Rassegne e riflessioni

Resisting the Religion/Spirituality Mantra: In Search of the Peculiarity of Psychology of Religion

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Riassunto

Uscire dal mantra "Religione e Spiritualità": in cerca dell'ambito proprio della Psicologia della religione

L'intreccio religione/spiritualità pone in questione lo stesso oggetto della Psicologia della religione. Alcuni propongono di considerare la religione come *meaning system*, nell'intento di trovare una dimensione *culture-free* di ricerca di senso, che prescinda dalle religioni istituzionali. Ma per la stessa distintività della disciplina occorre definire l'oggetto religione come qualcosa di individuabile nella cultura e nella storia, con credenze, riti e pratiche che fanno riferimento al Trascendente. Oggetto della psicologia della religione dovrebbe essere l'attitudine soggettiva nella costruzione di un rapporto con la religione ambiente, non vago senso di spiritualità o di sacro, di orientamento ai valori o semplice ricerca di senso. La religione non è una domanda ma è una (non l'unica) delle possibili (cioè non necessaria) risposte al *search for meaning*. La domanda di senso è universale, caratteristica della psiche umana; la risposta religiosa è determinata. Ma la religione non è *soltanto* un sistema di significato: per il credente è una relazione personale, i cui effetti psichici sono considerati dallo psicologo a prescindere dalla questione della loro verità di contenuto.

Parole chiave: Religione, Trascendente, Sistema di significato.

Abstract

The overlapping between religion and spirituality questions the main object of the psychology of religion. Some scholars suggest considering religion as a meaning system, in order to identify a culture-free field where the search for meaning would be independent of institutional religions and where religion should be meant as something which can be identified in culture, as well as in beliefs, rituals, and practices that refer to the Transcendent. The object of the psychology of religion should not be a sense of spirituality or simply search for meaning. Religion is not a question, but it is one (although not the only one) of the possible (and not the exclusive) responses to the search for meaning. The latter is a universal feature of the human mind, whereas the former is culturally determined. Religion is not merely a meaning system since the believer has a personal relationship with the Transcendent.

Keywords: Religion, Transcendent, Meaning system

Introduction

The overlapping between religion and spirituality questions psychology of religion itself. Increasingly more often, in international publications and congresses psychology of religion intersects, is associated with, or even overlaps the notion of "spirituality", as if religion and spirituality were the same or belong to the same field of research. The expression "Religion and Spirituality" occurs repeatedly like a kind of "mantra" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014) and in 2011 the name of Division 36 of the APA has been changed into "Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality". Along the same line, the titles of two handbooks published by the same division in 2013 joined religion and spirituality. This can be considered as a positive fact, because such an approach extends and unifies different disciplines (Pargament, 2013) or as a negative phenomenon because it may confuse previously distinct contents and scientific perspectives and sometimes skews scientific neutrality (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014; 2015).

If we look at the PsycINFO database, a huge increase of the number of publications that include "spirituality" in the title can be easily noticed (Pargament, 2013). It should be noted that such a trend does not support the notion that people are now more involved in spirituality rather than in religion (as it is claimed in newspapers and popular books and fiction). In fact, this trend mirrors only the researchers' shift or increase of interest. Thus, the appropriate question should be: Why are psychologists increasingly concerned with spirituality rather than religion? Also the notion that, according to psychological meaning (we stress the adjective "psychological" since we intend neither the sociological nor the theological meaning), spirituality is a "post-religion religiosity" (Westerink, 2012) or a "religion after religion" (Hood, 2012, p. 106) has to be questioned. The same is true about the claim that religion and spirituality, even though they are not considered the same thing, belong to the same family as they were conjoined twins, but oddly born, in the psychological literature, some decades one far from the other (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015). We wonder whether this recent interest in spirituality is grounded in intrinsic reasons within psychology (for example, in order to broaden the investigation of how ordinary people live and conceive their existence) or whether it is motivated by extrinsic reasons, for example to seek opportunistic goals such as obtaining grants and research funds, getting academic positions, or being perceived as more attuned to the current cultural and ideological trends. Another possibility is that interest in spirituality comes from religious, namely, apologetic or pastoral reasons. This focus on the orientation of psychologists and their derivation from the culture they are part of will feature heavily throughout this paper. Why does this happen in the domain of the psychology of religion in general, in Division 36 of the APA and the International Association Psychology Religion (IAPR)?

We claim that religion is distinct from spirituality and it is something different from a meaning system or an ideology both for the content and the methods (Aletti & Antonietti, 2015). A further claim is that the notion of spirituality adds nothing to the psychology of religion. We think that it is necessary to distinguish religion from spirituality and that the latter tends to lead to a general, vague psychological attitude.

The ambiguity of the notion of "Spirituality"

Spirituality - as argued by Westerink (2012), who edited a special issue of the Archives devoted to such a topic - is "a concept in search of its meaning". In fact, the concept of spirituality is problematic. It is vague, ambiguous, with a long history that, in Europe first and then in America, dates back to and is fused with Christianity (Rican, 2004; Westerink, 2012; Montanari, 2016). But even today it is a polisemantic, polyvalent and multidimensional concept. Peter la Cour and colleagues showed that the understanding of the word "spirituality" in the population of a country, which is quite secularised as Denmark, involves six distinct meanings: positive dimensions in human life and well-being, New Age ideology, the integral part of an established religious life, a vague striving opposed to religion, selfishness, and ordinary inspiration in human activities. The conclusion of the researchers is that there is no commonly shared meaning of "spirituality": "A common understanding of the term spirituality does not exist" (La Cour, Ausker, & Hvidt, 2012, p. 63).

The concept of "spirituality" - widespread in American literature but often criticised in Europe

- has too many different meanings, both in the academic and in popular environments. It is used to denote the public or private devotion to God, but also a devotion without God, self-transcendence, feelings of unity, fusion with nature, humanistic values, meditation, experience of otherness, enhancement of the human potential, life purpose, meaning-making, mindfulness, search for physical and psychological well-being, positive thinking, animalism and anti-specism (with associated food practices such as vegetarianism and veganism), body care, and so on. Used in so many senses, the concept of "spirituality" is irrelevant to the psychology of religion.

Some scholars propose to consider religion only as a meaning system, in order to identify a culture-free field where the search for meaning would be independent from institutional religions. As a matter of fact, spirituality is a characteristic feature of human beings who have a "spiritual" life. Atheists, too, have their own form of spirituality, their own experience of the absolute, and often their own forms of mystical experience (Comte-Sponville, 2006; Schnell, 2013). Being an atheist does not mean abandoning the search for answers to the most profound existential questions or negating ethical values. As human beings, we all have values, search for meaning, elaborate explanatory narratives myths and devotion. As Schnell (2013) clearly said, "spirituality is the life of the mind as spirit". From this point of view, being "spiritual" means being human and so the psychology of religion (if reduced to the psychology of spirituality) would overlap psychology in general.

In literature, despite the increase in the number of publications about spirituality, there are also critical positions that confirm how much the term "spirituality" is "fuzzy". For instance, Bernard Spilka (1993, p. 1) stressed that spirituality is "a word that embraces obscurity with passion". Among the perplexities that accompany the term "spirituality", there are those that concern the coping functions that spirituality can play, above all when individuals have to deal with situations of illness, grief, and loss. Peter Salander argued that religion, spirituality, well-being, if merged, constitute the new venerated "Trinity" of empirical research in the psychology of religion, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context. The same author emphasised that the concept of spirituality is almost coextensive of all what is psychic, so lacking clarity and univocity.

Furthermore, the notion risks of being interpreted as tautological or circular: for some authors spirituality is what is defined through the spirituality tests they devised. Thus, it seems impossible to define what the concept actually refers to (the so-called "ontology" of spirituality; Salander, 2012).

Studies in this field are on the increase. They emphasise the importance of spirituality for the well-being or quality of life and consequently the importance of "spiritual care" is promoted. Many studies concerned with the concept of "religious/spiritual coping" address serious, long-term illnesses, particularly cancer. In many of these studies, there is a kind of *petitio principii*, because of the vastness of the concept used: "Spirituality includes not only religion and positive indicators of mental health as part of its but also the secular. In this model, everyone is spiritual, including atheists and agnostics. Since there is no one left to compare, with this all-inclusive category of spiritual individuals research is impossible and relationships with mental or physical health cannot be studied" (Koenig, 2008, p. 350).

In the research of the beneficial impact of religion/spirituality on well-being, we should be careful about avoiding tautology. In an exploratory survey of eight well-cited journals, Garssen, Visser and de Jager Meezenbroek (2016) found that 26 out of 58 studies used a spirituality scale that contained 25% or more of well-being items to examine whether spirituality predicts well-being or distress.

Unfuzzing the fuzzy: Religion vs. Spirituality

Some scholars believe that the psychology of religion could broaden its scope through the concept of spirituality. But some authors go further and, because of the difficulty of clarifying the relationships between religion and spirituality, tend to bring them back to the broader field of meaning-system or meaning-making, which also includes "implicit religion" (Schnell, 2003), or in the still broader horizon of search for meaning, which would be a "basic human imperative that goes beyond any explicit belief or meaning system" (Murphy, 2017, p. 4).

It is worth noting that search for meaning concerns posing questions but not providing answers, which is what religion does. However, Schnell has found that "so many people do not live a meaningful life

but they do not have any problems with that. They do not suffer from a crisis of meaning, but they do not think their life is in anyway meaningful". She calls this situation "existential indifference" (Schnell, 2010). Can this just say that it is not necessary to have a religion or explicit sense-making to live well as a man? These positions propose a solution to the dichotomy between religion and spirituality based on the statement that "we cannot limit the issue of meaning" (Westerink, 2013). But the more the boundary of the concept is widened, the more its content becomes unidentifiable since it leads to generic humanistic anthropology.

The concept of meaning-making concerns every activity of the human spirit/mind. So, what about the psychology of religion? And although some studies attest to the crucial role of meaningfulness for mental and physical health, what does this add to the psychological understanding of religion? Finally, there is the issue of the subject of the discipline: Psychology of what? Religion, spirituality or meaning or, ultimately, "psyche psychology". From this point of view, being "spiritual" means being human and, more specifically, the psychology of religion (reduced to the psychology of spirituality) would be identified with psychology in general. On the contrary, in our view, the psychology of religion has its own distinctiveness as a discipline by safeguarding the object of its field of research following a substantive definition of religion (Aletti & Antonietti, 2015). "Psychology does not define spirituality" (Belzen, 2010, p. 85) and, in the same way, it does not define religion. However, the situation is different. Psychologists find religion in the cultural environment as a structured and observable public set of facts, whereas spirituality is only a matter of psychical attitudes, feelings and processes. Also meaning-making processes are idiosyncratic and derive from the absolutely person-specific intersection of individual experiences and cultural influence. Religion should be meant as something that can be identified in culture, as well as in beliefs, rituals, and practices that refer to the Transcendent.

The object of the psychology of religion should not be a sense of spirituality or simply search for meaning. Religion exists as an objective reality identifiable in culture. We refer to what ordinary people mean by religion (why not so for psychologists?). In fact, people believing in transcendent entities exist. There are billions of people who believe in the divine, personal entities who direct their lives and to whom they regularly turn to pray and look for answers. Psychologists can study the specificity of actual religions with an unconditional observation of what people actually do and what people think religion is. As psychologists, we are not interested in knowing whether religions are true, what are their past origins or future destiny. We look at religion as it is "lived" by real people in our present world. Even if the beliefs shared by religious persons are strange, they exist and have relevance in the subject's psyche. As psychologists, we are not interested in the objective truth of beliefs (Aletti, 2014, pp.15-18) but, as psychologists, we are interested in what happens in the mind (we prefer the term "psyche") of a person who believes into a transcendent entity. When people speak about God, when they pray him, when they utter blasphemy, what happens in their psyche? As ordinary people understand it, religion is a concrete historical phenomenon: a set of institutionalised beliefs, forms of worship, and ethical behaviours that seek to establish a relationship with the Transcendent, which believers generally experience as a person, an interlocutor in a dialogue between two subjects. Religion is too complex to be considered only as a meaning-system or an ideology. And religiosity, that is, the personal appropriation of institutional religion, cannot be reduced to an adaptation strategy. Psychology of religion requires that religion is defined first and foremost ("How do you study religion if you are not sure how to define it?"; Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 2). From a Popperian perspective, the "thing" that is religion exists before it is encapsulated into different sciences: history, sociology, philosophy, phenomenology, and also psychology. This is the definition of the content before the creation of the scientific object. It means that religion cannot be defined only as a psychological process, but should be considered as an existent thing in itself. Psychology of religion investigates, with psychological tools and models, only what is psychic in the religion (Aletti, 2010). We prefer a real and substantive definition rather than theoretical and functional ones. Psychology of religion is interested in what religion is and not what it is useful for. Religion is defined here for its content, not as a psychic process. The discriminating and inescapable element is the relationship with the Tran-

scendent. By narrowing the field of psychology of religion in this way, we emphasise the distance that separates psychology of religion from a hypothetical "psychology of spirituality" or of meaning-making. More clearly, we distinguish the psychology of religion from mindfulness, well-being, and "religious coping". All these concepts - which have no clear, unambiguous definition and status in psychology - refer to *functional correlatives or derivatives* of religiosity, but they do not express the idea of religion as ordinary people understand and experience it.

There are certainly some common elements in religion and other systems of values or meaning systems (in the sense of organised systems of personal and social values, rituals, metaphorical languages, symbols, and emotional experiences). But calling them all "religious" conflicts with natural language. Considering "religious" every system of values that relates to money, sex, hygiene, art and so on and, consequently, claiming that every individual is, in one way or another, religious would be mere conceptual deconstructionism (Vergote, 1993). If we compare the numerous definitions of religion reported in literature, we note that one common concept is consistent: "Religion is a belief system which includes the notion of a supernatural, invisible world, inhabited by gods, human souls, angels, demons, and other conscious spirit entities" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 3). Religion has to be conceived as a set of beliefs, rituals, practices, and organization issues intended to establish and support a relationship with the Transcendent, which is generally thought by the believer as a personal entity. Hence, what qualifies religion is the reference to a personal relationship with a supernatural, transcendent, spiritual, divine being. It is also possible to highlight some common institutional features of religion, at least of the three so-called religions of the Book: God's self-disclosure deposited in a sacred text; symbolic and ritual language; tradition and official and recognised magisterium; institutionalized cults of the community of believers; initiation and progressive education; dialectics between personal religiosity and institutional religion (Aletti, 2010).

Institutionalization is not an *a priori*, rigid and inhibiting element, but a characteristic inherent to the fact that individual religiosity is an experience which is by its own nature participatory. Psychology of religion does not "invoke" religion, nor does it question the origin, the essence, the evolutionary destiny of "religion": It does not speak of religion in general (contrary to what scholars of "spirituality" do). A religion is a specific religious mode, which develops within a culture. As such, it is a reality identifiable in its own object (Vergote, 1993). As psychologists, we do not know religion, but religious men. Man cannot be religious "in general", but people believe in a particular religion. Psychology of religion investigates, more appropriately, the personal belief, that is to say, how the person interacts with the religious reality presented by the culture he/she encounters. The "psychological invariants" and the individual variables that undergo a relationship with the Transcendent are studied. However, the culture and the symbolic language, and the idiosyncratic resonance of the person involved (his/her story, as well as relational and emotional world) cannot be ignored.

Some methodological issues

As regards methodology, scholars over the past twenty years have employed new models, theories, and procedures. As with language, art, politics and so on, religion involves more than one psychic process. However, what distinguishes the psychology of religion is not the uniqueness of its methodology but the uniqueness of its content: the relationship (felt as real) with the Transcendent (Aletti & Antonietti, 2015). The researcher is confronted with the question of what is meant by "spiritual" and "religious", as well as for "meaning in life". These issues are addressed both from the point of view of the researcher him/herself and of the subjects which are investigated, both with reference to their cultural and linguistic framework. This calls into question the on-line survey-based methodology, which does not allow to identify the context in which the subject is self-defined.

For example, it is an excessive simplification presenting subjects with the alternative "Are you religious (or spiritual) or not?". It is problematic to identify the religious/spiritual in the absence of a concrete cultural reference. The definition of spiritual is often provided per *negationem*: Spiritual are men who believe in something, regardless of the reference to the institutional religion. Atheists are also defined per *viam negationis* as they oppose one or all religions. But

how should we categorise agnostics, sceptics, existentially indifferent, and "implicit religious people"?

Coping, meaning-making, meaningfulness are individual, idiosyncratic psychological processes. Well-being can vary from person to person. As Schell (2010) says, meaning is not always happiness and Visser, Garssen and Vingerhoets (2013) stated that most of the dimensions of spirituality, including meaning in life, are distinct from well-being. In addition, the expression "coping with religion" is ambiguous. You can defend yourself with religion, but also from religion. You can experience well-being and meaning in life opposing religion, as it may happen to a militant atheist (Dworkin, 2013). Religion is not a question, but it is one (although not the only one) of the possible (but not the exclusive) responses to the search for meaning. The latter is a universal feature of the human mind, whereas the former is culturally determined. We think that it is necessary to distinguish between the universal search for meaning and that specific response, neither necessary nor universal, to the search for meaning that the religious response is. However, responses psychologically relevant to the questions may be also atheistic or spiritual (Schnell & Keenan, 2013). We agree that "we cannot confine the issue of meaning, meaning-making and meaning system to the realm of the psychology of religion" (Westerink, 2013).

In the Western culture religion is the specific answer to the general search for meaning according to which the Transcendent is the source of meaning and the ultimate value. Such a response has specific connotations (beliefs, symbols, rituals, relationships, ethical principles) according to the different historical and cultural, linguistic, and symbolic contexts (Aletti & Antonietti, 2015). In this sense, human religiosity has its own specificity and distinctiveness. Is religion only practised by a few people in some Western countries? But that is precisely what psychology of religion investigates. Otherwise, besides changing the subject, you will also change the name of the discipline (Psychology of what?) or reduce it to pure general psychology. Indeed, Schnell, from the observation that religiosity is rather institutional and spirituality is too vague, highlights the centrality of the concept of meaning among religiosity, spirituality, non-belief, values, well-being, atheism and seems to suggest a new name for this field of research

(psychology of meaning) of which religion would be only a part.

In our opinion, if we were to refer to a diagram we should design it in this way. In the centre, there is the search for meaning (the question); around, in various centripetal directions, different meaning-making processes (the answers) at different levels of meaning and complexity. Man gives meaning to his existence in the world and behaves accordingly at various levels. It goes from the simple self-defence from dangers and stress, with the fight or flight response (with the concurrent release of cortisol and adrenaline) to the most abstract philosophical systems (with involvement into the ultimate concern) and even with psychotic delirium (with the defensive function of the core of the Self).

Among all the possible answers to the search for meaning, religion is the specific response that refers to the Transcendent as a source of global, totalizing meaning, which orientates and informs the whole life. It should be said that in the scheme of meaning-making and mindfulness, the authors insist on the cognitive and intellectual aspects of religion as a response to the need for meaning. Here the influence of some relevant psychologists inspired by philosophy - such as Maslow, Frankl and, to some extent, Allport - is highly noticeable. It would be wise to bear in mind that religiousness is, for the believer, a personal relationship with a personal God, based on emotions and affections deeply rooted in his/her experience, starting with the interaction of representations of primary objects (mother, father, Self; Rizzuto, 1979). The truth of individual religion is based on illusion (in a Winnicottian sense), that is, on subjective and perceived evidence, which is not less true than the subjective certainty of being loved by the partner we believe to love, or the aesthetic experience in front of painting or music. Religion may remain a great, magnificent, and perhaps useful "illusion", in the Freudian sense of an irrefutable certainty based on desire (Aletti, 2005; 2014).

Self-involvement and neutrality

We are interested in religion as psychologists, not as religious experts. The discipline of the psychology of religion is psychological in nature, not religious. For psychologists religion is just a topic to be inves-

tigated. Just as psychologists, we are intrigued by this strange attitude of man who believes in things he sees, feels, perceives. Often psychologists of religion are predominantly religious psychologists, personally involved in a form of religion. On the contrary, non-believing psychologists are often disinterested in the problem of religion, which they consider irrational.

Therefore, the psychology of religion finds it difficult to navigate between Scilla of the apologetics and Charybdis of the reductionists (Wulff, 2003, pp. 14-15). Perhaps behind the recent interest by researchers in spirituality, seeking mindfulness, meaning system and so on by the there is a "hidden agenda" according to which they should try to show the truth and the benefit of the adherence to religion (predominantly Christianity) on the basis of the assertion "religion is better than no religion" (a fact denounced by Belzen, 2010, pp. 90-93). This concerns above all the "religious professionals" who are interested in the discipline with philosophical, apologetic, pastoral, and even therapeutic aims, by assuming that religions support well-being. As noted by David Wulff, "as in other fields associated with religious studies, psychologists of religion have nowadays to serve more as caretakers than as critics of religion" (Wulff, 2003, p. 28; see also McCutcheon, 2001). As we said, religion does not belong to the questions but to the answers. The psychologist does not verify a religious question, but a religious answer to a search for meaning (Aletti, 2012).

Psychologists cannot say that religiosity is a human *proprium* or that human beings are religious by nature (*homo religiosus*, both in the original sense by van der Leeuw, who coined the term, and in the recent elaboration of religious anthropology by Julien Reis, who spoke of *homo naturaliter religiosus*). Psychology of religion is not anthropology. It studies the psychological invariants and individual variables (cognitive, neurological, psychodynamic, etc.) that preside at becoming religious (or atheistic) in concretely determined persons, in a certain culture and religion. Psychology is "ecological", it refers to a man embedded in a culture, a religion, a symbolic, determined, and contingent language. Psychology of religion is emic, not etic; it puts in brackets the truth of the content of religious intent. It goes without saying that incorporating religion and spirituality within "meaning systems" responds to the need, perceived

by many scholars, to have a culture-free approach that is extensible to all men. It is a philosophical-anthropological temptation, or even an apologetic temptation to show that religion "is good", as would be the fact that it always existed in all peoples and ages.

The psychological understanding of the believers' religious experience needs empirical and phenomenological observation of real, concrete manifestations of lived religion. Metaphorically speaking, psychologists of religion should enter churches, synagogues, and mosques.

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