

Newsletter of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion

March 2008

In this Newsletter you find information on:

- Psychology of Religion in Italy. Second contribution in the series 'self-presentations'.
- the International Conference on Religious Conversion, May 15-16, Lausanne, Switzerland.
- key publications.

1. Psychology of Religion in Italy

By Mario Aletti (Milan)

The Italian situation about psychology of religion is unusual and strange. As an academic discipline, it is quite absent in the universities though there is a professional association of psychologists and psychotherapists that cultivates it.

Academic context

In Italy, a specific academic program in psychology of religion does not exist. Courses in psychology of religion are very few (about ten) and located in other faculty's academic programs, such as psychology, philosophy, theology and educational sciences. Concerning theology, it is important to specify that in the Italian State Universities no degree program exists although there are a dozen Pontifical Universities, most of all situated in Rome, where they do it. This degree does not have professional validity in Italy and it is recognised only for ecclesiastical carrier or for teaching religion in schools (where is an optional subject of study). In some of these Pontifical Universities there are classes in psychology of religion and general psychology but complementary to theological training. They are often based on "theological anthropology" or oriented to spiritual and pastoral topics. In the State Universities (or in the Catholic University where academic degrees are recognised by the State) only very few courses in psychology of religion find a place inside humanistic faculties, as a discipline concerned with psychological disciplinary areas. Here, a number of seminars are held, based on psychology of religion, as integration for other psychological courses and themes, by some general psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology and dynamic psychology lecturers.

The range of topics discussed is ample. There is a widespread interest in epistemology, methodology and history of psychology of religion. Even psychodynamic perspective attracts much interest, giving particular attention to the object relations theory, religion and psychotherapy, religion and coping (e.g. Catholic University of Milan, Prof. Mario Aletti). Also, in recent years a particular interest has been dedicated to methodological aspects of the empirical research, in the psycho-social area, and several scales were translated and applied in the Italian context; the main purpose is to study, with new instruments, the religious orientation, the religious fundamentalism and the connection between attachment and religion (Prof. Germano Rossi, State University of Milano-Bicocca). In every Italian State university, the psychology of religion is considered as a psychological discipline, not a theological discipline. This contributes to identify it as a "lay" science with no religious influences. This epistemological clarity constitutes its strong point but also a refusal in some confessional

context. A few of Pontifical Universities offer a degree in Psychology with some lectures dedicated to the relation between religion and psychology (e.g. spiritual psychology, pastoral psychology, psychology of the Bible). However according to many scholars of psychology of religion, these courses are marked by a sense of epistemological confusion, primarily conditioned by an anthropological theology, depending on personal believing. Until today, however, even where it is taught in Italy, the psychology of religion is considered a marginal discipline, mostly “optional”, on a curriculum of studies. Normally it is a half-yearly course (about 28 hours) and its attendance credits account only for 1-2% of the total.

The professional association.

Given the scarce attention paid to the discipline by the academic environment, the work of the Italian Society of Psychology of Religion has become extremely important. The Society brings together over 150 professional psychologists (of which about 30 are actively involved in research and publications) and practically, all the lecturers in the field of psychology of religion (about 10) belong to this society. The society performs a stimulating function and promotes culture and organization. Every two years an international conference takes place, covering a large range of themes such as: new clinical-hermeneutic perspectives in psychoanalysis and religion; religious identity, pluralism and fundamentalism; interaction between neurobiology and culture; new religious movements; religion and coping; religion and psychotherapy. Last year, the 11^o conference was dedicated to attachment and religion. A specific feature of the Society is that the ordinary fellows are professional psychologists with a degree in Psychology. Most of them are psychotherapist and clinician; there is also a good number of academics who are occasionally interested in psychology of religion and they offer to the students seminars and graduation theses in this field. Another peculiarity concerns the subject of study: the human beings and their interaction with religion, that is the psychological functioning, and not the religion itself and its contents. Thus it is interesting also for non-believer or agnostic researchers.

Unfortunately, a negative aspect is that the Society is not supported by any university or foundation and it receives no external subvention. Thus, the association organizes its activities based exclusively on annual membership and no funds are available for young researchers. Certainly, this is a limit, but also a guarantee of authenticity and independence. Another important activity for the psychology of religion in Italy, is the publication, by the Society, of papers, acts of conferences, international or Italian monographs and texts, in the “Collana di Psicologia della Religione” (Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore). Also, the Society has promotes the “Giancarlo Milanese Prize”, dedicated to the memory of the scientist who, from his chair at the salesian university of Rome (1965-1973) contributed a lot to the beginning and development of the psychology of religion in Italy. The prize, 1000 euros, is awarded every two years, to the best degree thesis developed in Italian universities. This prize helps to stimulate interest from students and even from lecturers. It is also a clear sign of how well the discipline is progressing, because it provides information about the level of interest, special topics, and the approaches preferred by lecturers and students. The prize is now in its seventh edition with approximately 20 theses for each event. The web site www.psicologiadellareligione.it shows the structure and the activities of the Society and publishes texts sometimes available even in English version.

The main feature of psychology of religion in Italy is to show clearly its epistemological specificity in line with an empirical psychological discipline, distinct from psychological reductionisms (dreaded by ecclesiastical environments) and apologetic temptations (dreaded by lay academic environments). While scientists, in Italy and in the world, have long since reached this clarity, the difficulty lies in convincing the institutions – both academic and

ecclesiastical – that the psychology of religion is essentially a psychological discipline, and that its object is psychological in nature, not primarily religious.

2. La conversion religieuse. Colloque International . Université de Lausanne.15-16 mai 2008

Renseignements et inscriptions:

<http://www.unil.ch/theol/page53281.html>

Parmi les fonctions psychologiques du religieux, la construction de l'identité individuelle est centrale. Un moment privilégié où cette fonction se manifeste de manière particulièrement active est celui des transformations identitaires, parmi lesquelles la conversion occupe une place de choix. L'objectif de ce colloque est de considérer dans un même cadre d'analyse et de réflexion des données provenant de divers terrains d'observation et qui documentent des processus de conversion. Nous accorderons une attention toute spéciale à la manière dont l'individuel s'articule sur le collectif. Le colloque se propose donc de réunir des intervenants représentant diverses disciplines concernées par cette problématique.

Lectures Thursday

Raymond Paloutzian (professeur de psychologie, Westmont College, USA)
Conversion, Self, Culture, and the Far Reach of the Meaning System Analysis

Olivier Favre (UNIL)
La conversion des évangéliques: contextes, stratégies, expériences, effets

Coralie Buxant (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgique)
Les motifs de conversion: Incontournables besoins compensatoires?

Claude-Alexandre Fournier (UNIL)
Le récit de soi et la construction de l'identité: Quelle place pour la dimension religieuse?

Zhargalma Dandarova (professeur de psychologie, université de St-Petersbourg)
La conversion religieuse ou la loi karmique

Lectures Friday

Jean-Luc Alber (Neuchâtel)
(Re-)Devenir hindou : la voie de la Saiva Siddhanta Church pour l'Occident et pour la diaspora indienne

James Meredith Day (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgique)
Religious (Re)Conversion in the Resolution of Moral Dilemmas Empirical and Clinical perspectives from samples of Belgian and English Adolescents

Catherine Clémentin Ojha (Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris)
La conversion, une pratique étrangère à l'hindouisme ?

Habiba Fathi (Institut Français d'Etudes sur l'Asie Centrale, Ouzbékistan)
Expériences mystiques de femmes « mollahs » (atin-ayi) et de « chamanes » (falbin) d'Asie centrale

3. Key publication

G. Virtbauer, *Psychologie im Erkenntnishorizont des Mahayana-Buddhismus. Interdependenz und Intersubjektivität im Beziehungserstreben*. Peter Lang: Frankfurt, Berlin, Bern, Brussel, New York, Oxford, Vienna, 2008, pp.118 (Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe 20, Philosophie Bd. 714)

(Whoever wants to bring a key publication under attention of the IAPR members, please email the data to the editor of the Newsletter.)

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