

Theoretical paper



Psicologia della Religione e-journal

Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione
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The legacy of Lou Andreas Salomé and Donald Winnicott as a psychoanalytical contribution to theological research. Some considerations

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Riassunto

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

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

Parole chiave: Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psicoanalisi, teologia

Abstract

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

Keywords: Lou Salomé, Winnicott, psychoanalysis, theology

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

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

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

Lou Andreas Salomé: faith as frail wrapping of doubt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Winnicott: religion as illusionary transitional phenomenon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Challenges of transitional phenomenon perspective

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

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

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

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

Drawing tentative conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

As in all sciences, the goal of the psychology (of religion) is truth. It aims neither to lead toward God nor toward non-belief. It sheds light on mental aspects (conscious or unconscious to a greater or lesser degree) of both religious and anti-religious convictions (Aletti, 2014, pp. 15-18). Through the same careful search for truth, psychology of religion is useful for believers and non-believers.

For believers and theologians there is a certainty: inasmuch as psychology explains the human truth, it makes human beings more able to find the motivations behind their belief, making them more autonomous and aware.

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

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

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

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

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

