RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, GENDER DIFFERENCES AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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> *God becomes God*
> *when creatures say God*
> (Meister Eckhart)

In this paper I make no attempt to survey all configurations of the relationship between religious experience, gender differences and religious language. Rather, I wish to stress that personal religious experience occurs within a framework of religious language, by which I mean a structured set of symbols that is historically and culturally determined. Individuals acquire religious language by means of cognitive and affective codes which develop in parallel with sexual identity. In essence, then, this paper will attempt to establish links between psychological, social and linguistic descriptions of religious experience and a psychodynamic view of personality.

1. Results of field research

I have been studying religious experience and conceptualisations of God in Italian teenagers for more than twenty years. I have interviewed more than 5000 subjects (aged 14-20), all of them Catholics who have received formal religious teaching at school. Using a variety of instruments, though chiefly cluster analysis of the results of a word association test, I have been

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able to identify five different ways of conceptualising and structuring awareness of God in Italian adolescents. These studies were presented at length in a recent book [1] and the results of a new protocol applied ten years later are now in press. These substantially confirm the earlier results in both clustering and gender differences, the two themes I wish to explore in this present paper.

1.1. *Five conceptualisations of God*

The five groups I obtained through cluster analysis were clearly defined and so easy to classify in a conventional way, although the procedure was also an interpretative one to a certain extent.

The most popular conceptualisation, accounting for 37.78% of the sample and occurring equally in males and females, was *rational* (notional, abstract, philosophical) in which the notional dimension of what can be "known" by reason takes precedence over the Biblical dimension of "revelation".

The second, 26.67% of the sample and more frequent in males than females (the difference was statistically significant), was *institutional* (traditionalist, conventional), learned from the church through the acquisition of a coherent corpus of knowledge that has few relational connotations and entails little emotional-affective involvement.

The third, 13.33% of sample and more frequent in females than in males, was *relational*, in which God is experienced as an interlocutor in an interpersonal relational dialogue, able to respond to subjective existential needs (guidance, security, being listened to and understood).

The fourth, 12.48% of the sample and significantly more frequent in females than in males, was *naturalistic*, in which observation of nature leads to acknowledgement of God as the source of Creation.

Lastly, the *problematic* conceptualisation, 10.74% of the sample and more prevalent in males, is characterised by doubt, disbelief and rejection of certain images or attributes of God.

1.2. *Gender differences*

Generally speaking, the most noticeable gender difference in conceptualisations of God, and the reasons given for rejection of institutional beliefs and forms of worship, in Italian Catholic adolescents is a clear male

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[1] M. ALETTI, *Psicologia, psicoanalisi e religione. Studi e ricerche*, Bologna, Dehoniane, 1992.

preference for logical and intellectual registers. By contrast, the female preference for emotional-affective modes and dynamics generates an ambivalent attitude alternating between desire for an intimate, trusting relationship with God, and total rejection when He is experienced as distant or absent. Girls have a marked preference for this kind of personal, subjective relationship with God.

Virtually all the published literature confirms the influence of sex on religious experience and attitudes.[2] Others also point to important gender differences in the nature and development moral judgement. To cite just one example, Carol Gilligan, who has done more than most to carry forward the post-Kohlberg debate, claims there is a significant qualitative difference between the prevalently male morality of *"justice"* and the more typically female morality of *"care"*. It remains to be seen whether these differences are mainly attributable to sex, or result from cultural variables like socialisation, education and socio-economic environment.[3]

2. Religion as a symbolic system

Explanations of how gender differences influence religious experience vary widely according to the psychological or psychosociological theories researchers choose to adopt. As the rest of this paper makes clear, my approach is psycho-socio-dynamic.[4]

As a science of observation, psychology studies the empirical religious

[2] There are numerous studies of this topic. For a comprehensive survey citing around two thousand empirical studies, see the monumental work by K. HYDE, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: A Comprehensive Review of the Research*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1990. For similarities between their theoretical approaches and results and mine, see, among others, the now classic studies of P. BABIN, *Dieu et l'adolescent*, Lyon, Ed. Du Chalet, 1963; J.-P. DECONCHY, *Structure génétique de l'idée de Dieu chez des catholiques français, garçons et filles de 8 à 16 ans,* Brussels, Lumen Vitae, 1967; A. VERGOTE, A. TAMAYO, *Parental Figures and the Representation of God. A Psychological and Cross-Cultural Study*, The Hague, Mouton, 1981. More recently, the influence of sexual gender on religious experience in childhood and adolescence has been confirmed by K. TAMMINEN, *Religious Experiences in Childhood and Adolescence: A Viewpoint of Religious Development between the Ages of 7 and 20*, in «The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion», 4 (1994), pp. 61-85.

[3] For the theory of a distinct female morality, see C. GILLIGAN, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1982. Italian readers will find a summary of the current debate in L. VENINI, «Moralità, tratti di personalità, differenze di genere», in P. DI BLASIO, L. VENINI (eds), *Competenze cognitive e sociali*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1992, pp. 223-233.

[4] For a well-argued justification of certain epistemological and methodological choices, see G. MILANESI, M. ALETTI, *Psicologia della religione*, Turin, Leumann, 1973, chap. 1, «La religione come problema psicologico», pp. 7-21; also M. ALETTI, *Psicologia, psicoanalisi e religione*, op. cit., Part One, «Psicologia, psicoanalisi e religione. Storia e problematica di un rapporto», pp. 7-70.

experience of human beings who live in specific cultural contexts. Depending on historical and socio-cultural context, and the personality features that determine the quality of individual experience, religiosity has specific connotations and enters a variety of symbolic systems.

As a structured set of symbols, religion is an attempt to give a name to the Other, to the Transcendent; to give a name to God and define how we relate to Him. This attempt is made, and acquires significance, within a specific, historically determined culture. In other words, culture – or cultures – present religion to individuals as a structured symbolic system in which desire for/experience of a relationship with the Transcendent is expressed in a historically determined way.

The historical dimension of religious language, the inevitable result of a fundamental lack of objective correlation between signifier and signified,[5] poses major problems for any scientific study of religion.

It is crucial for psychologists to remember that if human beings acknowledge God or, conversely, reject the notion of Transcendence, they do so within the context of a historically determined culture using the language of that culture. *A human being cannot say the word God without implying the rest of the language of which that word is a part, and all the other human beings who speak it.* Individuals do not predicate religion, they are predicated by it. Like any other language, religious language transcends the individual; it both contextualises and determines the nature of religious experience.

Just as people mature in a network of significant environmental that fosters awareness of Self and, at the same time, orientation towards the objective Other; so religious attitudes are structured by re-cognition of a symbolic religious and cultural system which is Other, which is given, and precedes the individual experience.

Moreover, uttering the word God – the initiation of individual religious experience – does not simply indicate that religious language has been assimilated; it is the outcome of interactive personal development, of the gradual acquisition/appropriation of "linguistic competence" in the broadest sense. Becoming religious is intimately related to the process of becoming human. In this sense, any psychology of religion must be dynamic and difference-based.

This brings us to the most important question: to what extent does religion, as a structured symbolic system, interact with modes of religious experience shaped by gender differences? In other words, are there specifically male and female modes of religious experience determined by the fact

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[5] For a trenchant discussion of this topic, see A. VERGOTE, *La teologia e la sua archeologia. Fede, teologia e scienze umane*, Fossano, Esperienze, 1974.

of being a man or a woman, and of being a man or a woman in a spatially and temporally discrete culture?

2.1. *"Saying God": the problem of religious language*

In reality, the problem of religious language is a complex knot in which all the problems inherent in human intellectual endeavour meet and intertwine. I think the root problem is what "giving a name to God" – taking possession of Him, if you like – actually means, and whether it is even possible to do it. This is the paradox of all religions: gods can only be understood in human terms, which limits their essence, brings them down to human level.

Seven centuries ago, in his sermon *Nolite timere eos*, Meister Eckhart made the suggestive point that «God becomes God when creatures say God», and in our own time Antoine Vergote seems to paraphrase this when he says that «language about God is what makes God the God of human beings».[6] How we speak about God makes God comprehensible and accessible to us; on the other hand, discourse about God is always tied up with culture and individual and social history.

Insofar as God reveals himself to human beings, even divine revelation relies on human language as its vehicle; not only language structures, but also culturally and historically determined symbolic imagery is needed for God to become incarnate. And to be fully human, don't religious language and divine revelation also have to filter through the unconscious structures and the meanings that depth psychology has taught us to interpret?

It is certainly no accident that this issue has attracted the attention of many theologians, and is the major focus of debate in what is now known in Europe as the "Drewermann controversy". Eugen Drewermann, a Catholic theologian who also underwent Jungian analytical training, is mainly interested in symbols, myths and archetypes in Biblical interpretation and, more generally, the role of human beings in divine revelation. He has developed a form of exegesis he calls the «depth psychology method» that attempts to replace the «historico-critical method» in Scriptural analysis. In his view, religious scholars should take as much account of the human psyche as they do of the Word of God. With his claim that Revelation occurs within the "psychodynamic" of two partners – man and God – he seems to take extremely seriously the notion that, if God reveals Himself to human beings, He does so

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[6] *La teologia e la sua archeologia*, op. cit., p. 9.

through human language and everything on which human discourse is based.[7]

2.2. *Psychoanalysis and the meaning of religious language*

Psychologists, and especially psychoanalysts who perforce attach great heuristic importance to human discourse, feel challenged by these issues. One might ask, for example, what kinds of negative experience or even perversion in the language of religious discourse and worship have made religious language seem so remote and abstract to modern man, so incapable of evoking or expressing the spontaneous religious experience of so many believers.

In the Christian religion, God reveals Himself through incarnation in humanity, history, the events, the things of the world ... and human sexuality. And yet many religions, Christianity included, preach the need to distance oneself from the things of this world − from humanity and sexuality − claiming that man's ethical drive should be directed towards something outside and beyond the world, human society ... and sexuality.[8]

Believers' representations of God are far from neutral − on the contrary, they are packed with personal and cultural connotation − and this obviously has an influence on their imaginative and religious experience.

For example, when I say that God is the Father, how does this image correlate with the father figure I have encountered in my personal experience and in the triadic configuration of the Oedipal relationship? How much depends on the symbolic elaboration of the culture to which I belong? Conversely, how much is the concept of human fatherhood in our culture influenced by religion discourse that portrays God either as the Omnipotent Father or as the loving father of the prodigal son? And what happens in other cultures?

3. The psychosocial dimension of religious language

Language is both the expression and repository of a people's culture. It also makes explicit how the two sexes relate to each other.

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[7] Drewermann's enormous output is surpassed only by the quantity of writings *about* Drewermann. For our purposes, five much-translated works are especially important: *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese. Die Wahrheit der Formen: Traum, Mythos, Märchen, Sage und Legende*, Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau, Walter Verlag, 1984-88. Italian readers will find a comprehensive survey in C. MARCHESELLI-CASALE, *Il caso Drewermann. Psicologia del profondo: un nuovo metodo per leggere la Bibbia?*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 1991.

[8] This rift in Christian religious discourse was dramatically anticipated in J. POHIER, *Quand je dis Dieu*, Paris, Ed. Du Seuil, 1977.

3.1. *Sex and language*

Applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics especially, have clearly shown that language and sexual gender are intimately related. In other words, there are phonological, lexical, syntactical and even stylistic differences in the way women and men use language. This has been demonstrated by studies of tribal societies (especially Amerindian and Australian) in which men and women lead fairly separate lives. Another clear example of sex-based language differentiation is Japanese culture, in which men and women have been using distinct language styles since the eleventh century. In Japan's rigid upper-class etiquette, women were even expected to use special vocabulary and grammar, and this persists even today, although distinctions are less clearly defined than they once were. Studies of sexism and language have often shown that language reflects and reinforces social attitudes and differences between women and men. It is well-known that different languages treat men and women unequally rather than simply differently.[9]

3.2. *Sexism, language and religion*

As regards religious language in particular, many religious denominations have tried to eradicate sexism in recent years, especially in adjectives and the use of the male pronoun when referring to God — the tendency now is to address God directly with the vocative (though archaic) *thou* rather than indirectly with the male pronoun He (which always needs a capital "h"). However, closer analysis invariably reveals that religious symbolism, images and meanings referring to God have clear masculine connotations, at least in our Western culture. Obviously, this has some influence on the religious experience of believers and their attitudes towards God. David Heller quotes the charming example of a letter written by a little girl called Silvia: «Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one [a boy] but try to be fair».[10]

It has also been observed of religious services that the people who play the key role in the sacrifice — priests — are usually men, while women are more often spectators, or even sacrificial victims. Because of their violence, sacrificial rites tend to become "men's business" which women can only admire from afar. Thus, the psychological preponderance of male attitudes

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[9] See D. CRYSTAL, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[10] D. HELLER, *The Children's God*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 57.

in religious ceremonies tends to become a way of belittling, subordinating and controlling women.

As regards sexual differences in the doctrine and practices of the Christian religion, the real problem − given the total dominance of men − is the role of women. The principle of female "subordination" has featured widely in the history of Christianity, and has always taken precedence over the principle of the "equality" of the sexes.[11]

4. Deeper levels of religious language

However, the sexist connotations of religious language and the culture in which a religion is rooted do not simply induce notional learning; they also determine how the religious experience of individual people is structured.

4.1. *Sexual personality*

Being a man or a women implies radical commitment to a sexual identity that influences all a person's attitudes. It seems quite justifiable to speak of male and female modes of experience, and of religious experience in particular.

Taking Bion's work on the development of mind a stage further, some psychoanalysts[12] have systematically elaborated a new "semantic" theory of personality. In this version of "psychoanalytical cognitivism", mental development is seen as a gradual process of symbolic structuring extending from early childhood to adulthood. Sexuality is regarded as a particular aspect of cognitive development so closely bound up with mental creativity and personal growth that every mental act becomes an expression of sexual identity.

Other researchers, developing on recent psychoanalytical theories that see the Self as a matrix of internalised relationships, have shown that religion reflects the structuring of the relational Self.[13]

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[11] I have adopted the concept and terms from R. RUETHER, «Christianity», in A. SHARMA (ed.), *Women in World Religions*, Albany NY, State University of New York.

[12] See A. IMBASCIATI, *Sviluppo psicosessuale e sviluppo cognitivo. Introduzione alla psicologia psicoanalitica*, Rome, Il Pensiero Scientifico, 1983; D. MELTZER, *Stati sessuali della mente*, Rome, Armando, 1975.

[13] See especially J.W. JONES, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Religion: Transference and Transcendence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991. Because of the psychodynamic origin it proposes, I am less convinced by the attempt to link certain aspects of ancient religions to the hypnagogic phenomena described by O. Isakover by relating both to the earliest visual and tactile sensations of the suckling infant. One tire-

Sexual identity develops in a "family matrix", i.e., a network of meanings, based on relationships predating the birth of the individual, which transmits genealogical and social information throughout the family system. This is "culture" not as cognitive transmission but as emotional communication, a set of "affective codes" which, as Franco Fornari has pointed out,[14] we assimilate unconsciously as part of the cultural context and family system we live in.

The family converts the symbolic systems of previous generations into symbolic systems for future generations that will shape the mental development of individuals yet to be born. It is these transpersonal super-structures that make possible and determine the form of the deeper psychological substructures known collectively as the Self.

4.2. *Sexual identity and awareness of limitation*

An awareness of deep-rooted limitation − I am not my opposite; I can't be both male and female − is intrinsic to the development of sexual identity and the differentiation and complementarity of the sexes.

The mental development of children is a slow process, extending from recognition of existential independence and renunciation of the fantasmatic, fusional register to the initiation of relationships with other people. For both males and females, awareness of the father forces acceptance of reality and renunciation of fusional experience of the mother. As a result, children discover castration, limitation, otherness, personal and sexual identity. The discovery that they are not their mothers' only object of desire prepares children (male and female) for the experience of symbolic castration. Although this denies the omnipotence of their own desires, it also forces them to acknowledge the reality of the parental dyad, reconcile generational and sexual differences and start constructing their own sexual identity, i.e., the ability to construct relationships results from acceptance of (sexual) otherness.

Identity − especially sexual − is neither innate nor given, but a process that develops within a relationship, a dynamic equilibrium of acquisition

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less champion of this curious undertaking has been R.J. ALMANESI, *Traces of Archaic Memories in Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis*, in «Rivista di Psicoanalisi», 36 (1990), pp. 370-424. Almanesi has also advanced an interpretation of the Menorah, the celebrated seven-armed candelabrum of the Jewish faith; see *A Psychoanalytical Interpretation of the Menorah*, in «Journal of Hillside Hospital», 2 (1953), pp. 80-95, followed a year later in the same journal (3, pp. 3-18) by *A Further Contribution to the Psychoanalytical Interpretation of the Menorah*. I cite Almanesi simply to show how wayward the development of «applied psychoanalysis» has been.

[14] See F. FORNARI, *Genitalità e cultura*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1975; *Simbolo e codice*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1977.

through introjection and loss through separation and mourning.[15] But the father figure cannot be acknowledged until the child is mentally capable of recognising him as distinct from the Self and the mother, and this happens when the child begins to live within a triadic parental relationship that denies fusion with the mother. Discovery of the difference between mother and father goes hand in hand with recognition of one's sexual identity as both difference and relationship. Masculinity exists only as something distinct from, though related to, femininity. Identity cannot develop independently of sexual bipolarisation.

This can only happen when children learn to accept their own castration: by renouncing the omnipotence of desire implied by fusional experience of the mother, they accept that they are not the only loved object, that they are not the father, that they are only a part of the bipolar sexual equation (renunciation of hermaphroditism).

4.3. *The limitations of religious language*

All this is very similar to the structuring of religious experience. Believers have to recognise that they are not "like God" and accept their limitations as creatures. They also have to recognise the limitations of their own religious experience, the incompleteness of their image of God, the relativity and inadequacy of any discourse about God.

Believers know that religious language is fundamentally and inevitably limited, which scandalises atheists who see this as proof that all images of God are projections of man.

The inadequacy of religious discourse sets the seal on its relativity, and means that individuals acquire only partial mastery of cultural and religious language. The relativity and incompleteness of religious language results not only from the ineffability of its object and the limitations of cultural language in the broader sense, but also from individual conditioning.

In other words, our ways of thinking about God, of saying God, of structuring our religious experience, are strongly influenced by individual history and personal characteristics, especially those generated by gender differences.

5. Religious experience and gender differences: stabilities and instabilities in a changing culture

In conclusion, I would say that the relationship between religious experience, religious language and gender differences (whose interconnectedness

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[15] See S. ARGENTIERI, *Sui processi mentali precoci dell'identità femminile. (Il rifiuto della femminilità e l'invidia del pene)*, in «Rivista di Psicoanalisi», 28 (1982), pp. 361-376.

has been repeatedly demonstrated in field research) is an expression of both cultural context and the deep structuring of personality. Whether gender differences persist and can be transmitted across cultures and religious languages depends on how deeply they are rooted in the human psyche.

Some differences in religious experience are supported by and expressed through religious language deeply rooted in sexual identity, and are quite independent of the religious language of culture in general.

Other sexual and religious differences — I believe, most — are generated by historically and culturally determined ways of interpreting masculinity and femininity, and how the sexes relate to each other. They are handed down through education and social conditioning, and will change in response to changes in culture itself, and the religious language that is such an integral part of it.