

***Laudatio* for professor Mario Aletti on the occasion of his honorary membership of S.I.P.R.¹**

Lucio Pinkus

1. Premise

Presenting the scientific and academic track of a friend is evidently not a neutral task. For this reason I have chosen to share some reflections on what I consider the most significant contributions from the works of Mario Aletti within the context of psychology of religion. I will be focusing particularly on those which I consider important and which I have used in my work. I believe there is sufficient proof that these, to say the least, have influenced the both the quality and the diffusion of psychology of religion within the Italian context.

2. The formation track

Aletti's psychological formation, more specifically, that related to psychology of religion, starts from two different places: the Università Cattolica of Milan, and the now, Università Pontificia Salesiana (formerly, the Pontificio Ateneo Salesiano) in Rome. These two points of reference are not irrelevant. One has to keep in mind that at that time there was no degree course in psychology in Italy. This started in 1971 and the professional recognition of the psychologist will come only in 1989. By and large, there was a kind of mistrust in this discipline and anyone wishing to acquire the psychological skills had to follow a sort of personal itinerary. The Università Cattolica was the first Italian university to teach psychology and to have a psychology laboratory which enjoyed full academic qualifications. It is

¹ Commendation speech on the occasion of the conferment of the title of Honorary Member of the Italian Society for the Psychology of Religion, Verona, 21th November 2010.

within this context that one is to understand Aletti's interest in linking psychology with religion under the inspiration of the linguistic and anthropological courses that were held by the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia (Faculty of Humanities). In these courses the topic of the symbolic, that is, the human individual is understood as a "symbolic animal", was dealt with in depth. The Università Cattolica, however, was rather mistrustful of the linking of psychology to religion, partly because of the original position taken by its founder, Fr. Agostino Gemelli, and partly because of the suspicions of the Catholic hierarchy towards any approach that looked as an encroachment into its field. As a matter of fact, the Dipartimento di Scienze Religiose (Department of Religious Studies) was founded many years later thanks to the determination of the rector Prof. Lazzati. It was only the presence of Prof. Giorgio Zunini, who was very sensitive and open towards this subject, who eventually towards the end of his academic life was to publish the book *Homo religiosus* (1966). This made it possible for Aletti to deepen this subject and to adopt it for his doctoral dissertation. Quite surprisingly, it was very much appreciated by the examining board.

The other very important formative context was the Università Salesiana of Rome which he had previously frequented. It was the only academic institution to have a well equipped library with a significant amount of material related to psychology of religion. To make the best use of this, Aletti moved to Rome in 1971. At this University psychology of religion was already a full component of the teaching program as well as a subject for research. This generated quite a lively debate that brought together various sides, starting from those interested in research from a psychosocial perspective, to those concerned with developmental issues both within the life cycle and the religious experience. He had the opportunity to have as his teachers two important figures considered the founding fathers of this discipline and who have undoubtedly left an important imprint on the psychology of religion, namely, Giancarlo Milanese from Italy, and Antoine Vergote and André Godin from the European context. Thanks to these contacts and collaboration with these teachers, particularly Milanese and Godin, Aletti will eventually become their assistant. This gave him the opportunity to pursue his interests in psychology of religion and to explore all its aspects, particularly the epistemological and methodological aspects, which characterize his teachings and his scientific work. At the same time, he started a course leading to a Bachelor's degree in Theology (the current 3 year course). This gave him also the chance to deepen his formation in theology and in the religious studies, enabling him thus to move with

more competence into the field of the religious phenomena, and that of the Catholic theology in particular.

One particular result of these years is the publication in 1973 of the book, *Psicologia della religione* (*Psychology of religion*) together with Giancarlo Milanese. This was the first Italian scientific systematic work on the subject in all its various aspects and it is still considered as relevant. The book was received favorably, being reprinted three times, and having become a sort of daybook for other authors who would later publish manuals on the subject.

Towards the mid 70s, Aletti started his psychoanalytic formation under analysts from the Società Italiana di Psicoanalisi (Italian Society of Psychoanalysis) who were also academics. This will eventually become his major professional commitment and with significant influences on his contributions to psychology of religion. This choice, in fact, meant that he had to live for a long time in a situation characterized by mistrust from either sides, the Catholic world, characterized for a long time by an inadequate understanding of psychoanalytic literature – particularly of Freud – and that of the world of psychoanalysts, who are still suspicious of anyone adopting an explicit personal stand as a believer.

Following a long process of rethinking and reflection over a period of time, these factors will eventually all come back in writing, particularly his book, *Psicologia, psicoanalisi e religione* (1992). This publication was well accepted and can be considered as the synthesis of Aletti's basic orientation. It will eventually characterize his scientific journey, particularly, his psychoanalytically oriented research.

3. The academic-didactic commitment and the autonomy of psychology of religion

From 1976 to 1998 Aletti will collaborate continuously in various forms with the chair of developmental psychology of the Università Cattolica of Milan in matters related to psychology of religion by holding seminars, guiding dissertations and conducting research mostly on the study of religious language and on the religious experience of youths, adolescents, and related issues.

In 1987 he was appointed lecturer in psychology of religion and dynamic psychology at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy (Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Settentrionale), a post which he still holds. This move marks a particular change in the cultural mentality and the institution's openness and sensitivity to these matters especially by entrusting such a delicate subject to

a layperson, and to a psychoanalyst in particular. It is through this post that Aletti could express fully, particularly through his monographs, his interest and understanding of the relationship between psychology, psychoanalysis and religion. Similarly, it meant a new opening in the dialogue between the various psychological approaches leading to a fuller understanding of complex phenomena, such as, religious experience, the mental representations of God, the problem of unbelief, and the relationship with the new emerging sciences and neurosciences.

Starting as from 1995, he will be given the responsibility of teaching Psychology of Religion at the Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione (Faculty of Educational Sciences) of the Università Cattolica both at the Milan campus and in that of Brescia. In spite of the fact that the importance of this discipline was not yet fully acknowledged on the formation-cultural level and on the scientific level, this post could be interpreted as a noteworthy recognition of Aletti's commitment and capacity to be in advance of the times.

In the same year, Aletti founded the Italian Society of Psychology of Religion (Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione) and was elected as its first President. I remember this event not as a mere organizational feat but because the foundation of the SIPR was the result of a complex and painstaking cultural process. We should not forget that way back in the 90s, the academic and scientific-cultural space for those interested in psychology of religion was very restricted, unorganized, and much less equipped to hold activities, let alone to expand. There were some associations, or rather circles, that were interested in the matter but these raised some problems on the epistemological and methodological level. Besides, they were scarcely connected among themselves, less known and less influential. Amongst the most noteworthy was the Italian section of the AIEMPR-*Association Internationale d'Études Médico-Psychologiques et Religieuses* (originally called ACIEMP-*Association Catholique Internationale d'Études Médico-Psychologiques*), an international association which brought together European experts. Aletti frequented this association for about a decade, starting from 1988.

The same old ambivalences which had always fought against, however, were to emerge also within this context. This time these were due to the confessional origin of the association. As a matter of fact, the association's approach was too distant from a secular one, or better, from that aspired neutrality. For this reason it ran the real risk of presenting implicit apologetic arguments, or even of pretending to be superior when it comes to the "religious studies" and faith issues. This, however, was far from that clarity and autonomy which Aletti together with his colleagues envisaged for this discipline.

This same problem was to crop up again in 1987 with the Società italiana di Psicologia (Italian Society of Psychology) which at that time included all the Italian psychologists, when was founded the Division dedicated to “Psychology and Religion”. This was also encouraged by Leonardo Ancona, a psychoanalyst and then director of the Istituto di Psicologia e Psichiatria (Institute of Psychology and Psychiatry) within the Facoltà di Medicina (Faculty of Medicine) of the Università Cattolica in Rome. The issue of the epistemological status of psychology at that step, found no solution. In fact, by naming the division “Psychology and Religion” his intention was to put the emphasis on the interface between the two disciplines whereby religion was to be approached from the psychologist’s competence of assessing issues related to religion. In this stand, however, one could sense a hidden confessional agenda which was probably related to Ancona’s personal vision of seeing himself as the mediator between the Catholic Church and Italian psychoanalysis.

This position was not shared by some members of the same division and not having the backing of the Italian Society of Psychology, many found the opportunity to create that neutral space where those interested in psychology of religion could belong. It was this that led Aletti, together with some of his colleagues, to found the Italian Society for the Psychology of Religion, where the change of denomination “of” qualified and specified the approach as a phenomenologico-existential study of religion according to its own models and methods. Its task was to deal with the various complex dynamics under the name religion but without prejudices or additives. The realization of this was something not to be taken for granted; nor to be underestimated particularly when one thinks that even today in various ecclesiastical academic circles, such as at the Institute of Psychology of the Università Gregoriana in Rome, psychology of religion continues to be based largely on an anthropological approach which is dominated by presuppositions and implications of a theological nature or inspired by the Church’s magisterium.

In 1996 Aletti became the founder and director of the periodical *Psicologia della Religione-news*, This was the first instrument that brought together experts in the field and made it possible for them to create a network for their studies, research, and for the sharing of information concerning their activities, such as meetings, seminars and publications. Later on he was to become also the director of the “Collana di Psicologia della Religione”, published by Centro Scientifico Editore.

In the 70s Aletti was to take up various roles on an international level as with journals of psychology of religion. He was member of the

Editorial Board and of the committee of peer reviewers of *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, of the *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, of the Editorial Board of *Psicologia USP* of the Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil) and a Consulting Editor for the *International Series in the Psychology of Religion* published by Rodopi of Amsterdam.

The sum total of all these noteworthy activities by far surpasses the personal recognition of his role; actually Aletti made known the works of psychology of religion in Italy and linked it to international circles. This was done particularly by inviting to the various conferences of the Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione scholars of repute such as Antoine Vergote, Jacob Belzen and Ana-María Rizzuto.

For someone who declares to be a professional psychoanalyst and who describes his interest in psychology of religion as a hobby, that might sound enough. But Aletti is also involved in the presentation of papers in a number of Conferences both in Italy and abroad. He still publishes his reflections and research in a number of writings. I will now limit myself to highlight some of the key issues which feature in all his writings.

4. The scientific nature of psychology of religion: a creative trend

Following his consistent line of thought and practice, Aletti wants to free psychology of religion from being considered as a mere psychological and humanistic trend, dependent on the religious experience of the believer, to focus to make it look more, “as a discipline founded and actually practiced, by the community of the psychologists interested in religion, who undertake to structure it on common epistemological foundations, research paradigms, parameters of validity, and models of interpretation” (1996). It is on these foundations that the various approaches of the different psychological disciplines (social psychology, developmental psychology, psycholinguistics etc.), the debates, the new avenues for research and the new perspectives find their right place. At the same time, Aletti is fully aware, and he often underlines it, that psychology of religion does not cover all the areas of the relational activities of the human person with religion and with the Transcendent because of the many contextual variables and epistemological hermeneutical issues at stake.

Against this background there lies the epistemological question and, consequently, of the scientific status of psychology of religion. The old but not completely forgone issue of the individuation of the sciences of the spirit, as being characterized by interpretation, and those of the natural sciences

as characterized by experimentation, has made the growth of psychology of religion very difficult.

The contrast between interpretation and quantitative precision has had significant repercussions also on the field of psychology to the extent that it was thought that only some of the psychological disciplines, such as experimental psychology, or psychophysiology do convey true knowledge because they steer along that reassuring distinction between what is true or false. Whereas the other disciplines, amongst which, dynamic psychology and psychology of religion in particular, deal with something which is undefined and perhaps cannot be perceived. For the latter, one possible concession would be that of producing more or less acceptable narratives, where precision gives way to something purely hypothetical and theoretical.

This position continues to persist in spite of the fact that the most reputed epistemology sustains that even the so called exact sciences, and those referred to as “hard”, are none other than interpretations. As Popper used to say early as the 1950s, “Scientific theories are, and will remain, hypotheses: they are suppositions contrasted with irrefutable knowledge” (1956). This is so because it can be proved through analytical precision that the methods of science are historical products through which humanity has come to the acquisition of knowledge in the course of the evolution. The precision which some scientific concepts and approaches claim to possess is not the ultimate one, where things can be seen objectively and where all subjectivity and personal perspective is bypassed. Rather, it is a better proven way, and perhaps as such more suited than others, which humanity has developed through the techniques of acquisition of knowledge and which have also been historically conditioned.

These assertions are not exhausted by the simple statement that the paradigms of the so called exact sciences depend also on historically acquired knowledge developed throughout the course of time. Rather, it is a suggestion that one be cognizant of the fact that there is always a degree of relativity in every scientific claim. In the light of this relativity and in conjunction with the influence of subjective factors one should refrain from pretending to have reached the ultimate truths. It is important that these truths be not confused with the journey done and with the successes achieved. This attitude consents every discipline of science to enter into the non definitive world and to therefore be open to the ultimate, or hermeneutics, where essentially every explanation is an interpretation.

It is true that there have been, and perhaps are still present latently, certain positions that uphold the inseparability between science and religion,

and theology. This claim is based on the assumption that both have as their object the reality in its totality because they do not have at their disposal any other method except that of reflective analysis. The same applies to any science that identifies a well defined area of research, searches for a solution to a particular problem, and constructs specific methods for this purpose. It is because of this that we encounter problems related to boundary issues, such as the case of apparitions or diabolical possessions, where it is difficult to decide in an absolute way whether the matter is related to science or to theology. Aletti insists that the epistemological status of psychology of religion cannot do other than go beyond the confines of the object and its problems to concentrate systematically on the issue of how knowledge is increased. In this way it qualifies as scientific psychology.

The emphasis that Aletti makes on the epistemological issue and its clarification has some very important repercussions on the relationship between psychology of religion and religion. In one way, acknowledging the clear identity of the object of study in psychology of religion reduces the risk that the psychologist behave towards religion or theology as if he were a sort of “super-theologian” through undue generalizations and confrontations. Although many of today’s reputable scholars on this subject are much more careful, this risk is not completely over yet. One has only to look at the many so called scientific publications, or the more popular ones, which continue to flood the market and influence readers by speaking about psychology and religion using a way of thinking derived from oriental philosophies or by adopting secondary phenomena from monotheistic religions that accentuate direct interventions of the divinity producing exceptional behaviors, such as speaking in unknown languages, or submitting oneself to mind altering practices.

At the same time Aletti many a times and explicitly, acknowledges a sphere of competence and autonomous reflection to religion and to theology. In this way he attributes to this kind of discipline a cultural dignity which is not for granted in the scientific community and less so within those psychological circles interested, perhaps marginally, in religion. Regrettably, I believe that this aspect has been hardly acknowledged by theologians and by psychologists of religion who operate within religious institutions. In doing so, they have avoided any confrontation or dialogue with contemporary culture.

5. A key issue: the religious experience

Another theme that runs through all of Aletti’s writings on psychology of religion is the attention to religious experience inasmuch as it touches the

emotional and affective aspect of the psychic phenomenon and its meaning to the subject. Starting from his doctoral thesis and moving through the numerous contributions, Aletti has above all emphasized that the object and content of religious experiences is conducive to the mental representations or God images that a person makes, together with the related themes which cover one's conceptions and primarily, the lived experiences. When a lived religious experience is acknowledged as such, it has already gone through a series of processes depending on the individual's "defensive" interests, as well as on context. By integrating cultural and constructivist psychological orientations, he places "The lived religious experience at a crossroad between the intrapsychic, the relational and the cultural". This means that the individual's religious experience develops and can be studied only within the specific and diversified symbolic cultural context according to its synchronic dimension (which deals with the religious traditions that belong to the different cultures within the same historical period) and the diachronic dimension (which concerns the historical evolution of a particular religious tradition) (2006).

The evaluation and use of the religious content of the lived experience is quite problematic because generally emotions do not last long and they present blends that change very quickly in their sequence. Unless they are channeled into a grid that gives them some meaning it is difficult to perceive them fully.

To live a religious emotion it is necessary to start from the experience of the sacred. This requires a paradigm with space and time where it can take place. Aletti underlines how this context is so important for religion. It is here where those basic metaphors that serve as mental references can thrive. These are the same metaphors which today continue to support millions of people in learning how to cope with the fundamental events of their life, such as birth, death, suffering, love, and helplessness. It lies in that intermediate area between the sacred and the profane, between the human space and the transcendental space, and between this earthly life and what precedes it and what goes beyond it.

It is from this awareness that one is moved to raise his thoughts towards the ultimate. This process can lead some to the discovery of the Divine, others to Nothingness. The unconscious is inadequate in dealing with suffering as well as with the aspiration to happiness. It is only in the religious symbols that one appreciates the potential of these icons. Religion is that space which makes it possible for the religious emotion to find symbolic expression in the search of its roots or bonds, and therefore for

that meaning which is extended to life itself, whether it is expressed as an explicit faith in God, or whether it takes an agnostic or a-theist form. In either case, it is always in reference to the transcendental, “connected as we are with the animal world, traces of which are the burden of our existence. Without religion we do not have that space where to note the difference. My atheism seeks from God those metaphors where to give sense to my joys and to my sorrows” (Galimberti).

It is along this track that religious life evolves from a constellation of emotions to a more organized attitude and endowed with a form of continuity. The latter is a process which, in the light of the changes in frequency and intensity of the religious emotion, offers a defined space where those emotions related by that common search for Good and Evil are organized in a unified way. It is this that gives rise to the appreciation of Good and Evil, from which the process of a conscious existential project also starts.

However, difficult problem of keeping a high vigilance remains. The relationship with God is always mediated by the mental representations that we make of him. It is therefore necessary that even for those religions which are called revealed, we need to be conscious of that clear separation between the reality of God, which cannot be grasped in its full reality, and the representation we make of it with all its limitations.

In keeping aware of this wide gap that, we come to realize both how relative is our speaking about God, and how mutually enriching can be the dialogue between religion and psychology, as something that should not be easily renounced. In fact, if we accept the definition of theology as a reflection on religious experience and belief, then it becomes very clear how the conditions of such an experience can find useful contributions from psychology, such as in the case of motivations and the clarity in their employment.

For example, religious life is in its own nature is a process that involves the whole person. It can lead to unconscious identifications with the divine, which is to say, to transfer the totality into us and becoming ourselves the totality. In another way, we can make external projections by transferring this totality onto objects, both real and imaginary. Confrontations here can be useful in avoiding distortions of reality, if not psychopathology. Theology on the other hand can offer those right concepts and correct expressions concerning the religious life, both on a personal and on a collective level. One could take as an example the different forms of asceticism which could damage one’s health, a strong and inappropriate sense of guilt, or the way one should react to people who think they are entrusted with special

missions or are endowed with special powers through direct messages from God or messengers of God.

Amongst the various approaches that Aletti proposes for the interpretation of religious behavior I wish to highlight that related to the attachment theory.

Aletti's research has picked up the challenge to confront his ideas with the various types of psychological theories, though always remaining faithful to psychoanalysis. This has allowed him to open up to a constructive dialogue, seeking always to highlight those elements in those theories deemed useful to psychology of religion. Amongst these is attachment theory. Aletti takes its theoretical premises and empirical results, submits them to a methodological validation and confronts them with psychoanalytical theory. After a strong and amply documented critique of the attachment theory regarding the phenomenon of religion he seeks to identify those elements which he deems useful to psychology of religion.

This is further opportunity to clarify the epistemological and hermeneutical issues related to the two disciplines, while seeking to extract from both a particular sensitivity in the de-construction of their premises to understand what in reality one is talking about and dealing with. For example, while being careful to avoid any form of reductionism in contents and in methodology, between an ethological and a clinical approach, and between the attachment theory and psychoanalysis, Aletti offers an interesting proposal with regards to attachment theory and religion

In fact, by replacing the term *religion* with *spirituality* (understood here as felt religion) it is possible to overcome the insufficiencies of an abstract religion, seen as something beyond the socio-cultural contexts, and to bring back attachment theory into an area which is more secure. This can be done by seeing it as a particular aspect of the religious attitude. Likewise, by deepening the understanding of the term attachment and the complex primary relationship which the term *caregiver* implies, more consideration can be given to the structural ambivalence that such a relationship entails, such as in its contradictions and conflicts. One can also ask whether there is room for aggressiveness, impotence and dependence besides the positive feelings.

This widening of the horizon, according to Aletti, could prove to be helpful and perhaps also necessary when investigating the intricate tension with an adult partner, and in our case, when seen in relation to God. After all, is it not part of the Christian experience to encounter such ambivalence in relation to God, when on the one hand he is seen as a fount of welcoming love and security, and on the other hand as a source of a demanding law,

severe in his judgments and perhaps even terrorizing? I believe that most psychologists, as well as those who exercise any pastoral ministry, have gone through such experiences and states of mind, which occasionally, or perhaps in certain ages, emerge also in a pathological form.

Aletti picks up Virginia Goldner's suggestion (2006) to rethink and to deconstruct the respective concepts on love and relationships from the point of view of psychology of attachment as well as from that of psychoanalysis. Here one questions love between adults, where can a person construct a "secure base" which gratifies, reassures, and organizes our emotions, but at the same time which can become also a source of threatening insecurity and anxiety, both by the lover's presence and abandonment. After all, it is typical of the sexual relationship to create a situation similar to attachment both in intensity and in its dramatic manifestation as in the childhood experience of attachment by its excessive demands and deepest desire for wellbeing. To realize how important this aspect is to the psychology of religion one need only infer from the experience of the mystics, both men and women, with their passionate intricacies emerging from the structured interaction between two persons and where the wave of desire to possess the other breaks and dissolves again into singleness (Aletti, 2010).

The reflections which Aletti makes regarding the phenomenon of attachment, in my opinion, capture the experience of uncertainty and of radical solitude which we all carry in our heart. This is so deeply seated that it is completely unreachable to any human voice. The intensity of the passions does not fill this space and the occasional feeling of being lost cannot find expression unless the counterpart has a face which goes beyond the human. This will have to be in the form of either a *caregiver*, a "Totally Other", or the absolute absence of nothingness.

In his commitment to confront without prejudice or exclusion, any psychological approach which has some reference to religion, Aletti enters into a fairly recent discipline, though peripherally inasmuch as related to psychology of religion, which is that of neuroscience, or more specifically, of neurobiology and neuropsychology, Here he also carries with him his own epistemological and methodological premises, such as the congruence with psychology of religion, and the advantages and limitations of the various theoretical models, and applies them to psychology of religion. In the past few years several research works have been published which propose to sound the relationship between neurobiology and psychology of religion up to the point of formulating a hypothesis of "neurotheology".

In this enterprise Aletti shows to be very resolute in judging both the methods and results of neurosciences as little pertinent and useful to psychology of religion. This negative rating applies also to other areas, such as dynamic psychology. His criticism is directed primarily to a basic problem; the neurobiology correlations do not take into account the dimensions of intentionality and of mental activity. In particular, they ignore the specificity of the human being which is awareness and the capacity to give meaning to the reality of experience. These elements are basic in man's mytho-poetic activity as well as in theology. Here lies the serious risk on the part of the neuropsychological studies when it comes to religious experiences of falling into reductionism. In fact, if one considers the behavior examined from a neurobiological perspective, as is meditation, prayer, or mysticism, while these do register diverse states of consciousness and activate certain areas and functions of the brain, they remain nonetheless wholly indeterminate unless the subject gives them a "name" on the basis of this human capacity to confer meaning.

By way of conclusion, Aletti recalls the centrality of the intentional relationship between the subject and what is perceived as ontologically Transcendent. Such conscious intentionality cannot be reduced to mere external practices, nor can it explained by an analysis of the changes in the brain. For this reason he holds that the relationship between the neurosciences and psychology of religion is not appropriate, or to say the least, he does not see any benefits from it.

6. Religion and spirituality

Consistent with his preference of experience and religious life, Aletti takes note of those different religious manifestations from the past, and their corresponding manifestations today, such as the increased interest in the sacred and in the religious. This phenomenon, however, is not exempt from ambiguities because of the innumerable factors that compose it. The causes have to be sought in that murky substance so called post-modernism. Its ingredients are secularization, technological logic, exaggerated subjectivity and the deinstitutionalization of religions, if not perhaps, an anti-institutional attitude. At the same time, Aletti reminds us that the so called religions are not exempt from these challenges both in their identity and in their experience. The moment the effect of a vital and strong tradition is weakened or lost the repercussions will be felt also in the weakening and loss of individual

identity, including the religious identity. Likewise, this could trigger a defensive reaction as in the rise of dogmatism, sectarianism and fundamentalism.

The first of Aletti's tasks is that of clarifying the object of his study and to distinguish it from the so called traditional understandings of religion and other subjects. In doing so he avoids the risk of softening the rigor of religion as an object of study by psychology and pushing the new religious movements into that channel of religious feeling or spirituality, understood as a search for an existential meaning or search for the "sacred", while this term is a controversial one and not free from ambiguities. Aletti highlights some characteristics of these new religious movements and religious aggregations to distinguish them clearly from religion. These include, a lack of interest in, if not a complete avoidance of, the so called "ultimate questions"; the employment of different forms of syncretism, where views from different religions, spiritualities and philosophies, especially from the Far East, are put together without any heuristic coherence; forms of belonging are very fluid and at times invisible; more importance to certain precise rituals; a highlighted and over-inflated subjectivity; the real risk of dependence on masters or guides who very often are the founders and reference points of such religious movements.

In understanding the common characteristics of these movements, Aletti starts from his firm conviction that psychology does not study religion or spirituality. Because of his interest in experience, he studies the person in relation to that particular religion or spirituality to be found in that environment. His proposal to classify the adherents to the new religious movements into "psychological types" has to be seen in relation to their identity. Such a hypothesis seems relevant because it has been taken up in studies by other authors who have written on the subject. In this perspective, Aletti proposes the following types.

6.1. The intimist-exoteric type

This form of religiosity reveals an erratic religious identity. It is characterized by a predominant self-referring subjectivity. It is also known as the DIY (Do It Yourself) religion which does not correlate faith with an explicit concept of the sacred or sense of belonging. In reality, it expresses itself in multiple forms of belonging, both contemporaneously and in succession.

This type denotes a personality that makes choices based on *experience*, but which are loose and tentative and are not related to the subject's personal history, community, and not open to an adequate criticism. For some reasons, it is reminiscent of adolescent behavior and motivation. Often

there is an attempt to manifest religiosity through a degree of anxiety and insecurity, which although in itself not indicative of psychopathology, it seeks its own validity in the personal way such impulses are internalized. This can result in either an increased freedom or in dysfunction, if not pathology. Moreover, because of the dispersive and fleeting attitude of the person typical of this contemporary society, behavior is erratic and developing a strong identity becomes more difficult.

Quite appropriately, Aletti highlights that in order to understand this phenomenon one has to see it against the complex scenario of the so called *diaspora of the sacred*. This is related to the deep crisis in the ideologies and to the suspiciousness or refusal of all forms of authority which very often characterize religious institutions. Furthermore, within these contexts linguistic forms related to symbolic and anthropological referents, which are difficult and distant from the contemporary world vision, are employed. For this reason they are scarcely suitable to induce those deep religious experiences particularly in that multicultural reality which is that of our contemporary society.

It is often the case that the rise and success of the new religious phenomena and movements is attributed to the socio-cultural framework of the “metamorphosis of the sacred”. The deep crisis of the ideologies, of the structures and of “strong” organizations, and specifically, of those institutions which have been historically and traditionally entrusted with the management of the collective sacred, that is the churches, favor that centrifugal and now stable movement called “diaspora of the sacred”. Worth highlighting is the fragmentation and privatization of religion, supported by an emphasis on the subjective dimension of religious experience, and a corresponding progressive loss of relevance of the institutional dimensions and openness to the transcendent. Moreover, by insisting on the formula of a holistic approach, there is a considerable search for the immediate psychological and physical well-being, as well as for a “global well-being” of the person mediated by meditative practices and ritual.

To these difficulties the new religious movement would respond by relying on a form of wisdom, often accessed only by a privileged few, where the concept of salvation is replaced by health or self-realization, to be experienced here and now, and free from the painstaking search for the Transcendental and its consequences on the level of motivation and decision. Theology is replaced by a sort of psycho-religious syncretism; there is a return to the simplicity of nature; and the emphasis is on the *feeling* in contrast to the *thinking*. All those phenomena that serve the function of reassurance or

simplification are immediately exploited. Often such movements are called to respond to difficult situations or painful personal experiences. Their response or cure would be a sort of therapy of the mind characterized by the suggestibility and charism of their guides, in a manner, however, which does not show the rigor found in psychotherapy.

Furthermore, the tendency is to live these experiences outside their socio-cultural contexts, by the creation of the so called artificial environment. Here, conflicts are carefully avoided and the ability to respond immediately to individual psychological needs is quite strong. The atmosphere is highly emotional and characterized by a deep sense of affectivity and a sense of belonging and informal integration with an apparently symmetrical group. This is perhaps why these new religious movements are perceived as liberating, especially when one compares these with the prevailing technological and consumerist tendency today, which leads towards the leveling off of behavior and of experiences.

6.2. The social type: belonging, identity seeking and personal affirmation

In this grouping Aletti picks up a very interesting aspect which explains some of the forms adopted by religiosity not only in the new religious movements but also in those which are typically known as the institutional religions. As a matter of fact and without doubt, the majority of those who enter into these new religious movements come from the traditional religions, sometimes even after a long experience. This information is significant in that it gauges how the various churches manage or not to address in an adequate way the need for an active sense of belonging of its members. This means to acknowledge each individual's role and the need to build communities not only in a sociological sense but also in a relational and affective sense. The relative success of the new religious movements shows that these somehow are able answer much better to the personal needs of the individuals, and to engage them much more that the churches actually do.

Nonetheless, also in this subtype, the basic element is to understand the motivations, the experiences and behaviors that make up one's personal identity, and more specifically, the religious identity. It is clear today that religion as such is no longer that which structures one's personality and determines the choices. Much less does it serve the purpose of offering a unified vision regarding existence. As it becomes more labile on the individual level also its capacity to integrate some of the contemporary problems, starting from sexuality, types of couple bonding, to the vaster area

of bioethics which deal with matters of life and death, or the conflict with the world of science in matters of research related to life will be effected.

It is very often the case that behind such choices that there is a need for belonging and for identification with a particular group. Such affiliation is more emotional than ideological. It seems to offer a sort of short cut to the more difficult search for personal and religious restructuring. Moreover, owing to their sectarian nature often such groups prove to be quite reassuring because their strong internal cohesion, conflict avoidance, and particularly, because of their leadership. The latter, while most commonly of the authoritarian type, does not however usually appear as such. Rather, this role is experienced as guidance and the authoritarian function is seen as a source of reassurance. The conglomeration of these processes often becomes the mask of fragility of one's personal identity, even though a critical evaluation might be enough to disclose it. It is difficult to say how much of these strategies leave a mark on the individual's religious identity. But there is no doubt that they have helped to bring a comeback of fundamentalist and integralist positions. They have also contributed to the rise of group organizations, or have become themselves religious associations or institutions, sometimes approved and perhaps even privileged by their respective religious hierarchies. It is certainly not difficult to see in these structures, the need for power by personalities that are on the one side fragile and narcissistic, and on the other side, gregarious.

Alongside these manifestations, maybe also by way of reaction to these, Aletti observes a recovery on the part of the religions of their strong and public dimension with the intent of having an impact on society. This is done by raising their profile and increasing it through an ample use of the media. Religious institutions are very keen on recovering orthodoxy and orthopraxis, deemed to offer an efficacious response to the attempts at reducing religion to the private sphere and to shore up the exodus of its members. If these manifestations are understood under these new forms, or in forms already experienced by other religions, there still remains the question of how much do these combined strategies, similar to other institutions as in the strong presence of the hierarchy on the media and the continuous insistence on doctrinal aspects, contribute to the formation of mature and free religious personalities.

Furthermore, it is not infrequent to observe in believers who respond to the promptings of the institutions, attitudes of a naïve belief combined with the latest forms of sophisticated technology. One need only look at the intense search for miracles, prodigious signs, and positive and negative energies related to places, persons and objects. An example from Catholic circles, but relevant also to other congregations, is the proliferation of Marian

apparitions. These are often accompanied by audiovisual communication networks, radio programs and internet links all meant to convey the messages related to these apparitions, or to diffuse their indoctrination and confirm the authoritativeness of these extraordinary phenomena. Speaking of technology one could start from the minicomputer that recites the rosary, to the authentication of bodily fluids, such as tears or blood allegedly shed by sacred images, to cloths and other objects such as the Shroud of Turin. These are often done by the use of the most sophisticated technology available.

These attitudes amount to a new type of relationship with the divine, and are not exempt from certain conditions, such as an ideal niche for the various personality types where they find a role and a source of power. For this reason, it becomes more difficult to understand the type of faith on which such persons are relying.

Moreover, Aletti highlights and invites for a deeper understanding of the effect of technology on the sacred. This is more widespread among the new religious movements but also among fundamentalist groups or the other aggregations formed around certain phenomena as that of Medjugorje. Here the network becomes the place for the gathering of information, proselytism, organization and promotion of religious culture or that of the same movement, of communication between the members, if not also the space for the formation of prayer groups, spiritual direction, and even cultural celebrations. Certainly, the use of virtual technology offers unprecedented possibilities for the diffusion of religious messages and for different ways of religious belonging. However, while Aletti admits that this subject needs more research and deepening, he points out that we should not underestimate the concrete risk in that “the virtual dimension of the encounter with the Other could replace the personal relationship and facilitate a way of experience which is more related to oneself rather than oriented towards the acknowledgment and the mediation between the internal world and the external world” (2010, p. 65).

Amongst the most common risks that concern psychology of religion is the search for technological proofs of the existence of the divine. This could actually be a deep seated attempt to renounce to the Transcendent in order to express a need, perhaps an unconscious one, to control and manipulate the sacred.

6.3. The intellectual type

While taking into consideration those aspects and expressions which are somehow related to religiosity, in this category especially amongst the so

called intellectuals, Aletti sees a kind of mental disposition which is more on the rational side. This includes people from the world of culture as well as from psychology. While affirming that it is practically impossible for them to adhere to an institutional religion or to the new religious movements, at the same time they claim of living their own spirituality. What one sees here is a sort of melting down of the Transcendental which in reality becomes self-transcendence. The common characteristics are the central role of spirituality, the sense of the “sacred”, and the mystical dimension. Although the motivations can be very different and are expressed in various forms and ways, the core issue is not only the privatization of the religious phenomenon, but also the negation and refusal of doctrinal truths and of the metaphysical preconditions of religion.

Those who can be included, at least hypothetically, into this category tend to relate the various religious manifestations to historically determined necessities by way of response to that generic need for spirituality. These also believe that religion can benefit from a purification exercise through the critique of that religion and of the transcendence. It is more a question of responding to the need for meaning, to the call for self-fulfillment, to a selection of values that guarantee pluralism, to tolerance towards all forms of interpretation of life, and not uncommonly, to a select choice of values related to pacifism and ecology.

This phenomenon, however, does not enter into that dimension commonly referred to as the scientific study of psychology of religion. Rather, typically of a large section of our culture, it refuses metaphysics. It sets the problem within the domain of the possibility of knowing the truth, but as an autobiographical narrative and as hypothetical, and therefore as a subjective reflection of external reality. Aletti has dedicated specific works on this subject (Aletti 2000, 2002). Probably, these manifestations could find a place in an eventual widening of psychology of religion to embrace spirituality in its generic meaning, as long as a clear distinction between the various theoretical and experiential aspects is upheld.

7. An invasion of territory?

Aletti is one of those few scholars in Italy who have broached those themes which are strictly related to theology directly from a purely scientific perspective, or from a “lay” approach. Many a times he made it clear that psychology of religion does not pretend to cover completely the field which we consider as religion. Nor does it include the way people understand

themselves. Thanks to his past theological training, he is cognizant of the fact that both psychology of religion and theology have had a history of mutual relationship, but also of conflict at times. So, he addresses both those involved in theological reflection and those in pastoral activity. For this reason, he makes it clear that for the sake of a fruitful dialogue it is necessary to respect the autonomy and the specificity of the two disciplines. He also highlights how it is theology's task to indicate to psychological research those areas of convergence, particularly on the level of individual religious experience. He also recommends those areas where dialogue could be of mutual benefit to be especially privileged.

Aletti focuses his interest on those supports that psychology could offer to theology, especially psychology of religion. Time again he makes it clear that his approach has to do with the analysis of the processes by which people internalize that which is transmitted to them from the religious tradition, both on the conscious and on the unconscious level. Consequently, he favors the clinical method with an eye on religious experience which is the only process that can bring out changes to the individual. I want to underline that this apparently evident affirmation is the proper foundation for the dialogue between psychology and religion. Actually, I am quite surprised that it has not been adopted by the majority of theologians and pastoral functionaries. The reason why it has been avoided or sidelined, particularly in Catholic circles, lies probably in the lack of sufficient consideration of this aspect. In other words, the focus of the problem is not the prevailing religious doctrine but the lived religious experience.

It is for this reason that Aletti's studies risk being seen as an undue invasion of territory. Rather, this kind of assessment expresses a defensive reaction which avoids a deepening of the issues, or because it views the use of psychology merely for the purpose of obtaining immediate results in the diverse pastoral activities. This, in fact, amounts to a denaturalization of psychology. An indication of the ambiguities that still exist in the dialogue between psychology and theology can be inferred from the fact there are scarcely any satisfactory results when it comes to fulfilling mutual expectations, even where the dialogue is promoted by both sides. Also where the dialogue is promoted by both sides there are still some issues of mutual concern.

Aletti goes to analyze several themes that call for a theological reflection but which have already been confirmed for some time. Starting from the penitential rite, he includes the study of the sense of sin and guilt, pastoral praxis, spiritual direction, catechesis, initial and on-going formation

for the clergy, and the more recent practices of counseling and spiritual companionship. He highlights the danger for theology when pastoral praxis makes use of these psychological insights only in an instrumental way. This implies a negation of their scientific autonomy to the point of banality, while perhaps provoking undue distortions when dealing with the faithful.

I want to make some recommendations here. Amongst the most common risks that crop up in the latest forms of spiritual counseling (spiritual companionship, religious self-reflection groups, pastoral encounters) is that of a possible confusion in setting up an “alternate” form of psychotherapy which is different from the one practiced by professional psychotherapists. At this stage it becomes doubtful whether it is spiritual counseling or psychotherapy which will bring that liberating effect and wellbeing in the individual. There is no doubt that the various forms of spiritual help, as all the other forms of interpersonal relations, can have a sort of therapeutic effect. But to establish this kind of parallelism between the two risks leaving out some important elements which Aletti tries to capture in the term *setting*.

In the first place, the formation for the practice of spiritual direction is somewhat shorter compared to the psychotherapeutic formation and it does not impart those notions or that personal training which would make it suitable for this kind of activity. Moreover, psychotherapy, particularly the analytical types, adopts a complete suspension of judgment regarding the client’s behavior and life. This might prove to be difficult in a spiritual encounter which expects a common ethical and religious orientation between counselor and counselee. Furthermore, in spiritual direction the counselor is not acknowledged for his psychological competence but dons an authority which is ascribed to him through a role which is also recognized by the institution. The nature of the relationship puts the counselor in the role of master whose example is to be followed. Finally, one important difference which could also be a big limitation, is the fact that in spiritual direction one takes into consideration only the conscious processes, whereas in psychotherapy the unconscious ones are considered as essential both in the religious life and in life in general.

Concerning this aspect, one can raise a very interesting question which is very rarely addressed, that of the *self-involvement of the theologian* in his activity and in his identity. Aletti would certainly highlight that also in theology the learning process does not come from an affective vacuum and a sterile attitude with respect to emotions. Rather, it passes through the subjectivity of the theologian or pastoral agent and through his cultural

context. Of equal importance are his faith motivations and his theological commitment. These issues have a deep effect on the theologian's identity to the extent that a priest theologian, for instance, could feel somewhat inadequate or less prepared in this area than the other pastoral functionaries with whom he could be working. Similarly, one could have other problems such as, in the understanding of his role and the relationship with the institution; in distinguishing between his own personal reflections and conclusions and how could these be actually understood by the *magisterium* of the Church and their pertinence as pastoral activity; and finally, in relating his own personal experiences and faith motivations with the results of his research.

Such considerations could be much easier and complete if one were to seek the cooperation of psychology and of psychoanalysis in particular. This would open the road to more awareness of the underlying desires and unconscious motivations which are at the basis of any activity, in this case, the lived experience and the real role within the context in which one operates. This would indeed be a very strong contribution towards a sense of wellbeing and to the reassurance of the same theologian.

8. Conclusions

I believe that this exposition has made justice to the conferment of the status of honorary member to Mario Aletti. Thanks to his commitment, psychologists of religion have passed from the condition of members of an exclusive, but irrelevant club, to that of a scientific Society which deals with psychology of religion in a scientific way. Its epistemological framework is clear, and it can develop a network of communication and transmit valid information with others in different parts of the world and who share the same interests. Its scientific contributions have not only touched key issues in psychology of religion and laid down the premises for a new and fruitful dialogue with theology, but has opened avenues and new possibilities for further developments in this discipline.

9. References

- Aletti, M. (1992). *Psicologia, psicoanalisi e religione. Studi e ricerche*. Bologna: Dehoniane.
- Aletti, M. (1996). Psicologia della Religione. In *L'Enciclopedia della Filosofia e delle Scienze Umane* (pp. 831). Novara: De Agostini.

- Aletti, M. (2000). La rappresentazione di Dio come oggetto transizionale illusorio. *Rivista di Psicologia Analitica*, *n.s. 9*, 109-134.
- Aletti, M. (2002). La religione come illusione: modelli, prospettive e problemi per una lettura psicoanalitica. In M. Aletti & F. De Nardi (Eds.), *Psicoanalisi e religione. Nuove prospettive clinico-ermeneutiche* (pp. 59-89). Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore.
- Aletti, M. (2003). Psicologia, teologia, psicologia della religione. Alcuni snodi attuali di un rapporto complesso. *Teologia. Rivista della Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Settentrionale*, *28*, 254-286.
- Aletti, M. (2006). Psicologia della Religione. In Fondazione Centro Studi Filosofici di Gallarate (Ed.), *Enciclopedia Filosofica* (Vol. 10, pp. 9624-9627). Milano: RCS Libri.
- Aletti, M. (2010). *Percorsi di psicologia della religione alla luce della psicoanalisi* (2. ed.). Roma: Aracne.
- Goldner, V. (2006). Let's do it again: further reflections on eros and attachment. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *16*, 616-637.
- Milanesi, G., & Aletti, M. (1973). *Psicologia della religione*. Leumann (TO): ElleDiCi.
- Zunini, G. (1966). *Homo religiosus. Capitoli di psicologia della religiosità*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.