

SIPS. A HUNDRED YEARS OF ITALIAN PSYCHOLOGY 1910-2010

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**A HUNDRED YEARS OF PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION IN ITALY.
THE HISTORY, THE ISSUES, THE PERSONS**

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It is a known fact that psychology of religion has always followed the course of the history of psychology, starting from Wundt who dedicated three volumes of his *Völkerpsychologie* to myth and religion. Religious behavior was seen as a specific object of study and as a specific discipline since the very early writings of the “fathers” of psychology. Just to mention Edwin D. Starbuck, who already in 1899 published a volume on *Psychology of religion*, William James’s (1902) analysis of *The varieties of religious experience*, the epistemological and methodological rigor envisaged by Theodore Flournoy (1902, 1903, 1910), and the studies on adolescent religion and on the figure of Christ by Granville Stanley Hall (1904, 1917).

Exactly a hundred years ago, in 1910, the book *Psicologia religiosa* (Religious psychology) saw the first light of day in Italy. It was a translation of some writings by Theodore Flournoy who, in 1909 at the 6th Psychology conference in Geneva, had outlined the epistemological foundations of the discipline with the methodological exclusion of the transcendental. This however was sidelined by the main currents of the Italian academic psychology with the exception of some eminent people like Sante De Sanctis (*La conversione religiosa*, 1924) and Agostino Gemelli, who somewhat mistrustfully was afraid that someone could reduce the Transcendental to the dimension which he called “subconscious”.

In a purely university setting the first teachings were started within the ecclesiastical Faculties under the inspiration and guidance of Giacomo Lorenzini (Pontificio Ateneo Salesiano, prof. Pier Giovanni Grasso, 1958). But it was only in 1965 in the same PAS that psychology of religion reached the standard and rigor of an academic discipline with the teachings of Giancarlo Milanese.

On the organizational side, one has to acknowledge the work of Leonardo Ancona who proposed himself as the go-between for the ecclesiastical institution and psychoanalysis. It was Ancona, who had already been a student of Gemelli at the Università Cattolica and, with him, one of the first supporters of the AIEMPR-*Association Internationale d’Études Médico-Psychologiques et Religieuses*, who took the initiative for the foundation of the SIP’s “Psychology and Religion” Division. After the first proposal in 1984 during the 20th congress, in Bergamo, the formalization of the division was finalized in Venice in 1987 and the first Board was elected in 1989. The nomenclature “Psychology and Religion” alluded to and encouraged an equal and mutual encounter of collaboration and dialogue between

religion and psychology, or rather, according to Ancona, to a study of the interface between the two dimensions of personality. In reality it did sound like an imposition of a belief, something inherited from the AIEMPR which was not called A.C.I.E.M.P. — *Association Catholique Internationale d'Études Médico-Psychologiques*) by chance.

Within this Division, however, many felt the need for more “lay” epistemological and methodological choices which would place more clearly the discipline within the context of a psychological science. In the attempt to be more coherent, the name “Psychology of Religion” was thought more appropriate. The genitive case here identified religion as one of the many objective forms of human behavior that could be subject to psychological investigation. This was also the chosen nomenclature in 1995 for the SIPR, born as a natural evolution of the SIP’s Division. This change from the previous label “religious psychology” would be far from nominal. The new title “psychology of religion” expressed a new direction regarding the understanding of the object, the context and the finality of the discipline and it was an important turning point. It highlighted that psychological research was not interested in the essence, in the origin, or in the contents of truth of religion, but it sought to assess the psychic processes lying beneath the “naming of God” by an individual or a social group. Psychology of religion is the study of all that is psychic in religion. If it is true that all that is human is psychic, but nothing which is human is only psychic. Psychological research is centered round the individual subject. It is not religion but the believer and his attitude towards religion which is at the centre. It is for this reason that the psychology of religion is also the psychology of atheism, because, as already pointed out by the Pastor Oskar Pfister to Freud, “atheism is a faith in the negative”.

Naturally, the question that psychology puts is not whether God exists but that the believer exists. The psychologist is interested in the individual and in the cultural relevance of religion which accompanies the entire history of humanity and, at least in our culture, the whole life of the individual. The declaration in the western culture that “*God is dead*”(signed Nietzsche) finds its immediate echo in “*Nietzsche is dead*” (signed God) or rather, endorsed by humanity, history, and evolution. The fact is that religion continues to be an unavoidable element of our culture. Just think about the latest importance given to exterior and public signs of religion/s (the crucifix in schools, the burka in public, etc.) and to the renewed search for spirituality, the esoteric, the miraculous, and perhaps the magical in this so called “post-modern” culture.

Certainly it has to do with the belief in God and not with God. The experience of believing and non believing is actuated through psychic processes, pathways, conflicts and outcomes of conflicts which cannot be ignored by psychologists because they are relevant in the psychic functioning of the individuals and of groups. One has to think of the meaning that is given to life, the creation of values, the use of religion as coping with the mental and the physical stress. One thinks of the incidence in social life of the so called de-privatization of religion with the claim by ecclesial groups for a greater visibility, political influence and power to decide. Again, one is

led to think of the questions of interculturalism and of fundamentalism; of the new religious-political conglomerations which become sources of power, etc. The list is never ending.

For sure, when observing the impact that religion has on human life one wonders why psychology in general and academic psychology in particular have neglected it so much. Maybe this is due to the difficulty of envisaging an area of scientific research which should be equidistant from the two opposite ideologies, psychological reductivism (very much feared by ecclesiastical, especially clerical circles) on the one hand, and apologetic or catechetical expectations (opposed by lay circles for whom psychology of religion is just “priests’ stuff”) on the other. Both the former and the latter have thought of Dr. Guillotin’s easy solution, which was so common during the time of the Revolution, that is, the machine (the “Guillotine”) that would solve all problems and headaches simply by cutting off the heads. Did our university heads really reason in this way? The fact is that the number of courses of psychology of religion in the Italian universities can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The limited attention in the academic world has been compensated for by the promoters of this discipline who continue to do so till this day with their own personal commitment particularly in associating with like-minded people. As a matter of fact, one of the merits of the SIPR is that of having provided a meeting place and a space for cultural exchange and for publications. Without such initiatives most probably psychology of religion would not have been possible or else reduced to a hobby for elitist circles. In this, one needs to highlight the way the Society’s members have been able to maintain a completely “lay” methodological approach, that is, free from any confessional concerns and university career expectations.

More explicitly, the fact that the SIPR has been and still is, distant from academic circles has two effects, one negative and one positive. The negative one is the lack of economic means, of research funds, of acknowledgments, and of incentives for young scholars. The positive effect was the purification of the motivations for joining. Only persons motivated by a real interest in the field and not attracted by the promise of an academic career or financial benefits, would join a “cultural non-profitable organization”. This implies that the scholars already have their own source of income from their profession which would allow them to dedicate some free time to the psychology of religion as if it were a hobby. Often these are psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychologists, who put their competence at the service of their intellectual curiosity. Others members belong to the categories of philosophers and priests, sometimes University lecturers in other disciplines, who from time to time, dedicate themselves to the psychology of religion.

The Italian Society for the Psychology of Religion is the result of the conglomeration of previous organizational experiences and now includes almost the totality of the psychologists of religion. The Society, whose members number between 120 to 180 academic and professional psychologists, has as its scope that of acting as a cultural stimulus and as an organizational support. This can be seen from the study days and conferences it organizes, the publication of the bulletin *Psicologia della religione-news* (*Psychology of religion-news*) three times a year, and the

biannual award dedicated to Giancarlo Milanese, for the best doctoral dissertation on a theme related to psychology of religion.

Since its very beginning, the SIPR has always been interested in engaging into fruitful dialogue with the various psychological approaches to religion and with all the other sub-disciplines, theories and models in mainstream psychology. The international conferences, which are held every two years and are always dedicated to a set theme, have covered a wide range of subjects, such as, depth psychology and the new clinical and hermeneutical views; religious identity, pluralism and fundamentalism; the interaction between neurobiological and cultural aspects; the new religious movements; the gender differences; religion and coping; religion, and cultural psychology; and religion and psychotherapy, the attachment theory, and Role theory.

Also the 12th conference, in November 20-21, 2010, on “Self, other, God. Religion and narcissism” (L’io, l’altro, Dio. Religiosità e narcisismo) has included the participation of a number of foreign scholars. The content and organizational level of these conferences has today been widely recognized in international circles, also thanks to the publication of the papers, often in two languages. This is confirmed by the fact that the organization for the next IAPR- *International Association for the Psychology of Religion*, which is to be held in Bari between 21-25 August 2011, has been entrusted to the SIPR.

One precious characteristic of the Society inherited from the various divisions of the SIPR particularly amongst the professionals, and which is carried on amongst its contemporary members is the spirit that unites the persons sharing a common interest in the field and the pleasure in coming together as if it were a club. This is different from being a simple network for the organization of conferences or for promoting publications or the careers of young university members. Today, as it was during the good times of the SIP, sustained by the help of volunteers and the members’ fees, the society enjoys a good reputation for its *Efficiency*, *Generosity* and *Elegance* in its performance. All this makes it possible to continue with the past experiences and it promises well for the future.

(Translated by Paul Galea)

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