

**RELIGIOUS METAPHOR: PSYCHOLOGY, THEOLOGY, AESTHETICS.  
SOME CONSIDERATIONS FROM A CLINICAL POINT OF VIEW.**

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We would like to begin with a passage in the Bible of the first book of Kings, where we hear of the manifestation of Yahweh to the prophet Elijah, refugee upon the mountain Oreb:

*And Yahweh said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh." And behold, Yahweh was passing by, and a wind great and strong was tearing up the mountains, shattering the rocks before Yahweh. Yahweh was not in the wind. And after the wind came an earthquake; Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire; Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle voice of silence. And it so happened that, when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle<sup>1</sup>(1 Kings, 19: 11-13).*

In these words the rhetorical figure of oxymoron ("voice of silence") remarks the difficulty of expression, the stammering of a word that desires to say something about an unspeakable and unspoken God, unpronounceable and always invoked. [ Besides, the passage illustrates in a suggestive manner the tendency of the biblical tradition to correct and go beyond the theophanic pretensions of pagan religions, in the knowledge of the unspeakableness of God, ] whom the language can approach only through metaphor. Symbol and metaphor refer and send back to a reality which is always "other" and "elsewhere" from the linguistic signs, and push man's speech towards shores constantly open to the unheard-of.

The believer (separating in this from the idolatrous) feels that the religious language is metaphorical, referring and sending back to a non expressible Other; is a vision "per speculum et in aenigmate", is a word balancing between the shores of humanity and divinity, word invoking the transcendence, rather than celebrating the acquisition and the possession of God.

On his side, the psychoanalyst knows that the "talking cure" is based, in the patient no less than in the analyst, on a word which always goes "beyond". The interpretation, for example, seizes the not said of the saying, and opens to a content which is other and new as regards what is intentionally expressed, assuming it as a container, as a metaphor: what you tell me by words and gestures with your speech, dream, symptom, with the relationship we establish ( transference and countertransference) contains also this other...Nonetheless also the word of interpretation is other thing - more limited - as to the relational experience which it signals in the past of the subject and enacts in and through the present of a transference.

Some specifications about the limited and partial aspects in which we refer to the relationship between psychology, art and religion. We do not refer to the artistic expressions of religious feeling, with the related bureaucratic questions, about what is religious art, about the difference between religious and sacred art,

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<sup>1</sup>Word biblical commentary vol. 12, 1 Kings (Simon J. de Vries ed.), Waco, Texas: Word books. [Luis Alonso Schökel]

and so on. Neither we intend to interpret religion as a form of art as some authors, like Beit-Hallahmi, proposed. We also think that religion cannot be considered as a kind of individual emotional state and decontextualised from the cultural environment, nor we intend that emotion could be taken as a model for religion in the way that Watts seems to do: "Emotion as a model for religion".<sup>2</sup> On this matter, we agree with O'Connor, sustaining that "Religion involves the whole person, and it is through the instrumentality of language, symbols, and ritual that an encounter or relationship with the sacred or transcendent is articulated and expressed".<sup>3</sup>

We speak of Aesthetics as reflection around the fascinating element of the experience of reality, under the perspective of emphasizing the symbolic meaning of perception, rather than in that of the artistic quality of the "beautiful" sign. It is true that the aesthetic evaluation is founded upon the sensations, the perception of the bodily. But there is not a sensation without a meaning: the beauty is beautiful...in order to something. It seems to us possible to detect some points of contact between psychology, theology, aesthetic philosophy...not questing for parallelisms, nor for delicate alliances or crypt-apologetic crypt-reductionistic strategies. Only under the perspective to best understand some psychological dynamics of religious metaphor that constitute a partial, but unavoidable aspect, as Vergote teaches us: all that is human is psychic even if nothing of what is human is only psychic.

Under a theological perspective, the question interested many authors: sufficient to cite Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>4</sup> who has proposed an aesthetic theology as an adequate kind of theological reflection on revelation and faith. More recently quite known are the accusations that Eugen Drewermann makes against the logocentrism of biblical exegesis and his call to restore the symbolical, metaphorical, mythical elements of religious language. [More and more is outspoken by the experience of strangeness, inauthenticity and/or inadequacy of the theological reflection towards one's own personal experience. According to Jaques-Marie Pohier, for example, psychoanalysis questions to the theologian about the faith in an original manner: the question shifts from the expression of what is believed (the theological truths), to the reason of the personal involvement "Why do you believe what you believe? Which desire is enacted and is satisfied in your belief?". the theologian assuming this perspective, is radically involved, with his whole person, in his work: "I cannot theologise other than as a first person singular: I believe".<sup>5</sup>

Some theologians nowadays feel the urgency to put in evidence the aesthetic moment as a place for experiencing the arousal of faith. One of the most renowned theologians in our country, has written a treatise of fundamental theology to which he gave the meaningful title "the trustful God". According to him, the language of the Faith, rooted in the order of the emotions, is located between the order of the signs and the order of the meanings, at the origin (inchoative moment) of their signifying interaction. He writes:

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<sup>2</sup>WATTS, F.N. (1996). Psychological and religious perspectives on emotion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6(2), 72-87.

<sup>3</sup>O'CONNOR, K.V. (1996). Reconfiguring the emotions in the psychology of religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6(3), 165-173.

<sup>4</sup>VON BALTHASAR, H. U. (1968). Rivelazione e bellezza, in IDEM, *Verbum Caro* (105-140). Brescia: Morcelliana.

<sup>5</sup>POHIER, J.-M. (1978), Le consequences d'une familiarité de vingt ans avec la psychanalyse sur ma pratique de la théologie. *Concilium*, n. 135, 69-78.

*The believer's conscience lives its own relationship to the truth under ways essentially mediated through an aesthetic appreciation: that is from the confidence and consensus devolved to a **persuasive justice** which manifests itself in the shape of a **symbolic evidence** capable of giving an **affective impression**. This includes the determining role of a constellation of figures of experience who are not reducible to the conceptual and to the operational, although having a close relation with this both figure of the experience, They in fact are the figures of **resonance**: those that belong to the sphere of the emotional and of the imaginal, of the feeling and of the passion. In the end to the qualitative echo of experience: that which in the end makes the difference between the spoken word and the reassuring tone in which it sounds.<sup>6</sup>*

The interest of the psychological research seems to converge with the theological one, towards the study of a source affective nucleus of experience, (which naturally does not emerge in vacuum, but inside a culture and its language). This ultimately should send back to the anthropological reflection, but, at least in a first phase, it can represent a common field of meeting, debate and research between psychology and theology. A similar foundation is perhaps recognisable also in A. Vergote's work, specifically in a collection of essays published 20 years ago in Italy with the meaningful title *Theology and its archaeology: Faith, theology and human sciences*.

It seems advisable to restore the relevance of aesthetic appreciation as constitutive of the daily conscience; not exceptional state intended as phenomenon of "enthusiasm" and confined/tolerated only in the artistic genius or in the mystical state, if not even in the exaltation of psychosis. The relegation of the emotional-esthetical experience to clinical-pathological or mystical exception obeys to the prejudice of very ancient ascendance in western philosophy that the rooting of spirit in body is a constriction and an obstacle for the expression of the conscience and not a means with a specific richness. Attitude from which contemporary psychology, and even psychoanalysis, do not seem to be completely liberated.

The aesthetic appreciation includes the acknowledgement of one's own emotion of the Beauty. It doesn't turn on in the perception, but in the perception's emotion. It arises from processes of attribution of meaning: it does not reside in the thing, (not even in the "masterwork" *per se*) but in a sort of relation which presupposes subjective relevance...the interest, the meaning for myself.

Our hypothesis moves from a suggestion coming up from Lou Andreas Salomé, who sustained that the process of faith confines with that of artistic creation and that both of them spring off from an originary archaic narcissism where inner reality and outer reality are not perceived as separated. *She considered in fact that: To any work of art we attribute impressions that we cannot receive from any outer reality and that nonetheless communicate to us something which is not only the subjectivity's fruit, but seems to be objectively founded. (page 84)*

Art does not necessitate a gratification in reality; on the contrary the tension to reach the peaks of the creative process draws out of the frustration of human wishes. Right with Lou Andréas Salomé, a gifted individual with romantic sensitivity, starts a new way of thinking the freudian figure of illusion which will show

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<sup>6</sup>SEQUERI, P. (1996), *Il Dio affidabile. Saggio di teologia fondamentale*. Brescia: Queriniana, pp. 380-381.

us great usefulness in understanding some great experiences of man, specifically the religious and the artistic.

Freud, speaking of religion, primarily in **The future of an illusion**, defined illusion as a belief founded on a desire. Being such, illusion, on the rational field of demonstration is not demonstrable (but also not refutable) in its contents of truth. It is though evident from many passages of his work, and against what he himself declares explicitly, that this illusion is, for him, also a mistake, a self-deception towards reality destined to end in delusion.

Lou Andreas Salomé did already contest this to him, claiming the originality and the non-reducibility of the illusions to the explanations given by reason: exactly in referring to religion she writes, in **Mein Dank an Freud**:

*Never it could be possible to reduce the significance of this experience through the lights of reason, to reduce the "rapture" through the "truth" in an intellectual sense.<sup>7</sup>*

But this faith eludes the representations of God, because it remains always the chance that such a representation is nothing else than "a name for a void".

*It is necessary to understand that the worship of God is already a name for a void, for a lacuna of devotion, where renunciation and loss are already present, a need for God who cannot be owned, while in the end, God could not exist as such if not where there is not "need" for him. Anyone who wishes to use this name, will not have anymore "God", but rather something which is indicated by a finger, to force it to assume in a way or another a visible, earthly, interchangeable form. (page 71)*

The concept of illusion comes back markedly in the history of psychology with Winnicott. It is known that he describes the vicissitudes of the "primary emotional development" in terms of processes that, taken altogether, can be summarised in the progressive establishment of the ability to distinguish between the self and the outer world and to elaborate a rudimentary image of himself and of the real, and of the relation connecting the one to the other.

Winnicott analyses the complex relations that come into being between what is felt as subjective and what is felt as objective and elaborates the concept of "transitional object" as a bridge between inner and outer reality. In this context, reality and illusions are not in contradiction; rather illusion is presented as an essential structural element, an inchoative moment, a germinative field for recognising and giving meaning to the objects. This not only happens in the little child, but also in the adult:

*no human being is free from strain of relating inner and outer reality...the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience...which is not challenged... This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play of the small child who is "lost" in play.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup>ANDREAS SALOMÉ, L. (1931). *Mein Dank an Freud*. Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, (Ital. Transl., *Il mio ringraziamento a Freud*. Torino: Boringhieri, 1984, p. 72).

<sup>8</sup>WINNICOTT, D. W. (1986). Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena (orig.1951) in *Playing and Reality*, pp. 1-30, page 15, London: Penguin books.

According to Winnicott then, culture, and in it art, religion, science, obtain the purpose of uniting what is subjective and what is objective and assume in a certain way, the function of transitional objects.

The application of the concept of transitional object to religion has been made by different authors and is quite fertile albeit not without problems. Among others, a clever and stimulating contribution was given during a preceding European Symposium on the Psychology of Religion by Professor Hans Günter Heimbrock on the Transitional qualities of ritual behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

We only mention Pruyser's work, who, starting from the etymological meaning of illusion as derived from the word *in-ludere* (to play) proposes the "illusionistic world" positioned between the realistic and the autistic world as a "world of play, of the creative imagination in which feelings are not antagonistic to thinking".<sup>10</sup> In this view, Pruyser considers art, religion and even science as functionally equivalent, to the transitional phenomena in the psychic economy of the individual included in a cultural context.

More specifically connected to the clinical practice is the work of Ana Rizzuto, *The birth of the Living God*, which takes into account the formation, the transformation and the use of the representations of God during the life-cycle. Recognising that the object representations are a particular aspect of more general unconscious processes and not a concrete entity having its own life, Rizzuto alerts against interpretations of religion, in itself, as a transformational object, rather it seems more useful to confront the notion of transformational object with the religious search for a God since this really is capable of producing inner changes:

*The representational processes and concrete representations are immensely complex processes of an essential unconscious nature. Our conscious awareness of some of them follows regular psychic laws that we do not control. The representation, by definition, cannot be an expression of anything. Rather, the opposite is true. A religious desire reveals the search for an object whose representation promises transformations that are deemed necessary".<sup>11</sup>*

Along this line, the religious metaphor can become a transformational object in the living experience of who, recognising the impossibility to see God, feels the need of a idiomorphic and ego-syntonic representation of him, connected to the individual history and the vicissitudes of the first object relations. [If we consider the individuation as a process of personal integration which recognises together one's own omnipotence wishes and its frustration by reality, balancing between inner and outer world, between fusional tendencies and separation, between narcissism and relationality, the religious metaphor, which retains the longing for a fusional paradise in the ground of an experience of limitation and of separation, can become a structuring factor.]

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<sup>9</sup>HEIMBROCK, H. G. (1990). Ritual and transformation. A psychoanalytic perspective. IN H. G. HEIMBROCK & H.B. BOUDEWIJNSE (eds.) *Current studies on rituals. Perspectives for the psychology of religion* (pp.33-42). Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.

<sup>10</sup>PRUYSER, P. W. (1977). The Seamy Side of Current Religious Beliefs. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 41, 329-348, page 334.

<sup>11</sup>RIZZUTO, A.-M. (1992). Afterword. In FINN M. & GARTNER J. *Object Relations Theory and Religion, Clinical Applications* (pp. 155.175). Westport, CT – London: Praeger, p.162.

If what is important in the relation to the mother first, and to all the other figures of partners later (included those of play and of culture) and what is internalised is not the other, but a dimension of experiencing the other person, which refers to his function of support to our self, the religious metaphor then becomes charged with the deep valence of making present the Ultimate Other in a context of desire and of desire's frustration.

As the child who, according to Winnicott's paradox, finds in the mother an object of which he is himself the creator in correspondence with his vision of reality, so the adult in the religious sign-symbol meets, changed and transformed at a social level, the projective identification, the emotional experience with which he goes encountering reality, full of expectation.

The religious signs-symbols are in a certain way, models and materials for the elaboration of the personal experience and the appropriation of a meaning which is never definitively given. On one side they refer to one's own culturally determined contents, on the other they need subjects who, taking possession of them, can "re-enliven" them. The process of symbolisation may then be seen as a container of subjective –objects in culturally and historically determined evolution, capable of transforming our emotional and relational figures. But transitional space and objects are ambivalent phenomena, open to growing processes, and to integration of the person along the directions of autonomy, of the "capacity to be alone", but also exposed to the failure in the task of differentiating and uniting the inner and the outer world.

In fact, even for religious metaphors and signs-symbols exists a possible "aesthetic conflict" between the experience of the outer "sensible" and the emotional "inner" meaning. This conflict maintains in itself also the chance of non coincidence, dissent, and even of a possible failure of the signs as structural elements of the symbolic experience.

[For example, the "scrupulous" catholic who approaches perhaps daily to the sacrament of Penitence, seems at times to search for the truth and the validity of his penitential practice in the exactness and completeness of the details: in intentions, in the accusation of pities, in the rite, and, in many cases, the interpretation may catch that the torture of the insisted accusation, or the fatigue of the gesture repetition, the sacrament of Penitence then is lived as a contractual element of a sinallagmatic devotion, that is of reciprocal obligation, between the divinity and the believer. So that the scrupulous, in making himself in a certain way creator of his own forgiving, ("If I don't do this, I will not obtain forgiving" has a manipulatory correlate: "If I do this, God will be obliged to forgive me") hides (and reveals, to the interpretation) the narcissism that stands behind the masochistic self-humiliation, a perverted parody of the authentic humility.]

[We could say the same thing from a different point of view. When the theologians, today, feel the need to take distance from and overcome certain figures of eschatological salvation and certain excessively "topographic" representations of the Hereafter and too much solid for a certain culture, anthropology and iconography today considered not pertaining nor adequate, (nonetheless deeply rooted in the religious imagery) they find themselves confronted with the problem of the elaboration not only of new theological figures, but also of the relative metaphoric, iconographic, aesthetic (sensible) representation.]

(BUT) It is not our intention here to signal possible distortions that the cultural meaning of rites may undergo at the personal appropriation level, nor to signal the loss of meaningful relevance that the religious symbolism may encounter in the historical and cultural vicissitudes.

*When 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.*<sup>12</sup>

We underline briefly that Winnicott advised us that the individual, even when expressing his own personal creativity, in art, religion, as well as in science, does it in constant interaction with the cultural tradition, in a context which is characterised by the “reciprocal action of separating and uniting”, of objective elements and projections of subjective desires.

In this process, which in a wide sense we could define as “transitional”, the religious metaphor may be seen not only as a way of recognising and getting acquainted with an already given outer symbolic world, but also as a specific and personalised way of appropriation of the cultural religious symbols and as an instrument to elaborate a further construction upon the conventional religious language.

The religious experience is founded on the symbolic structure of human experience, in which the believer traces, projectively, the tensions towards the transcendent. But, as a consequence, the religious symbols do not describe God, instead they describe man’s living experience of feeling himself in relation to the transcendent. This *status* of the religious language is maintained even when the matter is a novel of divine revelations and of salvation events, which are nonetheless made in human language, through metaphors rooted in human experience and which are illusions, in the etymological sense, of the ability to play and play oneself in the relationship between outer and inner reality.

Of course, to describe religion as illusion does not imply a judgement whether its contents are true or false. It only means an effort to better understand the psychological mechanisms at play.

We can agree with Hood<sup>13</sup>in saying that “Illusion is not necessarily delusion” but a doubt remains if it pertains psychology to measure the truth of beliefs. Once settled that illusion is defined (*in-ludere*) as a play with reality, for the psychologist the illusion **IS** real as illusion. Consequently, TO be a good psychologist of religion it **IS NOT** important/necessary to be believers, it **IS** necessary to be a good psychologist, which also means to rediscover the clinical and epistemological value of illusion.

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<sup>12</sup>ALETTI M. (1994). Religious experience, gender differences and religious language. In ALETTI, M. (ed.) *Religione o psicoterapia? Nuovi fenomeni e movimenti religiosi alla luce della psicologia* (pp.381-391). Roma: LAS, p. 384.

<sup>13</sup>HOOD, R. W. JR. (1992). Mysticism, Reality, Illusion, and the Freudian Critique of Religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2(3), 141-159, p. 155.