drafted this model on the basis of the data from the correlation matrix (Table 3). In this model, four stages can be distinguished: 1. Learning about abuse within the Church, 2. Criticism of the Church,

3. Loss of trust in the Church, and 4. Erosion of ties with the Church.

The first stage involves learning about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the primary reaction of feeling shocked. This shock stands on its own, as was clear from Table 3. It is not connected to one of the subsequent stages in the process of loss of commitment: criticism, loss of trust and erosion of ties. The second stage is that of criticism of the Church. The Church's reactions are deemed to be lax and negligent. She should have acted sooner in order to prevent abuse, and should have taken more adequate action after the abuse had been uncovered. In this stage, identification with the Church is at stake. The third stage is that of losing trust in the Church. The credibility of priests and other Church representatives, of the pope as head of the Church and of the Church as an institution has got damaged. Finally, the fourth stage is that of the erosion of ties. By this we mean that people begin to doubt their faith and to distance themselves from the Church, or will consider doing so. In this stage, Church membership is at stake.

We see that most respondents were shocked by the abuse. Many of them were critical. In a number of them, criticism of the Church was the overture to loss of trust. And in some of these, loss of trust would subsequently result in erosion of their ties with the Church. Loss of trust is the link between criticism and erosion. Criticism is a prerequisite for loss of trust, and loss of trust is a prerequisite for erosion of the ties with the Church.

It is not the shock, caused by learning about sexual abuse, that starts the process of commitment crumbling away. Being shocked by the abuse has no correlation with criticism (of laxity and negligence), or with loss of trust, and neither with erosion (doubting faith and distancing). Loss of commitment is driven by the Church's lax and negligent reactions with regard to sexual abuse. It is the way in which the Church handles this problem that causes commitment to collapse. She has done too little in order to prevent the abuse, and she has acted unsatisfactorily after learning about it. To a number of people, an institution that discredits itself in such a way does no longer deserve their trust. And for some of them, it ends in turning their backs on the Church. For American Catholics too, the reactions of the Church

were found to be a big problem apropos determining their attitudes towards the Church (Davidson & Hoge, 2004).

Earlier publications drew attention to the importance of loss of confidence in the decline of commitment to the Church (e.g. Rossetti, 1995; 1997). Our process model shows that loss of confidence is a phase in a larger process of commitment loss. Loss of confidence occurs after criticizing the Church and can be seen as a harbinger of erosion of ties with the Church.

There was much criticism of the Church. But the erosion of ties with the Church was lagging far behind the criticism. A skeptical reader may ask what more should happen for loyal Church members to definitively cut the ties. However, it is also possible to conclude that our respondents remained loyal to the Church in times of crisis. This loyalty does not imply that they were uncritical. On the contrary. Our respondents were very critical, but that was no reason for them to turn their backs on the Church. This was also the case in many of their co-religionists in the United States. In the introduction to the present study we also noted that the number of people turning their backs on the Church or considering doing so was small in proportion to the numbers distrusting her. Moreover, it seems that those who parted with the Church probably were marginal members already (Kregting, 2011). Our group of respondents can best be characterized as core members.

How representative are the findings reported here? We have carried out a research among a selective group of Catholics, a group strongly orientated towards the Catholic Church. Hence, what do the research data mean, seeing that we are dealing with a specific group: loyal Catholics?

The safest approach is to view the data for this group as a lower limit. If, in this group, their commitment to the Church is put under pressure in the form of criticism, this criticism probably will be stronger in others. By 'others' we mean less loyal Catholics, members of other denominations, non-denominational believers and people without affinity with a church or religion. The odds are that these others will trust the media more and will be more fiercely convinced that the Church has acted with negligence and laxity. They probably will also lose more trust in the Church. In addition, there is a considerable prob-

ability that these others will experience more doubt of faith, and will distance themselves more from the Church. That is, in as far as they were having any trust at all in the Church and in faith.

We conducted a small-scale study that provides insight into the factors that play a role in the commitment of Catholics to their church after the sexual abuse scandal. We also constructed a model for the loss of commitment to the Catholic Church. The logical next step for research is repeating the study with a larger sample, in international comparative perspective. Part of such an investigation is to test the proposed model for loss of commitment.

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## Appendix: Principal Component Analyses

**Trust in media.** Items, loadings, percentages, averages and standard deviations

Brief description	L	%	A	SD
Attention in media is good	.72	87	4.21	0.81
Media are anti-Catholic	-.88	38	3.12	1.10
Media present distorted picture	-.86	37	3.22	1.08

Explained variance 67%. L = loading (PCA); % = percentage of questions answered with: agree, strongly agree; A = average score; SD = standard deviation.

**Beliefs about Catholic Church's reactions to reports of abuse.** Components, items, loadings, percentages, averages and standard deviations

Brief description	L	%	A	SD
<b>Church's Negligence</b>				
Tip of iceberg	.73	45	3.31	0.98
Church covers up	.60	37	3.02	1.10
Church denies	.74	28	2.73	1.01
Church accepts sufficient responsibility	-.84	23	2.68	1.01
Church informs me in right way	-.76	17	2.57	1.05
Church representatives' reactions in media are adequate	-.70	15	2.34	0.94
Church representatives tell truth in media	-.65	15	2.70	0.93
Church reacts in adequate ways	-.63	13	2.24	0.96
<b>Church's Laxity</b>				
If Church had acted sooner, much evil prevented	.83	83	4.15	0.95
Church protected herself, no attention for victims	.68	74	3.79	0.99
Pope should have acted with more severity	.66	67	3.74	1.09
Church did what was best	-.59	16	2.38	1.04

Explained variance 57% (first component 47%; second 10%). L = rotated loading (PCA with varimax rotation); % = percentage of questions answered with: agree, strongly agree; A = average score; SD = standard deviation.



**Coping with and consequences of reports of abuse in Catholic Church.** Dimensions, items, factor loadings, percentages, averages and standard deviations.

Brief description	L	%	A	SD
<b>Loss of trust</b>				
Hurts that Church is in news in negative ways	-.62	69	3.70	1.01
Power imbalance in Church facilitates abuse	.52	68	3.77	1.07
Would allow my children to be altar servers	-.49	66	3.75	1.05
Am proud of my faith	-.57	65	3.82	1.01
Trust that RC Church will be all right	-.77	51	3.45	1.00
Church leadership is hypocritical	.63	47	3.23	1.19
Pray to God for solution	-.62	37	3.02	1.18
Less trust in pope	.69	37	2.98	1.19
Less trust in RC Church	.78	35	2.91	1.23
Less trust in priests and other representatives of RC Church	.78	30	2.79	1.16
Church loses credibility and integrity	.64	25	2.69	1.18
Feel betrayed by Church leadership	.60	24	2.64	1.14
Am able to forgive priests and other representatives	-.58	21	2.75	0.96
Abuse is exaggerated	-.59	15	2.37	0.99
More attached to RC Church	-.70	15	2.53	1.03
Pray more to God	-.48	9	2.44	0.90
<b>Feeling shocked</b>				
Priest or Church's representative should set example	.57	92	4.40	0.66
Much time needed to heal sorrow caused by abuse	.58	79	4.02	0.75
Talk with other people	.45	73	3.77	0.85
Am sad	.73	72	3.84	0.89
Have started to reflect upon causes	.67	66	3.74	0.84
Have been deeply shocked	.65	59	3.58	1.01
Am angry	.56	56	3.53	0.96
Have to justify being Catholic	.49	46	3.15	1.19
Wouldn't feel shocked if any more serious facts would emerge	-.35	36	2.95	1.07
Have disregarded the news	-.57	16	2.48	0.94
<b>Doubting faith</b>				
Enough good priests	-.41	87	4.30	0.82
Faith has not changed	-.60	71	3.79	1.00
Has made me doubt my faith	.74	13	2.15	1.04
More doubts than previously	.75	12	2.05	0.99
Attend fewer church services	.66	8	2.00	0.91
Abandoned by God	.55	5	1.75	0.92
Doubts about sacraments received	.58	5	1.94	0.88
Feel more distant from God	.61	3	1.92	0.80
<b>Distancing from Church</b>				
See Holy Communion as separate from situation in Church	-.46	80	4.03	0.94
Other ways of being close to God	.39	20	2.51	1.13
Have taken action regarding the abuse	.56	6	2.00	0.85
(Consider) discontinuing donations to Church	.62	6	1.89	0.93
(Consider) deregistration from parish	.72	5	1.69	0.87
(Consider) deregistration from Church	.71	5	1.69	0.87

Explained variance 48% (first component 23%; second 12%; third 8%; fourth 5%). L = rotated loading (PCA with varimax rotation); % = percentage of questions answered with: true and absolutely true; A = average score; SD = standard deviation.

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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Zondag, H. J., & van Uden, M. H. F. (2015). Critical yet loyal: An exploratory study of Roman Catholics' commitment to their Church after the sexual abuse scandal. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 1-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A10>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>





Rassegne e riflessioni



## Psicologia della Religione e-journal

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

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#### Riassunto

Si presentano alcune considerazioni a riguardo della psicologia della religione quale settore specifico e autonomo di indagine psicologica. 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 relazione 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

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

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

## In cerca della distintività

Oggi, il “ritorno alla religione” è enfatizzato dai mass-media non meno che dagli studiosi. Si parla di **de-secolarizzazione** e di **post-secolarizzazione**, di ritorno dell’anima, di bisogno di credere, di integralismo religioso che diventa anche proclamazione politica e di guerra santa, ma anche di spiritualità post-trascendente di “religione dopo la religione” (Hood, 2012, p. 110) e di “religione senza Dio” (Dworking, 2014). In questo contesto c’è un rinnovato interesse su che cosa la psicologia può dire attorno al “religioso” (religione, religiosità, spiritualità, ma anche ateismo, superstizione, integralismi e fondamentalismi). E la psicologia della religione è ormai considerata parte della *mainstream psychology*.

Ma non tutto ciò che viene detto e scritto sulla “religione” anche da psicologi è, di fatto, psicologia della religione. Questo contributo presenta alcune considerazioni, a volte divergenti da alcune prospettive di moda e, intenzionalmente provocative, a riguardo della psicologia della religione quale settore specifico e autonomo di indagine psicologica. La distintività della psicologia della religione suppone, da una parte il rispetto della specificità metodologica dell’approccio psicologico e, dall’altra, il riconoscimento della specificità della manifestazioni culturale delle diverse religioni ciascuna considerata nel suo contesto culturale: *defending psychology, respecting religion* (Aletti, 2012b).

Infatti, l’applicazione di modelli psicologici all’area del religioso può avere come obbiettivo un’ulteriore ricerca confermativa di una teoria psicologica già verificata in campi diversi, non religiosi. Una ricerca sull’incidenza delle differenze di genere nell’atteggiamento degli adolescenti verso la preghiera potrebbe non essere altro, in funzione dell’interesse cognitivo che la guida, che uno studio di psicologia evolutiva differenziale. Allo stesso modo, concentrarsi sulle mutazioni dei processi neurologici concomitanti l’attività mentale della meditazione serve a capire come funziona il cervello, ma non come si struttura e agisce nella personalità l’atteggiamento della meditazione “religiosa”. Così, un’indagine sui pellegrinaggi può essere soltanto una ricerca di psicologia sociale del turismo applicata ad una meta di devozione (Lourdes, Medjugorje, oppure cammino di Santiago, viaggio alla Mecca...) ma è psicologia della religione solo se indaga il vissuto

specifico delle persone, e come la loro devozione influenza gli altri vissuti e processi della personalità.

Il dibattito sulla definizione dell’oggetto proprio della disciplina è ampio e articolato (si veda Aletti, 2010, pp. 29-47; Belzen, 2005). Noi esprimiamo il nostro punto di vista, senza poter qui argomentare in dettaglio la sua validità. La psicologia della religione è quel ramo della psicologia che indaga, con paradigmi, metodi e strumenti psicologici, ciò che di psichico vi è nella religione. Non studia propriamente la religione, ma la personalità del credente, i suoi vissuti e le interazioni di quei vissuti con l’insieme dello psichismo. La psicologia della religione non spiega l’essenza e l’origine della religione; allo stesso modo che la psicologia del linguaggio non spiega che cos’è il linguaggio. L’uomo non crea la religione, come non crea il linguaggio: lo acquisisce attraverso l’interazione tra la sua psiche e la cultura dell’ambiente.

Se, da una parte, lo psicologo deve tener conto dello status della religione come dato obiettivo presente nella cultura, con cui il soggetto si trova ad interagire, d’altra parte l’approccio psicologico si focalizza sull’esperienza del soggetto.

Si pone perciò l’esigenza di chiarire che cosa abbia di specifico l’esperienza religiosa da renderla non assimilabile a più generali processi e atteggiamenti, vale a dire la specificità del vissuto religioso, rispetto ad altri vissuti della personalità. Dal punto di vista del soggetto, condividere la fede in un ente sovranaturale comporta elaborare determinate credenze (nell’esistenza di una divinità, nell’immortalità ecc.), vivere peculiari esperienze (sensazione di pace interiore, stati mistici ecc.) e assumere particolari comportamenti (pregare, prendere parte a riti ecc.). Ora, queste credenze, esperienze e comportamenti hanno qualcosa di specifico, che ne fa una tipologia *sui generis*, o sono forme e manifestazioni di più ampie tipologie di credenze, esperienze e comportamenti? Il credere in un essere divino ha gli stessi connotati del credere in entità dall’esistenza controversa come gli UFO o il mostro di Lockness o di una pura ipotesi come l’esistenza di altri universi popolati da altri essere viventi e pensanti? I vissuti del credente quando si trova/ritiene di trovarsi in rapporto particolare con la divinità sono riportabili a stati di coscienza cui si accede con pratiche “laiche” (come potrebbe essere lo stato di *flow*, la *mindfulness*



o la *rêverie*)? L'appartenenza a una confessione religiosa comporta atteggiamenti e comportamenti – sul piano individuale e sociale – che possono essere assimilati *tout court* a quelli che derivano dall'adesione a un'ideologia o dalla militanza in un'organizzazione sociale?

Dalla specificità e irriducibilità dei fenomeni mentali collegati all'esperienza con il divino sembra dipendere la distintività della psicologia della religione come disciplina, la quale diversamente rischierebbe di essere “smembrata” in una serie di sottocapitoli da rubricarsi nell'ambito della psicologia della coscienza, della psicologia cognitiva, della psicologia delle emozioni, della psicologia sociale, della psicologia dello sviluppo, della psicologia clinica.

Ma, certamente, la convinzione soggettiva di essere in rapporto con un essere o Agente trascendente per quanto corrispondente a certe attività mentali, non può ancorarsi ad una dimostrazione di una realtà esterna e diversa dalla percezione/convinzione soggettiva, o fede. L'esistenza di Dio non è dimostrabile a partire dalla psicologia come insegnava già Flournoy (1902), con il principio di esclusione metodologica del Trascendente: Dio è escluso dallo studio psicologico, sia come oggetto di studio sia come criterio interpretativo/esplicativo dei fenomeni mentali.

### Psicologia della religione e/o della spiritualità

Recentemente nella psicologia il tema della religione è stato accostato a quello della “spiritualità”. Forse si tratta del tentativo di preservare la psicologia della religione e di offrire attraverso una denominazione più trendy, una versione più accettabile da parte della mentalità contemporanea, specie quella psicologica, specie quella americana. C'è però da chiedersi se l'accostamento della religione alla spiritualità non rischi di fare perdere alla prima la sua distintività. Da un punto di vista concettuale, infatti, vi può essere una vita spirituale – fatta di meditazione, compassione, abnegazione ecc. – anche in chi non crede in un essere sovranaturale e, per converso, un orientamento religioso non necessariamente deve essere accompagnato da una particolare spiritualità.

La questione dei rapporti tra religione e spiritualità è estremamente dibattuta: i due concetti sono considerati da alcuni come sinonimi, da altri come intersecantisi, da altri come contrapposti.

Secondo alcuni la distinzione religione/spiritualità corrisponderebbe alla bipolarizzazione istituzionale/personale, esteriore/interiore, credenze/emozioni, verità oggettiva/autenticità oggettiva: equazioni che spesso scivolano dall'ambito descrittivo a quello valutativo, e quindi in considerazioni ideologiche sulla società e sulla religione. La cosiddetta “spiritualità post-moderna” (frase suggestiva, che non ha alcun concetto chiaro alle spalle) sembra guardare al trascendente come a una realtà psichica interiore, un sentimento psicologico d'essere inserito in una realtà invisibile, che supera la totalità delle cose osservabili e il mondo dell'esperienza quotidiana, prescindendo da un postulato cognitivo di un Trascendente divino e personale.

Altri (Paiva, 2005; Westerink, 2012), per esigenze di chiarezza concettuale (e di una definizione della stessa disciplina come “psicologia della religione”) vorrebbero introdurre una distinzione tra spiritualità teistica (psicologia della religione) e spiritualità non-teistica (psicologia della spiritualità);

Altri, come Salander (2012) più radicalmente, ritengono che il concetto di spiritualità, in psicologia della religione, sia inutile e confusivo. Opinione che pare condivisibile, se solo si pensa che il concetto di “spirituality”, endemico nella letteratura della “anglosfera”, ma più criticato in ambito europeo comprende tanti e tanto diversi significati: dalla devozione privata o pubblica a Dio, all'esperienza soggettiva ed interiore di autotrascendimento o di dedizione ai valori umanistici di fratellanza e solidarietà, alla meditazione e alle pratiche interiori di riscoperta del vero sé, alle tecniche di sviluppo del potenziale umano, all'attitudine di dare senso alla vita, alla ricerca del benessere psico-fisico, al rispetto degli animali, all'attenzione all'alimentazione vegetariana, alla capacità di “pensare positivo” in ogni accadimento della vita ecc. Usato in così tante accezioni, il concetto di spiritualità non riveste più nessuna realtà precisa, tanto meno operazionalizzabile. Con riferimento alla nota favola di Andersen si direbbe che l'imperatore, se non è proprio nudo, certamente è mal vestito!

Noi pensiamo che occorra distinguere la religione dalla spiritualità e che quest'ultima tenda a risolversi in un generale, indistinto, atteggiamento della psiche. Pensiamo necessaria una distinzione tra l'universale *search for meaning* e quella specifica risposta, non

necessaria né universale, al search for meaning che è la risposta “religiosa”. Ora, nella nostra cultura occidentale la religione è quella specifica risposta alla generale domanda di significato (*search for meaning*) che appella al Trascendente come fonte di senso e di valore/interesse ultimativo. Essa assume connotazioni specifiche (credenze, simboli, rituali, principi etici) in funzione dei diversi contesti storico-culturali e linguistico-simbolici (Antonietti e Iannello, 2013). Discriminante in questa definizione è la relazione (*religio*) che il credente intrattiene con il Trascendente, il “radicalmente Altro” (R. Otto). L’appello al trascendente comporta, secondo la lezione del grande teorico della personalità Gordon W. Allport, l’individuazione di un valore assoluto, quale cardine su cui ruota quella “unitaria filosofia di vita” che è essenziale per un “sentimento” di personalità maturo (Allport, 1950, pp. 67-70). Una religione veramente “intrinseca” ha carattere globalizzante, totalizzante, integrante di tutta la personalità, e comporta una disponibilità euristica e una consequenzialità etica. L’apertura al trascendente che il credente trova nel valore religioso può essere offerta, per il non credente, anche da valori umanistici, “assoluti di sostituzione” che se pur funzionalmente analoghi, sono qualitativamente diversi dalla religione. Credere in una relazione personale con Dio padre è cosa diversa che credere in un’ideologia, una missione, un destino o sentire di essere immersi in un tutto che ci circonda. (Con questa annotazione Allport prospettava già una possibile soluzione al problema dei rapporti tra religione e spiritualità. Purtroppo il suo background teorico è ignorata da molti di coloro che usano il suo strumento di religione intrinseca/estrinseca, ma lo riducono ad una strumento di rilevazione poco più che socio-demoscopica).

Questa opzione di definire religioso solo l’atteggiamento di riferimento al Trascendente aiuta a chiarire l’oggetto della psicologia della religione mentre ne limita il campo. Esclude che la religione posta ad oggetto dalla psicologia empirica sia una dimensione “interiore” della personalità o un *proprium* antropologico dell’uomo come sostengono i filosofi che parlano di *homo religiosus* o una forma specifica di “intelligenza” (Emmons, 2000), né che si identifichi con un interiore “senso religioso” o “spiritualità” o una ricerca di significato ultimo (“ultimate concern”) né che sia una dimensione della personalità,

o una specie di un sesto fattore accanto ai *big five*. Esclude, altresì, che si possa studiare una generica “religiosità mediana” o sentimento religioso, che sarebbero – secondo alcuni – sottese a tutte le diverse forme culturali e storiche della religione e per conseguenza, esclude la possibilità di elaborare test della religiosità validi in tutti i contesti culturali e simbolici a prescindere dalla dimensione storica e geografica.

Molti – e noi tra questi – preferiscono pensare alla religione come un fenomeno sociale e culturale, storicamente (e geograficamente) identificabile e differenziato, cui l’uomo si accosta con tutta l’insieme della sua personalità e la sua storia.

D’altra parte concepire la religione come una risposta al bisogno di significato fa sì che si parli a volte della religione come di un *meaning system*. La psicologia dovrebbe mettere preferibilmente l’accento sulla religiosità dell’individuo come *meaning making*, per sottolineare, anche qui, il rilievo decisivo del processo soggettivo nell’appropriazione del fenomeno culturale. La prima dicitura *meaning system* mette in evidenza l’istituzionalizzazione e la sedimentazione di credenze, significati, culto ed organizzazione comunitaria, mentre la seconda *meaning making* sottolinea la componente creativa che instaura la religiosità del singolo individuo.

### Psicologia: in difesa dell’autonomia

Sembra opportuno difendere l’approccio psicologico, in quanto psicologico, dal riduzionismo neurobiologico o dall’annessionismo sociologico.

Assunto che la disposizione religiosa nei confronti della realtà abbia una sua specificità rispetto alle altre forme con cui gli individui e le collettività si aprono ed entrano in relazione con il mondo, è poi da capire se l’indagine psicologica riguardi un livello di questa disposizione che è irriducibile a quello indagato dalle neuroscienze. Che la preghiera o la meditazione, come tutto ciò che si verifica nella mente, abbia un corrispettivo neurobiologico è ovvio e banale. Un punto fermo che si può stabilire è che la psicologia è comunque necessaria per definire e descrivere il fenomeno mentale di cui le neuroscienze intendono occuparsi. L’esperienza mentale, ancorché fosse esperienza illusoria (in quanto epifenomeno dei processi cerebrali), è comunque un qualcosa che a qualcuno accade, e come tale merita di essere preso in considerazione nei termini in

cui si manifesta, anche se l'intento fosse quello di non fermarsi alla descrizione in termini mentalistici ma di andare a scoprire i processi cerebrali che la determinano (Antonietti, 2008).

Una volta stabilito che le descrizioni psicologiche sono necessarie per mettere in corrispondenza esperienze mentali e processi neurobiologici, si tratta però di capire se, una volta acquisita la definizione psicologica del fenomeno mentale da indagare, la si possa poi abbandonare mantenendo soltanto la descrizione del processo neurobiologico. Infine, mentre nello studio scientifico delle realtà materiali ha senso procedere dall'apparenza a una realtà più profonda, oggettiva, indipendente dai nostri sensi, nel caso della mente non si tratta di passare dall'apparenza a una realtà profonda, perché l'apparenza soggettiva è l'essenza del mentale (Antonietti, 2006). La dolorosità non è una proprietà contingente del dolore; la dolorosità è l'essenza del dolore. Se provo un dolore, la sensazione del dolore è in tutto e per tutto ciò che provo; non ha senso dire che quel dolore è in realtà un processo cerebrale.

Le corrispondenze tra fenomeni psicologici e processi neurobiologici sono spesso addotte come evidenze che supportano la specificità degli atteggiamenti mentali. Ma questa specificità può spesso essere evidenziata per altre vie. Per esempio, l'attenuarsi della percezione del confine tra sé e la realtà e il disorientamento spaziale che compaiono durante la meditazione cui si accompagna – secondo i dati di Newberg e D'Aquili (1998) – la riduzione dell'attività del lobo parietale posteriore superiore, erano già note per via dell'analisi psicologica. Nel caso dell'epilessia del lobo temporale il dato neurobiologico mostra che un'esperienza "religiosa" come quella dei pazienti in questione è particolare rispetto alla quotidianità, poiché in sua corrispondenza il cervello si trova in uno stato particolare. Ma che quel genere di esperienza sia particolare lo si sapeva indipendentemente dal dato neurobiologico, poiché pensieri, interessi, atteggiamenti e comportamenti testimoniavano in abbondanza a favore della sua particolarità. Inoltre che un'esperienza psicologica particolare sia accompagnata da uno stato neurale particolare non è sorprendente per quell'unità psico-biologica che è l'uomo (Antonietti, 2005). Potrebbe invece essere interessante scoprire, tramite rilevazioni più fini, che – l'esempio è del tutto fittizio – i pazienti in questione

mostrano sistematicamente, durante la crisi epilettica o nei periodi inter-crisi, o un'attivazione neurobiologica N1 o un'attivazione N2. Questo potrebbe essere l'indizio di due forme diverse di "contatto" con il divino che a livello psicologico non erano state rilevate. La ricostruzione più dettagliata di ciò che i pazienti provano o pensano potrebbe così portare a individuare un contatto di genere P1 caratterizzato dalla sensazione di capire il mistero della realtà (un contatto prevalentemente intellettuale) e un contatto di genere P2 caratterizzato dalla sensazione di serenità e bellezza (un contatto prevalentemente emotivo-estetico). Le differenziazioni suggerite dal dato biologico andrebbero tuttavia provate sul piano psicologico dai resoconti introspettivi, dall'analisi degli atteggiamenti, dalla rilevazione delle espressioni facciali, dallo studio delle espressioni linguistiche ecc. (Antonietti e Iannello, 2011).

Per quel che riguarda l'approccio della psicologia sociale alla religione, ci si potrà chiedere se, in che modo e in che cosa la psicologia sociale della religione si qualifica all'interno della psicologia sociale e si distingue, per esempio dalla psicologia sociale di altri sistemi ideologici (Deconchy, 2010). La psicologia della religione non è una psicologia sociale applicata alle manifestazioni e comportamenti religiosi, così come potrebbe essere applicata ad altri comportamenti osservabili o dichiarati: nella politica, nei contatti sociali, nell'educazione, nella famiglia, nella pubblicità, nell'alimentazione ecc.

Se, da una parte la psicologia della religione comporta il riferimento ad un fenomeno culturale definito come "religione" (istituzionalizzazione di credenze, culto, organizzazione, linguaggio simbolico) socialmente osservabile e tipificabile, d'altra parte vi è indispensabile la comprensione fenomenologica dell'intenzionalità costitutiva dei vissuti psichici verso la religione e della loro interazione con altri vissuti, processi e dinamismi della personalità a livello intrapsichico. Del resto, anche il recentissimo volume *Religion, Personality and Social Behavior* curato Vassilis Saroglou (2014) evidenzia la necessità di ricondurre l'atteggiamento religioso (che pur si manifesta in comportamenti socialmente visibili, in quanto legato alla cultura, al linguaggio, alla simbolica religiosa) alla psicologia della personalità.

Le esplorazioni su tradizionali indicatori socio-demoscopici – frequenza ai riti, appartenenza ad un

gruppo, autoattestazione (self-report) di adesione e di livello di credenze – sono solo l'avvio iniziale dello studio dei vissuti religiosi e appaiono inadeguate a cogliere le dimensioni della religiosità, le sue motivazioni psichiche, i suoi effetti. La facilità d'uso di strumenti che consentono di raggiungere un cospicuo numero di soggetti, come ad esempio i questionari on-line, non garantisce però i ricercatori circa la correttezza metodologica e la validità delle conclusioni delle loro ricerche come “psicologia della religione”. La psicologia della religione richiede l'attenzione costante a coniugare l'aspetto “quantitativo” della ricerca dei dati con una prospettiva interpretativa “fenomenologica”, nel rispetto sia dell'intenzionalità specifica e caratterizzante della condotta religiosa (nei confronti del Trascendente) sia delle peculiarità dell'ambiente e del contesto culturale in cui essa si verifica e si istituzionalizza come culto, rito, organizzazione.

### Per un approccio psicodinamico

Ciò richiama l'attenzione sulla dimensione psicodinamica personale dell'atteggiamento verso la religione. L'individualità religiosa si costruisce lungo un processo di appropriazione personale che comporta il riconoscimento e la distanza, la differenziazione e l'alterità rispetto alla religione conosciuta nella cultura. Il grande pediatra e psicoanalista Donald W. Winnicott (1953/1974) ci ha insegnato che il bambino crea la madre che trova (vale a dire: quella donna era già là, ma non è “la madre” del bambino finché il bambino non entra in relazione con lei, riconoscendola come altra da sé). Si potrebbe applicare questa idea sostenendo che nella religione “il credente crea il Dio che trova”. Vale a dire che la nostra relazione con Dio e la nostra religione si strutturano in uno “spazio potenziale” molto complesso che è anche funzione di tutto un contesto personale, a partire da esperienze emotive primarie. Religiosi non si nasce, si diventa, attraverso un costante scambio e co-costruzione con l'ambiente culturale circostante, nell'interazione tra mondo soggettivo ed interno e mondo reale esterno (Aletti, 2005).

Questa visione dinamica e costruzionista dà ragione delle molteplici espressioni della religione, della sua accettazione o rifiuto, ed anche di molti processi e conflitti che si verificano nell'approccio dell'uomo alla religione del proprio ambiente cultu-

rale. Il modello darebbe conto, per esempio del fatto che l'atteggiamento personale del credente è sempre in tensione dialettica con le forme istituzionalizzate della religione (dogma, culto, organizzazione), ritagliandosi una ‘zona intermedia’ tra soggettività ed oggettività. Il modello segnala anche l'interazione di simboli e riti religiosi codificati con il personale processo di “dazione di senso”, che può spiegare sia l'adesione sia la negazione della credenza, sia la sua utilizzazione in forme de-viate e per-verse e/o creative e innovative, rispetto al sistema simbolico religioso istituzionale (Aletti, Fagnani e Colombo, 1998).

Di qui la necessità del dialogo con la teologia per la conoscenza dei contenuti della religione che si studia dal punto di vista psicologico. In proposito dovrebbe far riflettere il senso di estraneità denunciato dal credente rispetto ai tratti con cui lo studioso, psicologo, sociologo o filosofo, descrive la sua fede. In particolare gli uomini di Chiesa, pastori e teologi, denunciano il loro disagio alla lettura di tante indagini e ricerche psicologiche che appaiono inadeguate, periferiche e frammentarie (infine, “fuori centro” quanto all'oggetto) incapaci di cogliere ciò che è veramente la “loro” religione. Questa critica deve essere ascoltata dal ricercatore, il confronto costante con i credenti e con i teologi aiuta lo psicologo a una de-costruzione delle sue stesse categorie, e a verificare continuamente la validità di strumenti, anche se sembrano consolidati dall'uso di molti decenni (Aletti, 2012a).

La carenza di ricerche su simili concreti comportamenti religiosi e il prevalente concentrarsi su concetti generali ed astratti, quali religione, spiritualità e le loro dimensioni strutturali rappresenta una delle difficoltà che la psicologia della religione deve affrontare oggi. Gli psicologi della religione dovrebbero tornare nelle chiese, nelle sinagoghe, nelle moschee; non per aumentare la loro fede; ma semplicemente per essere dei veri psicologi della religione!

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Entrambi gli autori partecipano alle attività dell'Unità di Ricerca in Psicologia della Religione dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano.

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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Aletti, M., & Antonietti, A. (2015). Qualificare la psicologia, rispettare la religione: La distintività della psicologia della religione. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 15-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A12i>.

English version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A12e>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>



Theoretical paper



## Psicologia della Religione e-journal

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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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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Aletti, M., & Antonietti, A. (2015). Defending psychology, respecting religion: The distinctiveness of the psychology of religion. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 23-30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A12e>.

Versione italiana: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A12i>.

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Studies and research



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### Religion and the Submissive component of Depression: An explorative study

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#### Riassunto

##### La religione e la componente remissiva della depressione: uno studio esplorativo

Generalmente, le persone depresse tendono ad adottare comportamenti sottomessi, ad avere una scarsa considerazione di sé nel confronto sociale, alimentando la paura di una valutazione negativa. Un prolungato comportamento sottomesso, nel tempo, può tradursi in un disturbo depressivo. Allo stesso modo, in un’ottica evolutiva, le convinzioni e gli atteggiamenti religiosi presentano notevoli implicazioni per la vita sociale: stabilire e mantenere gerarchie, figure di potere e relazioni asimmetriche. Tutte queste implicazioni rappresentano esempi di comportamenti sottomessi tra persone religiose e credenti. Nel presente studio, il legame tra orientamento religioso e comportamento sottomesso è stato esplorato in un campione di 391 studenti universitari. I risultati hanno evidenziato che le persone caratterizzate da un orientamento religioso estrinseco sono più propense ad instaurare comportamenti sottomessi. Diversamente, nessuna associazione è stata riscontrata tra depressione e orientamento religioso. In conclusione, un orientamento religioso di tipo estrinseco sociale è funzionale nel perseguire obiettivi attraverso comportamenti sociali, ed è indirettamente coinvolto nella sintomatologia depressiva.

**Parole chiave:** Depressione, Religiosità, Comportamento sottomesso, Orientamento religioso

#### Abstract

Generally, depressed people tend to adopt submissive behavior, to have a low self-consideration in social comparison, which causes fear of a negative evaluation. A time-prolonged submission results into a development of depression. Likewise, from an evolutionary view, religious beliefs and attitudes have functional implications for social life: establishing and maintaining hierarchies, figures of power, and asymmetric relationships. All these implications accounted for submissive behavior in religious people. In this study, the link between depression, religious orientation and submissive behavior, and how these were causally related, was explored in a sample of 391 undergraduate students. Results showed that people characterized by an extrinsic religious orientation were more likely to engage submissive behaviors. No evidence of depression-religiosity pattern was found. These results suggest that an extrinsic social religious orientation play a functional goal-pursuit role in social behavior, but indirectly involves depressive symptoms.

**Keywords:** Depression, Religion, Submissive behavior, Religious orientation

## Introduction

Depression is one of the most debilitating and common mental illness in the world and the risk of relapse and the human cost for this disease are consistent (World Health Organization, 1998). Depression is the first cause of dysfunction in subjects between 14 and 44 years, with the overall impact of depressive disorder involves high prevalence from adolescence to older age. It causes significant deficits in social and academic context, and implies difficulty of diagnosis and high probability of relapse (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003).

Rates of depression vary between 2.6% and 12.7% in men and between 7% and 21% in women (Kessler, McGonagle, & Zhao, 1994). Prevalence of major depressive disorder in 18-29 year-old individuals is three times higher than the individuals age 60 years or older. The society is characterized by competition to achieve self-realization. The competitive environment is based on social confrontation, fear of a rejection and the perception of inferiority when we do not reach the social and personal realization (Cheung, Gilbert, & Irons, 2004). Competitiveness is linked to the experiences of life and cultural factors (consumerism or insecurity at work). If we feel inferior, we are more under pressure to achieve our projects, we are more competitive and we could be a higher risk of depression (Gilbert et al., 2007; Balsamo, Carlucci, Sergi, Murdock, & Saggino, 2015).

Evolutionary approach sought to explore the evolution mechanisms of the depression and if these processes could be adaptive (Sloman, Gilbert, & Hasey, 2003; Gilbert, 2006). It suggested that depression evolves in aversive social situations (Allen & Badcock, 2003) and the depressed mood could be an involuntary self-protective response (Allan & Gilbert, 1997). In this sense, one of the factor underlying of depression should be the submissiveness (Gilbert & Allan, 1998). The subordinate behaviour could be adaptive mechanism because it reduces the possibility of a failure (Sloman et al., 2003).

In the evolutionary approach, the Social Rank Theory suggested that both humans and animals have similar display in social aversive contexts: subjects in low rank tend to be subordinate and they are seen such inferior by similar (Allan & Gilbert, 2002; Byrne, et al., 2007). Submissive strategies are useful to promote hierarchical conflict termination (Sloman

et al., 2003). Aversive contexts are often unfavorable in social evaluations, in which individuals see themselves as inferior to a potential evaluating. On these bases, within the Social Rank Theory, depression and its symptomatology are linked to the perceptions of social status and fear of negative evaluation in social comparison (Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995).

Emotions, thoughts and moods are influenced by perceptions of our status or rank. Poor perceptions of the social position lead to feeling of inferiority, involuntary subordination, feeling defeated and lower and submissive behavior (Gilbert, 2000; Gilbert et al., 2007). The involuntary subordination is a relatively adaptive and stable trait, characterized by social comparison, defeat and submissive behavior (Sturman, 2011). Existing literature underlined that many depressed people tend to adopt submissive behavior (Allan & Gilbert, 1997; Forrest & Hokanson, 1975). For example, low self-consideration in social comparison produces fear of a negative evaluation. These processes lead to a submissive behaviour (Cheung et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2000). A time-prolonged submission results into a development of depression (Allan & Gilbert, 1997; Cheung et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2000; Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Swallow & Kuiper, 1988). Social comparison evaluation and hierarchical system play a key role in the understanding of the relation between submissive behavior and depression (Cheung et al., 2004). Given the importance of social context in the development of depression, also religion as specific social context could be involved in depression.

Religious beliefs or attitudes, from an evolutionary view, have functional implications for social life (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Boyer, 2001), for example, to establishing and maintaining hierarchies, figures of power, and asymmetric relationships (Kirkpatrick, 2005), and conditioning morality through reward or fear of punishment (Johnson & Bering, 2006). Bowing and kneeling represent behavioural expressions of veneration typical of religious practices. These display a form of submission of low-rank individuals to high-rank ones in human and nonhuman species (Burkert, 1996). Religions promote a God Image as similar to humans but, at the same time a superior one (thus, a promoted low rank of believers); this dualistic view of rank seems facilitate both prosocial and antisocial (i.e. the legitimation of



outgroup prejudice) behavior (Saroglou, Corneille & Van Cappellen, 2009).

Many self-report measures have been used in research to test the relation between religious and submission behavior (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). However, all these studies included obedience, compliance, conformity, dependence, restriction of free will, as measures of submission. For instance, intrinsically religious and fundamentalists people showed high rate of right-wing authoritarianism; in which the submission of authority is a key component (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005). Religious young adults tend to give high importance to values maintaining the social order, such as tradition and conformity, and low importance to self-direction (Picconi, Carlucci, Balsamo, Tommasi, & Saggino, 2014; Saroglou et al., 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995). In addition, aspects like trust of authorities and acceptance of their decisions (Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009), and submission to unjustified hypothetical request (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008) represent explicit religious-submission attitude. Similarly, using experimental task, Saroglou et al. (2009) showed how religious priming activates submission-related thoughts like obedience, or dependence, and increase among submissive individuals, compliance to an experimenter request for vindictive behavior. Exposure to religious cues may enhance people's willingness to assimilate their decisions to those of others, for the better or the worse depending on the specific content of the social influence (Van Cappellen, Corneille, Cols, & Saroglou, 2011). People living their religious experience in every aspect of their life have been described as individuals with intrinsic orientations (Allport, 1966). People who have an extrinsic orientation often using religion to reach for example a social status (Allport & Ross, 1967) and participation in powerful in-group (Genia & Shaw, 1991). The intrinsic religious orientation is associated with a better psychological well-being, while the extrinsic religious orientation is related to a poorer well-being (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999).

Several psychologists of religion and scientists have long been fascinated by the role that religion plays in everyday psychological adjustment, i.e. in the response to life events, stressor or physical injury, and how this manifests itself (i.e. coping effects, an

external useful resource). Different reviews of the literature showed contradictory findings and did not all arrive at consistent conclusions (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). These contradictory results were in great part due to author operationalization's of religiosity (often mistake with spirituality) and mental health (well-being, remission of symptoms or disorder, social or cognitive functioning).

Religion is a complex dimension and several aspects of it, are differentially related to mental health. For example, religious supports, closeness to God, prayer were aspects of religiosity positively associated with mental health; only few aspects presented negative impact to mental health, like the religious doubt and spiritual struggle (Hill & Pargament, 2003).

Generally, most researches in the field of psychology of religion and mental health take into account religious orientations dimension and its relation to depression (Genia & Shaw, 1991; Koenig, 1995; Maltby & Day, 2000; Maltby et al., 1999). Different studies investigated the relationship between depression and religion, but their results are controversial (Koenig, 1998). Early and recent studies underlined how the prevalence and the incidence of depression were related to religious affiliations. Specifically, secular Jews, Pentecostals, and those with no affiliations presented a higher risk for depression (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Particularly, eastern European Jewish males' exhibit higher prevalence of depressive symptoms: i.e. dysphoria, insomnia, fatigue, and loss concentrations compared with no Jewish males, and were more to complain about symptoms. This relationship could be explained by genetic factors, to the extended use of mental health services and the verbalization of their emotional pain (rather than suppress it with alcohol, typical of no Jewish). On the contrary, higher rates of depression among Pentecostal and no religious affiliations were related, respectively, to their socioeconomic status and lack of social support (Koenig et al., 2012).

Concerning religious orientation, an intrinsic religiousness was associated with lower scores on depression measures: an intrinsic faith may be intrinsically therapeutic for the religious individuals (Genia & Shaw, 1991; Koenig, 1995; Maltby & Day, 2000; Maltby et al., 1999). On the other hand, extrinsic orientation was associated with higher scores on de-

pression measures (Genia & Shaw, 1991; Maltby & Day, 2000; Park, Cohen, & Herb, 1990). Finally, some studies failed to find correlation between religion and depression (Bergin, Masters, & Richards, 1987), as well as between fundamentalist intrinsically oriented with depression and anxiety (Carlucci, Tommasi, Balsamo, Furnham, & Saggino, 2015). Research on patients with medical illnesses found that the intrinsic religious orientation allowed for a faster remission of disease in 70% of medical cases (Koenig, 1998). The lack of clarity about the association between religiousness (in particular, religious orientation) and depression was due to several factors. Some limits maybe due to the use of the certain instruments and the limited use of multiple measure for each constructs. Moreover, in the light of the findings presented above, religiousness potentially play an important role and significant implications in social behavior (Van Cappellen et al., 2011) and mental health (Koenig, & Larson, 2001), as well as submissive behavior on depression.

Thus, the study aimed firstly to explore the relationship between religion, depression and submissive behavior; secondly, the predicting role of religious orientation on submissive behavior and depression was tested. Based on the current literature, we expected to find significant and positive correlations between submissive behavior and depression, similarly with extrinsic religious orientation measure. As the association between religiousness and depression, no a priori hypothesis was formulated.

## Methods

### Participants

The sample was composed of 391 undergraduate students who participated for course extra credit. The sample was composed of 86.4% females and 13.6% males, with a mean age of 20.78 (SD = 3.64) years. Participants' religious affiliation was as follows: 81.8% Catholic, 0.5% Jews, 0.3% Orthodox, 0.3%, Protestant and 17.1% other or no Affiliation. The religious sample professed regular churchgoers.

### Instruments

*Teate Depression Inventory.* The Teate Depression Inventory (TDI; Balsamo & Saggino, 2013, 2014) is a new 21-item self-report instrument de-

signed to assess major depressive disorder as specified by the latest editions of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013; Balsamo & Saggino, 2013). It was developed via Rasch logistic analysis of responses, within the framework of item-response theory (Andrich, 1995), to overcome inherent psychometric weaknesses of existing measures of depression, including the BDI-II (Balsamo & Saggino, 2007). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 "always" to 4 "never". A small but growing literature suggests that the TDI has strong psychometric properties in both clinical and nonclinical samples (Balsamo, Carlucci, et al., 2015; Balsamo, Carlucci, & Sergi, 2016; Balsamo, Giampaglia, & Saggino, 2014; Balsamo, Imperatori, et al., 2013; Balsamo, Innamorati, Van Dam, Carlucci, & Saggino, 2015; Balsamo, Macchia, et al., 2015; Balsamo, Romanelli, et al., 2013). In a recent study, three cutoff scores were recommended in terms of sensitivity, specificity, and classification accuracy for screening for varying levels (minimal, mild, moderate, and severe) of depression severity in a group of patients diagnosed with major depressive disorder (Balsamo & Saggino, 2014).

*Submissive Behavior Scale.* The Submissive Behavior Scale (SBS, Allan & Gilbert, 1997) is a 16-item unidimensional self-report measure adapted from Buss and Craik (1986) to assess submissive social behavior. Respondents rate a series of statements on a 5-point scale (ranging from 0 to 4). Items refer to behaviors such as avoiding eye contact with others or walking out of a shop, the measure is a response scale based on behavioral frequency. This scale has satisfactory internal consistency and test-retest reliability, in both student and depressed group (Allan & Gilbert, 1997). It has been used in a number of studies concerned with assertive behavior (Gilbert & Allan, 1994), and depression (i.e., Gilbert, Allan, & Trent, 1995).

*Religious Orientation Scale-Revised.* The Religious Orientation Scale-Revised (I/E-R, Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989) is a 14-item self-report measure revised of the Gorsuch and Venable's 20-items "Age-Universal" IE scale. Items were rated on 5-likert point from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The scale measures both intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation originally posited by Allport (1950). Based on Kirkpatrick's (1989) conclusion, the scale

measures the intrinsic orientation (I, 7 items) and two extrinsic subscales: 1) personally oriented (Ep, 3 items), and 2) socially oriented (Es, 3 items).

Also, we administered two single items that assess both religiosity and church attendance. The first was assessed by a 7-point Likert scale from 1 “not religious” to 7 “very religious”. For church attendance (how frequently people participate in worship), the scale ranged from 1 “once a day”, 3 “once a week” to 6 “never”.

## Results

Means, standard deviations and reliability for the submissive, depression and religiousness measures were presented in Table 1. The univariate normality test showed skewness and kurtosis indices within the range  $\pm 1$  (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). All the measure showed a good internal consistency, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients range from .70 to .93.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the measures used in the study (N=391)

	Reliability	Mean	Std. Dev.
Intrinsic	.83	24.39	7.86
Extrinsic Social	.81	4.36	2.20
Extrinsic Personal	.81	9.10	3.59
TDI	.93	30.24	13.44
SBS	.79	20.11	7.77
Religiosity	-	5.21	2.57
Church Attendance		3.62	1.12

Note: TDI = Teate Depression Inventory; SBS = Submissive Behavior Scale.

Correlations were carried out (see Table 2), using the Bravais-Pearson  $r$  and the Spearman's  $\rho$  correlation coefficients, showed that the three subtests of I/E-R scales did not significantly correlate with depression measure. The correlation trend underlined the negative association between Intrinsic ( $r_{TDI} = -.078$ ) and Extrinsic Social ( $r_{TDI} = -.054$ ) religious orientation and a trivial association with Extrinsic personal ( $r_{TDI} = .035$ ). In addition, the two extrinsic religious orientation dimension presented slightly positive correlations with Submissive Behavior Scale ( $r_{Es} = .110$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r_{Ep} = .135$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The SBS, also, correlated positively and significantly with depression measure ( $r_{TDI} = .378$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover,

religiousness indices showed positive and significant association only with I-E/R dimensions (ranged from  $\rho = .340$  to  $\rho = .689$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

In order to pursue our second aim, we carried out two linear regression analyses with stepwise method (see Table 3). Depression, submissive behaviour and extrinsic social and personal variables were entered each time as the predicted variable. In all the models only the variables correlated with submissive behaviour were included. In the first regression (Model 1), submissive behaviour variable was entered as criterion, and depression and the extrinsic dimensions of religious orientation as predictor. In the second (Model 2), depression became the criterion and religious orientation dimension and submissive behaviour were introduced as predictor variables. In Model 1, the depression ( $\beta = .382$ ,  $t = 8.116$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and only the extrinsic social religious ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $t = 2.763$ ;  $p < .001$ ) orientation resulted to predict submissive behaviour. In Model 2, as expected, the submissive behaviour predicted depression ( $\beta = .385$ ,  $t = 8.120$ ;  $p < .001$ ), better than extrinsic social religious ( $\beta = -.096$ ,  $t = -2.019$ ;  $p = .044$ ). Additionally, a third model was tested, in which extrinsic personal and social orientation were entered as criterion and submissive and depression were introduced as predictor variables. None of the variables included in the model as a predictor succeeded to explain extrinsic religious orientation.

## Conclusions

Up to now, there is good evidence about the link between submissive behavior with depression (Cheung et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2000) and submissiveness and religion (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Saroglou et al., 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995; Van Cappellen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, no evidence concerned religious orientation and depression relationship, it was found in this study. However, literature showed an unclear relationship between religion and depression (i.e., Smith et al., 2003). Studies focused on religious orientation, as a specific dimension of religion, underlined that extrinsic orientation was correlated with depressive measure more than intrinsic religious (Genia & Shaw, 1991; Koenig, 1995; Maltby & Day, 2000; Maltby et al., 1999). Therefore, our goal was to explore, the presence of a relationship between submissive behavior, religious orientation

Table 2: Correlations between I-E/R, Submissive Behavior, Depression and Religiosity measures

	Es	Ep	TDI	SBS	R <sup>†</sup>	CA <sup>†</sup>
Intrinsic	.323**	.665**	-.078	.059	.689**	.619**
Extrinsic Social (Es)	-	.273**	-.054	.110*	.340**	.371**
Extrinsic Personal (Ep)		-	.035	.135*	.636**	.431**

Listwise comparison N=381. \*p<.01, \*\*p<.05; † = Spearman Rho

Note: TDI = Teate Depression Inventory; SBS = Submissive Behavior Scale; R = Religiosity; CA = Church Attendance.

Table 3: Summary of Linear Regression analysis for variables predicting, in turn, Submissive Behavior and Depression

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> adj.		B	SE	$\beta$	t	Sig.
<b>Model 1</b>									
Step One	.375	.140	.138	TDI	.217	.027	.375	7.911	.000
Step Two				TDI	.221	.027	.382	8.116	.000
	.397	.157	.153	Es	.458	.166	.130	2.763	.006
<b>Model 2</b>									
Step One	.375	.140	.138	SBS	.648	.082	.375	7.911	.000
Step Two				SBS	.666	.082	.385	8.12	.000
	.387	.150	.145	Es	-.584	.289	-.096	-2.019	.044

and depression. In line with the literature, this study highlighted how religious attitude and beliefs were not directly associated with depression (Bergin et al., 1987; Carlucci et al., 2015). The results showed that depression was significantly correlated with submissive behavior, as suggested by the existing literature (Allan & Gilbert, 2002; Cheung et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2000; Sturman, 2011; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002). Moreover, submissive behavior presented slight positive correlations with both religious orientation, personal and social extrinsic. Only the extrinsic social religious orientation predicted submissiveness, like depression. On the contrary, extrinsic religious orientation seems not determined by submissiveness behavior and depression mood. Finally, neither intrinsically religious orientation, church attendance, and religiosity indices have been correlated significantly with depression and submissive behavior measures.

In addition, results suggested how extrinsically oriented people use religion to have social status and participation in powerful in-group (Allport & Ross, 1967; Genia & Shaw, 1991). Both personal and social extrinsic religious orientations could be framed

as goal-pursuits through behavior; but extrinsic-personal orientation consists of the use of the religion to gain comfort, security or protection, while extrinsic-social consists of the use of the religion to gain social contact. The maintenance of hierarchies and an asymmetric relationships, lead individuals to see themselves as inferior to a potential evaluating. An extrinsic religious orientation, indirectly, contribute to a self-perceived submissive behavior trait; leading individual to develop a depressed mood.

Summarizing, the slightly positive significant correlations between extrinsic religious orientation and submissive behavior, found in this study, suggest how religiousness carry out a functional goal-pursuit role in social behavior, and may be involved indirectly in depressive symptoms. Religious attitude and beliefs were associated with submission concepts in people who tends to use religion as a way to achieve their goals and people with the tendency to comply and to conform to the others (Van Cappellen et al., 2011). Depression, in this way, can be seen as the repeated consequence of the failure of this strategy.

This study presents different limitations. The sample was composed exclusively by undergraduate stu-

dents, so the generalizability of the results is limited. Moreover, older adults are more religious oriented than younger and depressive symptoms are more prevalent among the elderly (Koenig, 1998). Methodologically, a sample size effect can be observed, and the analysis carried out here were not exhaustive, and did not covered all the effect-cause role of the variables involved into the study. Future researches should generalize these data in clinical sample and in a specific religious sample, as suggested by Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001). Likewise, to confirm the hypothesis that religious orientation may be involved indirectly in depression development is necessary to use more robust statistic techniques, i.e. the mediation/moderation analysis. This study represents a first attempt to understand how religious orientation influence individual's perception and behavior. Future studies and findings, in this direction, will provide useful clinical indications, developing intervention or therapeutic innovations programs for depression, and adjustment disorders, i.e. the compassionate mind training (Gilbert & Irons, 2005).

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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Carlucci, L., Macchia, A., Sergi, M. R., Balsamo, M. & Saggino, A. (2015). Religion and the Submissive component of Depression: An explorative study. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 31-40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A09>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>



2015

Rassegne e riflessioni



## Psicologia della Religione e-journal

Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione

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### L'eredità di Lou Andreas Salomé e Donald Winnicott come contributo psicoanalitico alla ricerca teologica. Alcune considerazioni

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#### Riassunto

Muovendo dalle prospettive aperte da Lou Andreas Salomé e Donald Winnicott, questo contributo propone di superare il problema della verità delle affermazioni teologiche (le credenze) mostrando che, in realtà la valenza psicologica della religione consiste proprio nel “credere”. Lou Andreas Salomé considera il narcisismo come un’esperienza originaria di fusione con il tutto. L’individuo per tutta la vita tenderebbe a ricostituire quello stato di benessere attraverso esperienze pregnanti, quali l’amore, l’arte, la religione. In Salomé il credente “creativo” si distanzia dal “sedentario” in quanto crea, ed in un certo modo pone in essere, il suo Dio. Con Winnicott possiamo considerare la religiosità un fenomeno transizionale illusorio, se liberata dai residui dell’onnipotenza allucinatoria infantile. Come il bambino con la propria madre, anche il credente crea il Dio che trova. Si evidenzierà il guadagno teorico desumibile da questi autori. Se per il credente “creativo” di Salomé, la fede racchiude in se stessa il dubbio e la nostalgia delle origini, e se, per Winnicott, in ultima analisi la valenza psicologica della fede sta tutta nel crederci, il credente, non meno che lo psicologo della religione, è orientato alla consapevolezza della metaforicità sempre insatura del discorso religioso e, per conseguenza, anche al pluralismo religioso.

**Parole chiave:** Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psicoanalisi, teologia

#### Abstract

##### **The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research. Some considerations**

Starting from the legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott, this contribution aims to overcome the problem of the truth of theological affirmations (“beliefs”) maintaining that the psychological value of religion is just in “believing”. Lou Andreas Salomé thought that narcissism is an early experience of “oneness with the universe”. According to her, man tries all his life, to regain such a state of well-being via creative experiences such as art, love, and religion. As far as religion is concerned, Salomé articulates a clear distinction between a “creative” and a “sedentary” believer, since the “creative” believer – in a certain way – calls into being his God. Winnicott considers religion of the individual to be an illusory transitional phenomenon; as a child with his mother, a believer creates the God he finds. The contribution focus on the theoretical paths opened by Salomé and Winnicott. Since Salomé’s “creative” believer’s religious faith encompasses doubt and Winnicott states that, in conclusion, the psychological value of believing is “believing in anything at all”, believers and

psychologists of religion become aware of the never ending metaphoricity of religious language and, consequently, of the necessity of religious pluralism.

**Keywords:** Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psychoanalysis, theology

Questo contributo si propone di dimostrare la ricchezza per la ricerca teologica del punto di vista di Salomé sulla fede religiosa, intesa come “fragile involucro del dubbio”, e della prospettiva offerta da Winnicott sull’esperienza religiosa, intesa come fenomeno transizionale illusorio.

Lungi dal voler sostenere la verità del contenuto delle credenze, Salomé e Winnicott aprono una prospettiva sul “bisogno di credere” (“pre-religioso” e a-religioso), essenziale per ogni persona umana e fondamentale per la fede religiosa, in particolare quella cristiana.

Come è noto, Freud descrive la religione come un’illusione, intesa come appagamento di un desiderio. Un’illusione è una credenza fondata sui desideri, piuttosto che sulla ragione e la verifica empirica: pertanto, non è possibile dare un parere sul suo valore di realtà. Le illusioni non possono essere dimostrate, così come non possono essere confutate e, di conseguenza, non possono essere giudicate false o in contraddizione con la realtà. Ma certamente, sostiene Freud, l’illusione non è un delirio. Di certo, la psicoanalisi, più interessata ai processi psichici che al contenuto della religione, non può affermare che la religione sia ingannevole perché, come lo stesso Freud scrive ne *L’avvenire di un’illusione*: “In realtà la psicoanalisi è un metodo di ricerca, uno strumento imparziale” per cui, a buon diritto i “difensori della religione potranno servirsi della psicoanalisi per avvalorare in pieno il significato affettivo della dottrina religiosa” (Freud, 1927, pp. 466-467).

### Lou Andreas Salomé: la fede come fragile involucro del dubbio

Salomé propone una prospettiva sull’illusione ponendosi in “amichevole disaccordo” con Freud. Essa appartiene all’indistricabile regno dell’attività del pensare e del sentire: attività psichica profondamente umana e fonte creativa di ogni prodotto culturale come la scienza (non sovrapponibile alla mera attività razionale), l’arte o la religione. Il contenuto dell’illusione, in termini di realtà, non è rilevante,

benché abbia un impatto importante e indelebile per l’esperienza soggettiva dell’individuo.

Circa l’irrelevanza del contenuto di realtà rispetto alla forza del desiderio, nel saggio *Von frühem Gottesdienst*, Salomé riferisce un simpatico aneddoto, della sua infanzia (Salomé, 1913, pp. 151-152) riferito ad un *Knallbonbon*, il petardo di Natale che, scoppiando lascia uscire un piccolo dono, per la sorpresa del bambino.

“Un piccolo ricordo evidenzia il metodo con cui sono riuscita a tenere i dubbi lontani da me. In un magnifico petardo che mio padre mi aveva portato da una festa di corte immaginavo ci fossero dei vestiti d’oro; quando però mi si disse che conteneva solo vestiti di carta con le bordature dorate non lo feci più esplodere: così continuavano ad esserci dei vestiti d’oro” (Salomé 1969/1977, p. 24).

Per quel che riguarda l’impatto delle illusioni nella vita reale, ella ricorda che “la fede nella vita” la “joie de vivre” è un dono, una profonda relazione affettiva tra il bambino e Dio (un Dio personale) che si instaura stabilmente per tutta la vita.

Da dove viene questa forza creatrice delle illusioni? Secondo la Salomé, il processo di fede confina con quello della creazione artistica ed entrambi sono generati da uno stato originario di narcisismo primario, in cui realtà interna ed esterna non sono percepite come separate: “Ad ogni opera d’arte attribuiamo impressioni che non possiamo ricevere da alcuna realtà esterna e che tuttavia ci comunicano qualcosa che non è soltanto il frutto della soggettività, ma sembra fondato oggettivamente” (Salomé, 1931, p. 84). L’arte non necessita di un appagamento nella realtà; al contrario, essa trae dalla frustrazione del desiderio la tensione per raggiungere le vette del percorso creativo. Con un processo analogo, la fede autentica – la fede creativa – prende le distanze dalle raffigurazioni di Dio da essa stessa create.

La figura di credente “creativo” è ben lontana da quella di credente “sedentario”, poiché introduce una dimensione rigenerativa nell’atto di fede, dal momento che riformula costantemente l’idea di Dio che egli stesso si dà. Al contrario, la figura del credente



“sedentario” si connota per la sua staticità e passività: utilizza Dio (p. 70) e se ne serve come fosse una gruc- cia per abiti logori o un utile scaffale di supermercato pieno di oggetti consolatori. Il vero credente, è con- sapevole che nell’elaborazione religiosa personale e nella propria elaborazione della rappresentazione di Dio, egli “crea il suo Creatore” e sa di rischiare con- tinuamente la caduta in una idolatria delle immagini. Per cui “questa [matura] fede, la sola che non sia oggetto di abuso e che sia assolutamente compiuta, si addice solo all’uomo del dubbio”; la fede stessa è “il fragile involucro di questo dubbio” (p. 71), dal momento che il credente è consapevole che “in tutte le raffigurazioni” di Dio “non ci si può servire d’altro che di un’immagine terrena” (p. 71).

“Occorre comprendere che il culto di Dio è già un nome per vuoto, per una lacuna nella devozione, dove sono già presenti la perdita e la rinuncia, un bisogno di Dio perché non lo si possiede, mentre in ultima istanza Dio non potrebbe esistere come tale se non dove non c’è “bisogno” di lui. Chi voglia servir- sene non avrà più “Dio”, ma qualcosa che si segna a dito, per forzarlo ad assumere in un modo o nell’altro una forma visibile, terrena, intercambiabile” (p. 71).

Salomé osserva come la fede sia la proiezione di un narcisismo inconsapevole e primario; allo stesso tempo, essa appare anche come un richiamo nostal- gico verso una condizione originaria di completo appagamento che smuove proprio quel percorso crea- tivo e asintotico il cui obiettivo è sempre fuori dalla portata di una piena realizzazione, poiché collocato sempre in un altrove (Salomé, 1921). Per la Salomé questa fede “nella persona di fede ben riuscita: voglio dire rimasta sana” (1931, p. 103) non solo non è pato- logica, ma rientra in una sfera in cui “qualunque cosa accada costituisce l’esperienza più profonda, immer- sa forse nel fondo originario, nell’abisso dell’animo umano” (p. 72).

Per meglio trarre profitto dalla prospettiva aperta dalla Salomé, conviene soffermarsi sul bisogno di credere e sul desiderio di Dio. Il desiderio vive nel- l’assenza dell’oggetto o, per meglio dire, si origina dalla latenza di un oggetto percepito come presente ma indisponibile. Il credente creativo vive il proprio desiderio di Dio a partire proprio da una essenziale condizione di latenza del proprio Dio. È consapevole che l’uomo, in ultima analisi, non raggiungerà mai Dio, ma che la sua ricerca proseguirà, attraverso un

percorso asintotico e catartico, segnato dai limiti di un linguaggio che, per quanto riguarda il discorso su Dio, si rivela sempre una metafora insatura (Aletti, 1998; Aletti, Fagnani, & Colombo, 1998). Questo forse, potrebbe richiamare l’idea teologica del *deus absconditus* che riecheggia il passo del profeta Isaia (Is 45:15 CEI 2008): “In verità tu sei un Dio che ti nascondi, o Dio d’Israele, o Salvatore”; Dio di cui l’uomo può solo dire quello che non è, secondo la teologia apofatica.

### Winnicott: la religione come fenomeno transizionale illusorio

Nella storia delle teorie psicodinamiche, il pro- gressivo passaggio dal punto di vista pulsionale (fo- calizzato sulle dinamiche intrapsichiche) alla pro- spettiva relazionale (che tiene conto della rete e della struttura delle relazioni in cui un soggetto vive) ha aperto anche un rinnovato interesse per la compren- sione psicologica della religione e dei suoi rituali. In particolare, la prospettiva dell’esperienza transizio- nale, basata sul lavoro teorico-clinico di Donald W. Winnicott, si è dimostrata particolarmente utile.

Gli oggetti transizionali (ben noti alle madri sotto forma di oggetti esterni come orsetti, coperte, ninne nanne, lallazioni) permettono all’infante di pervenire ad una prima distinzione tra Me e non-Me: a partire dall’esperienza col seno materno, consentono un pro- gressivo adattamento con l’ambiente, con gli oggetti ed il loro uso. Gli oggetti transizionali sono “cose” che, investite di affetto, rappresentano e ricordano la madre quando non c’è.

Winnicott sottolinea che transizionale non è l’og- getto in sé, ma il suo utilizzo, vale a dire l’investi- mento affettivo sperimentato dal bambino: “Il bam- bino crea l’oggetto, ma l’oggetto era lì, in attesa di essere creato e di divenire un oggetto investito di ca- rica” (Winnicott, 1969/1974, p. 156). Riguardo alla relazione oggettuale primaria, quella con la madre, Winnicott osserva come il bambino crei la madre che trova. In un certo senso, la donna era già lì, ma non è ancora “la madre” del bambino fino a quando il bambino non si relaziona con lei.

Secondo Winnicott, lo “spazio potenziale” che si viene a costituire tra un oggetto reale esterno e l’investimento affettivo del bambino, tra il bambino e la madre, è una condizione di esperienza prototipica degli scambi che si instaurano tra bambino e fami-

glia e, in seguito, tra l'adulto e l'ambito sociale, tra mondo interno e realtà esterna; e questo vale anche per il gioco, il teatro, le arti, l'eroticismo e la religione.

“Si prende qui per assunto che il compito di accettazione-di-realtà non è mai completato, che nessun essere umano è libero dalla tensione di mettere in rapporto la realtà interna con la realtà esterna, e che il sollievo da questa tensione è provveduto da un'area intermedia di esperienza che non viene messa in dubbio (arte, religione, ecc.). Questa area intermedia è in diretta continuità con l'area del gioco del bambino piccolo, che è 'perduto' nel gioco” (Winnicott, 1953/1974, pp. 41-42).

La prospettiva dei fenomeni transizionali può essere impiegata per la comprensione della religiosità, laddove il credente trova ed investe affettivamente i dati oggettivi della religione presenti in un contesto culturale, intersecandoli con le disposizioni affettive e il proprio mondo interno. Si potrebbe così riformulare l'asserzione di Winnicott secondo cui il bambino crea la madre che trova: il credente crea il Dio che trova nella tradizione in cui vive. Così, la religione diventa la “sua” religione, intendendo con ciò che essa diviene significativa per lui. Naturalmente, questo non vuol dire che Dio sia una sorta di orsacchiotto, una specie di gigantesco *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Si tratta di un possibile schema di spiegazione tramite il quale può verificarsi l'appropriazione della rappresentazione simbolica di Dio nel mondo personale.

### Vantaggi della prospettiva transizionale

L'applicazione alla religione della prospettiva transizionale sembra essere utile in quanto spiega alcuni processi psichici e atteggiamenti del credente.

Uno dei principali contributi di questa prospettiva è quello di riuscire ad evidenziare l'interazione e la negoziazione tra esperienze idiosincratiche e dinamismi intra-psichici da un lato e ambiente socio-culturale dall'altro. In termini winnicottiani la religione, in quanto fenomeno transizionale è capace di gettare un ponte (*bridging*) tra mondo soggettivo e mondo oggettivo attraverso la creatività. Intesa come “una sorta di colorazione dell'intero atteggiamento verso la realtà esterna” (Winnicott, 1971/1974, p. 119). Opposta alla “compiacenza”, che implica un adattamento passivo alle richieste esterne ed un senso di futilità, nel singolo, l'“appercezione creativa” è fonte di un costante processo di costruzione del vero Sé. Da que-

sto punto vista, l'esperienza religiosa potrebbe essere un aspetto dell'ortogenesi del soggetto.

La prospettiva offerta dal modello dei fenomeni transizionali circa la religione tiene conto delle componenti emotivo-affettive, etiche, ludico-estetiche, cognitive e sociali. È in grado di interpretare l'atteggiamento personale del credente come costante tensione dialettica con i diversi aspetti della religione istituzionale (dogma, culto, organizzazione), che si ritaglia un'area intermedia di esperienza, tra la soggettività dei singoli individui e l'oggettività del mondo esterno. La prospettiva transizionale offre, d'altra parte, anche una comprensione circa l'uso de-viato e per-verso di alcune forme religiose istituzionali. L'immaginazione e la capacità creativa che anima l'esperienza religiosa potrebbe infatti scade-re nella trappola di un uso “autistico” o “feticistico” dei contenuti religiosi: nel primo caso, il soggetto non è in grado di uscire dalle strettoie della propria esperienza emotiva; mente nel secondo, il soggetto aderisce ad una materialità oggettiva, in cui prende forma un ritualismo privo di un significato religioso socializzabile. L'abuso feticistico può coinvolgere l'intera esperienza religiosa, spingendola verso una degenerazione mortifera: gli oggetti religiosi diventano talismani, mentre la creatività personale scade in stereotipo e ripetitività; il simbolismo religioso degenera in materialismo e in fondamentalismo letterale; i riti religiosi divengono rituali ossessivi o esoterici; l'appartenenza ad una chiesa o ad un gruppo religioso degrada in fanatismo e credulità acritica, la fiducia nel leader degenera in obbedienza passiva; la solidarietà e la coesione interna del gruppo si cristallizzano in distacco dall'esterno, in settarismo, paura del mondo e impossibilità di crescere (Aletti, 2005).

### Verso una prima conclusione

Per riassumere, con una inevitabile semplificazione, Salomé e Winnicott suggeriscono di guardare al fenomeno religioso da un punto di vista psicodinamico e socio-costruttivista. Il credente creativo fa un uso “sano” e transizionale dell'esperienza religiosa. Egli è consapevole che il linguaggio religioso è una metafora imperfetta, destinato a non essere mai appagato nel desiderio di comunicare ciò che appare indicibile e sa che il cammino religioso è asintotico, la cui meta è sempre fuori dalla sua portata, collocata in un altrove in cui l'oggetto del desiderio è irraggiungibile. È

nell'umile ricerca per la verità, e non in l'arroganza di possederla, che un uomo incontra la propria grandezza e il proprio limite, pur sempre entro l'ambito della normale salute mentale. Nella fede creativa la chiave è nella la ricerca. Nessuno può pretendere di essere "arrivato", perché, qualora lo facesse, tradirebbe l'intero percorso di crescita, che è sempre in corso d'opera: una ricerca. In questa prospettiva la salute psichica è ben lontana dal prospettarsi una postposizione compensatoria delle frustrazioni del presente in un al di là di questo mondo. Come annota Salomé, proprio con riguardo alla religione, "La salute è rappresentata dalla capacità di concepire il futuro nell'attimo presente" (1958/1980, p. 55).

Questa consapevolezza rende possibile al credente di accettare lealmente i diversi percorsi verso Dio e promuove un vero pluralismo religioso. Non per via di un'arrogante (presuntuosa) tolleranza, ma grazie alla fiducia nell'uomo e nella speranza che il dialogo possa portare ad una migliore comprensione non solo dell'oggetto del proprio desiderio nostalgico (Dio), ma anche del percorso (la religione) che questo desiderio accoglie, inevitabilmente contrassegnato dal conflitto e dagli esiti di questo conflitto.

Certamente, la psicologia della religione, incentrata sull'osservazione del soggetto, non esplora una credenza religiosa in sé, ma la personalità dei credenti. Ciò che conta per la psicologia non è se Dio esiste, ma che i credenti esistono. Peraltro, come dice Lou Salomé: "Non Dio è un termine religioso, bensì il MIO Dio" (dal "Libro domestico di Stibbe" [*Stibber Nestbuch*] n. 29, in Pfeiffer, 1999, p. 173). Gli psicologi si concentrano sulla rilevanza personale e culturale della religione, che accompagna tutta la storia del genere umano e, almeno nella cultura occidentale, tutta la vita dell'individuo.

Nella cultura occidentale, l'affermazione "Dio è morto" (firmato: Nietzsche) fa eco a "Nietzsche è morto" (firmato: Dio); o firmato "razza umana", "storia", "evoluzione". Ma anche firmato dal bisogno psicologico di credere. Se ci si attiene all'ambito dell'esperienza soggettiva – che è quello specifico della psicologia – si osserva che l'esperienza di credere o non credere coinvolge i processi psichici, i percorsi, i conflitti e risultati di questi conflitti: gli psicologi sono tenuti a prendere in considerazione questi aspetti, in quanto rilevanti per funzionamento psichico individuale e collettivo.

Come in tutte le scienze, l'obiettivo della psicologia (della religione) è la verità. Essa non mira né a condurre verso Dio né verso la non credenza: semmai, mette in luce gli aspetti psichici (consci o inconsci) di tutte le convinzioni, religiose, non-religiose, o anti-religiose (Aletti, 2014, pp. 15-18). In questo senso, la psicologia della religione può servire sia ai credenti che ai non credenti, poiché il suo interesse è rivolto alla verità psicologica.

Per credenti e teologi vi è una certezza: nella misura in cui la psicologia spiega la verità umana, rende gli esseri umani più in grado di trovare le motivazioni che stanno dietro la loro fede, che li rende più autonomi e consapevoli.

I credenti avranno quindi la possibilità di divenire "credenti creativi", avendo l'opportunità di osservare come la fede religiosa sia radicata nelle profondità della loro personalità e interagendo con lo spazio simbolico-culturale in cui possono sperimentare ed esprimere il proprio rapporto con Dio. All'interno della teorizzazione psicoanalitica i teologi cristiani potranno trovare un modello per una ricerca teologica che tenga conto della verità antropologica dell'essere umano. Un modello aperto – e non costretto – all'accettazione della parola performativa di un Dio che si auto-rivela. Il teologo potrà inoltre apprezzare appieno le dimensioni conflittuali della fede, intesa come ricerca individuale verso l'accettazione o il rifiuto della parola divina.

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Il testo è una rielaborazione della comunicazione *Faith, as frail wrapping of doubt. The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research*, presentata da Mario Aletti e Cristina Scarpa al 2011 IAPR Congress (Bari, 21-25 agosto) nel corso del panel "Psychoanalytic contributions to theology and the question of truth in religion" (chairman M. Aletti).

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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Aletti, M. (2015). L'eredità di Lou Andreas Salomé e Donald Winnicott come contributo psicoanalitico alla ricerca teologica. Alcune considerazioni. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 41-46. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A25i>.

English version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A26e>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>





Theoretical paper



Psicologia della Religione e-journal

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## The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research. Some considerations

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### Riassunto

#### L'eredità di Lou Andreas Salomé e Donald Winnicott come contributo psicoanalitico alla ricerca teologica. Alcune considerazioni

Muovendo dalle prospettive aperte da Lou Andreas Salomé e Donald Winnicott, questo contributo propone di superare il problema della verità delle affermazioni teologiche (le credenze) mostrando che, in realtà la valenza psicologica della religione consiste proprio nel “credere”. Lou Andreas Salomé considera il narcisismo come un'esperienza originaria di fusione con il tutto. L'individuo per tutta la vita tenderebbe a ricostituire quello stato di benessere attraverso esperienze pregnanti, quali l'amore, l'arte, la religione. In Salomé il credente “creativo” si distanzia dal “sedentario” in quanto crea, ed in un certo modo pone in essere, il suo Dio. Con Winnicott possiamo considerare la religiosità un fenomeno transizionale illusorio, se liberata dai residui dell'onnipotenza allucinatoria infantile. Come il bambino con la propria madre, anche il credente crea il Dio che trova. Si evidenzierà il guadagno teorico desumibile da questi autori. Se per il credente “creativo” di Salomé, la fede racchiude in se stessa il dubbio e la nostalgia delle origini, e se, per Winnicott, in ultima analisi la valenza psicologica della fede sta tutta nel crederci, il credente, non meno che lo psicologo della religione, è orientato alla consapevolezza della metaforicità sempre insatura del discorso religioso e, per conseguenza, anche al pluralismo religioso.

**Parole chiave:** Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psicoanalisi, teologia

### Abstract

Starting from the legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott, this contribution aims to overcome the problem of the truth of theological affirmations (“beliefs”) maintaining that the psychological value of religion is just in “believing”. Lou Andreas Salomé thought that narcissism is an early experience of “oneness with the universe”. According to her, man tries all his life, to regain such a state of well-being via creative experiences such as art, love, and religion. As far as religion is concerned, Salomé articulates a clear distinction between a “creative” and a “sedentary” believer, since the “creative” believer – in a certain way – calls into being his God. Winnicott considers religion of the individual to be an illusory transitional phenomenon; as a child with his mother, a believer creates the God he finds. The contribution focus on the theoretical paths opened by Salomé and Winnicott. Since Salomé’s “creative” believer’s religious faith encompasses doubt and Winnicott states that, in conclusion, the psychological value of believing is “believing in anything at all”, believers and psychologists of religion become aware of the never ending metaphoricity of religious language and, consequently, of the necessity of religious pluralism.

**Keywords:** Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psychoanalysis, theology



This contribution seeks to demonstrate how Salomé's view of faith as "frail wrapping of doubt" as well as Winnicott's perspective of illusory transitional phenomenon, applied to the religious experience of an individual, can contribute to the theological research.

Far from aiming to prove the truth of the contents of a belief, Salomé and Winnicott open a perspective to the "need to believe" ("pre-religious" and secular) that is both essential for each human person and fundamental for religious belief, especially for Christians.

As widely known, Freud describes religion as an illusion, that is, in his view, the fulfillment of a desire. An illusion is a belief founded on wishes rather than on reason and empirical verification. Thus, it is impossible to give an opinion of the value of its reality: illusions cannot be proved and also cannot be refuted and, thus, they are not false or in contradiction to reality. According to Freud, illusion is not a delusion. For sure, psychoanalysis, more interested in psychic processes than in contents of religion, can't claim religion to be deceptive because, as Freud himself writes in *The future of an illusion* "In point of fact psycho-analysis is a method of research, an impartial instrument [...]" therefore "defenders of religion will by the same right make use of psycho-analysis to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines" (1927, pp. 36-37).

### Lou Andreas Salomé: faith as frail wrapping of doubt

Salomé proposes a perspective about illusion in "a friendly disagreement" with Freud: it belongs to the realm of inseparable thinking and feeling, that is the activity which is truly human and generates cultural products such as science (that is – she states – far from a purely rational business), arts or religion; its contents in terms of reality are not relevant, nonetheless it impacts on the real life of an individual deeply and indelibly.

In the essay *Von frühem Gottesdienst*, Salomé refers a funny story of her childhood that well illustrates the power of desire compared to the factual reality (Salomé, 1913, pp. 151-152). It deals with a Knallbonbon, a Christmas firecracker: during the explosion, it launches off a surprise gift for the children.

"A simple memory highlights the method by which I was able to keep the doubts away from me. In a beautiful firecracker that my father had brought me from a court party, I imagined there were golden clothes; but when I was told that only contained paper clothes with golden borders, I decided that I would no longer be exploded: In this way, the golden clothes could continue to be inside of the firecracker" (Salomé, 1969/1977, p. 24).

Regarding the impact of illusions in real life, she argues that "faith in life", the "joie de vivre" is a gift, a deep emotional relationship between the child and God (a personal God) that develops permanently throughout life.

Where does such a generative power of illusions come from? According to Salomé, the process of faith borders on that of artistic creation and both are generated by an original state of archaic narcissism in which inner and outer reality are not perceived as separated: "to any work of art we attribute impressions that we cannot receive from any outer reality, but which nonetheless communicate to us something which is not only the result of subjectivity, but also seems to be grounded in objectivity" (Salomé, 1931, p. 84). Arts need no gratification in reality; on the contrary, it is the frustration of human desires that fuels the creative urge.

In a similar way, faith - creative faith, as we are about to elucidate - is aware of the need to overcome each and every representation of God.

This way a "creative" believer differs from a "sedentary" one since he creates his personal reformulation of God. A "sedentary" believer makes himself at home in a passively received religion and "uses" (p. 70) God as a "crutch" (to compensate for his impairments) or a self-service shelf of comforting commodities. The sincere believer is aware that in personal religious elaboration and in his own God representation he "creates his Creator" and is aware to risk constantly to fall into the idolatry of images. Therefore "such [authentic] faith, the only one which is not abused but that is wholesome, belongs to the doubtful", the faith itself is a "fragile wrapping of this doubt" (p. 71), since believers know that "in every representation" of God "one cannot avoid to use earthly images" Therefore creative believers, who are aware that every representation of God is in itself "a term for something missing, for a void", never depart from

“suspicion of having transposed God, of having offended him by making him earthly” (p. 71).

“It is crucial to understand that the cult of God is in itself a term for a void, a gap in religious devotion, where already there are loss and deprivation, the need for God because we don’t own him, where, indeed, God could only exist as such where there is no ‘need’ of him”. The believer who wishes to ‘use’ God, will not have ‘God’, but “something to point finger at, something that can be forced to assume visible, terrestrial, on-demand shape” (p. 71).

Salomé states that a true faith is a projection of an unconscious and primal narcissism; at the same time it is a nostalgic call toward the original paradise and a creative and asymptotic path to a goal which is always out of reach and somewhere else (Salomé, 1921). Such true, creative faith “in a successful believer, I mean a healthy believer” (Salomé, 1931, p. 103) not only is not pathological, but also gives access to a world where “What may be taking place there, is the most profound experience of standing safe and sound at the rim, merged in the primal depths, in the abyss of human soul” (p. 72).

To better profit from Salomé’s words, we’ll focus on the need to believe and to the longing for God. A desire lives on object absence or, better said, on the latency of an object perceived as present but unattainable. Creative believers start from such an essential latency of their God. They are aware that man, at the very end of a lifelong path, will not discover God, but that the pursuit of the ever desirable will go on, in an asymptotic cathartic path and within the boundaries of a language which is, as far as God is concerned, an unsaturated metaphor (Aletti, 1998; Aletti, Fagnani & Colombo, 1998). *Deus absconditus* (hidden God), would the theologian say relying on Isaiah (Is 45:15): “Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel” (NIV-New International Version); God of which man can only say what He is not, according to apophatic theology.

### Winnicott: religion as illusionary transitional phenomenon

In history of psychodynamic theories, the progressive shift from drive perspective (focused on intra-psychic dynamics) to the relation perspective (which takes into account the structure and the net of relations one lives in) offered a renewed interest

to the psychological understanding of religion and rituals. Transitional experience perspective, based on the works of Donald W. Winnicott has proved peculiarly useful.

Transitional objects, well known to mothers, such as teddy bears, blankets, lullabies or lallations allow very young children to recognize a first distinction between Me and not-Me and, starting from the motherly breast, draw progressively reality, external to himself and liable to his use. Transitional objects are “things” that, invested by affects, represent and recall the child’s mother when she’s away.

Winnicott underlines that transitional is not the object but its use, that is the cathexis experienced by the child: “The baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object” (1969/1971, p. 89). Concerning the primary relational object of the child, the mother, Winnicott could say that the child creates the mother he finds, that is: that woman is already there, but she is not “the mother” until the child relates to her.

According to Winnicott, the “potential space” between an actual external object and the internal movement of the child, between the child and the mother, is precondition and prototypical experience of the intercourses between the child and the family and, later, between the adult and a society, between internal world and reality: the same applies to playing, theatre, arts, eroticism and religion.

“It is assumed that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is far from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). That area is in direct continuity with the play area of small child who is ‘lost’ in play” (Winnicott, 1953/1971, p. 13).

That’s the reason for the application of the transitional perspective to religion, where believers catech the cultural and objective data of the religion they find in their own society with their own internal word. Winnicott’s conviction that the baby creates the mother he finds could be re-written: a believer creates the God he finds in tradition he lives within. Thus religion becomes “his” religion, becomes meaningful for him. Of course this is not to say that God is a teddy bear, a giant *Winnie-the-Pooh*. It’s merely a possible

explanation scheme of the appropriation of the symbolic representation of God in the personal world.

### Challenges of transitional phenomenon perspective

The application to religion of the transitional phenomenon perspective appears to be useful since it explains some processes and attitudes.

A main contribution of such perspective is to enlighten the interaction and the negotiation between idiosyncratic experiences and individual intrapsychical dynamism on one side and socio-cultural environment on the other. In winnicottian term to approach religion as a transitional phenomenon, *bridging* between the subjective and the objective worlds -. It implies a creativity based approach also about religion, where creativity could be defined as “a coloring of the whole attitude to external reality” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 65). As opposed to “compliance”, which means a passive adaptation to external requests and carries with a sense of futility the individual, “creative apperception” is the source of an ongoing building process of the true Self. The religious experience could be a component of a subject’s orthogenesis also from this point of view.

The transitional phenomenon perspective values emotional-affective, ethic, esthetic and playful components, cognitive and social ones. It takes into account that believers personal attitude is an ongoing dialectical tension with all religion institutional forms (dogma, cult, organization) and therefore creating an “intermediate area” between subjective and objective worlds. The transitional perspective actually proposes an explanation also of de-viated and per-verse use of institutional religious forms. Imagination, playing and creativity potential about religious objects usage could fall into the trap of making an “autistic” or “fetishistic” usage of them, that is in the first case being unable to overcome the boundaries of emotional subjectivity or, in the second, sticking to objective materiality, in a ritualism deprived of a conveyed religious meaning. Fetishistic abuse impacts every dimension of the religious experience and forces a mortifying degeneration: religious objects become talismans, the personal creativity and playing decay to stereotype and repetitiveness; the religious symbolism degenerates into materialism and literal fundamentalism, the religious rites degenerate into obsessive or esoteric

rituals, belonging to a church or religious group degenerates into fanaticism, or herding behavior and passive dependence; the faith in leaders degenerates into passive obedience; the solidarity and the internal cohesion crystallize in detachment from external word, sectarianism, fear of the world and impossibility to grow (Aletti, 2005).

### Drawing tentative conclusions

To sum it all up, with an unavoidable oversimplification, Salomé and Winnicott suggest to read the religious phenomenon from a psychodynamic and socio-constructivist point of view. Creative believer make a “healthy” and transitional usage of the religious experience, he is aware that religious language is imperfect metaphor, doomed by unfaithfulness when it tries to communicate what can’t be said, and that religious path is an asymptotic one and the goal always out of reach and elsewhere, unattainable object of desire. It is in the humble search for the truth and not in the arrogance of owning it that a man meets his greatness and his limit always within the boundaries of mental well-being. In a creative faith the search is key. No one can claim to be “arrived” because, if he did, he would betray the whole path which is ongoing “search”. In such task, psychic health can’t consist of compensatory postposition to the end of world because of an unsatisfactory present. As Salomé puts it, commenting on a text about religion: “Health is being able to live the future in the present” (1958/1980, p. 55).

Such an awareness enables to faithful accept different paths toward God and promotes a true religious pluralism. Not because of an arrogant (presuming) tolerance, but because of the faith in man and of the hope that dialogue with others may lead to a better understanding not only of the object of one’s own nostalgic desire (God) but also of one’s path (religion), conflicts and conflict outcomes.

Psychology of religion, focused on subject, explores precisely not a religious belief but the personality of believers. What matters to psychology is not whether God exists but that believers exist. Moreover, in the same words of Lou Salomé: “Not God is a religious term, but MY God” (from “Stibbe nest book” [*Stibber Nestbuch*] n. 29, in Pfeiffer, 1999, p. 173). Psychologists focus on the personal and cultural relevance of religion, which accompanies the entire



history of mankind and, at least in western culture, the whole life of the individual.

In western culture the claim “God is dead” (signed: Nietzsche) is echoed by “Nietzsche is dead” (signed: God); or signed by the human race, the history, the evolution. But also signed by the psychological need to believe. If we stick to the point of the subject lived through experience – psychology’s own sphere –, we will see that the experience of believing or not believing involves psychic processes, pathways, conflicts and conflict outcomes that psychologists have to take into account, since relevant in psychic functioning and personal and collective well-being.

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 (Aletti, 2014, pp. 15-18). Through the same careful search for truth, psychology of religion is useful for believers and non-believers.

For believers and theologians 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.

Believers will be then enabled to become more “creative believers”, rooting their faith in the depths of their personality and interacting with cultural-symbolic potential space in which they experience and express their narrative about God. In psychoanalysis as subject’s narrative, Christian theologians will find a model for a theological research that takes into account the anthropological truth of human beings and therefore open to – not forced to accept – the performative word of a Self-revealing God. Theologians will then fully appreciate the progressive, ongoing, conflictual dimensions of faith, thought of as research of an individual toward the acceptance or the refusal of such a word.

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This text is a reworking of the paper *Faith, as frail wrapping of doubt. The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research*, presented by Mario Aletti and Cristina Scarpa at the IAPR 2011 Congress (Bari, 21-25 August) in the panel “Psychoanalytic Contributions to theology and the question of truth in religion” (chairman M. Aletti). We point out that so far there is no valid English translation of the book of Lou Andreas Salomé *Mein Dank an Freud* (My thanks to Freud). The reported quotations are translated by the Author, from the Italian version edited by Maria Anna Massimello (Salomé, 1931/1984); the quoted pages refer to this Italian version. However we have always kept in mind the original German text.

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Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Aletti, M. (2015). The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research. Some considerations. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 2 (1-2), 47-52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2016A26e>.

Italian version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2015A25i>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>

