

## When is the dimension of the sacred ill? When illness is inherent also to the communicative, relational and institutional system of a religious creed

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### Abstract

A strong religious drive can be a constitutive element of human identity, not only as it shapes the single subject but also a whole social, institutional group. Religion, therefore, at the micro and macro level, can give rise to a high level of awareness which can direct the view of life, orientations, discoveries, intuitions, building of meanings, prospects for the future. In this way it becomes a fundamental factor in building the group's idea of reality. However, when a religious creed is characterized by excessive idealization, dogmatism, fanaticism, rigid hypocritical attitudes, not to mention a reduced or entirely absent connection with the historical-social context and cultural values, it can combine and amplify some character traits and psychopathological components in vulnerable, fragile even if not actually pathological subjects. Extending well beyond the single subject, it can create a maladaptive and deficient or pathological context at the relational and institutional level. From this viewpoint, the present contribution is based upon an expert case series investigation that is highly pertinent to the topic, offering points for reflection on some defective and dysfunctional modes of communication, and on aberrant personal and institutional relationships that can arise within some religious movements. These modes can aggravate or sometimes provoke situations that may also have a legal relevance, requiring a technical assessment of an objective criminological-clinical and/or psychological-psychiatric nature to achieve a better understanding not only of the individual but also of the group or institution.

**Keywords:** religious institutions, relationship, disease, intersubjectivity, couple, group, religious beliefs, personal values

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## When is the dimension of the sacred ill ? When illness is inherent also to the communicative, relational and institutional system of a religious creed

### 1. Introduction

Any discussion of religion is naturally bound up with a series of convictions and feelings that link an individual or a group to what they believe is holy, in other words a combination of dogmas, precepts and rituals that govern a particular religious cult. Various authors have offered a more substantial definition, discussing creeds and practices, emotions and interactions, all oriented toward a “superior being” to which are associated the feelings, acts and experiences of single individuals in their solitude, to the variable degree in which they learn that they are related to whatever they regard as divine (James, 2009, p. 32). Others have tried to define this from a functional standpoint, focusing on the aim of life and considering religion as “a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people contend with fundamental problems of human life” (Yinger, 1970, p. 7). We shall start with a relatively obvious, simple statement. In the “western” world (because it is always unwise to generalize our analysis of history to cultural worlds that do not live as we do in “contemporary” or “synchronous” situations), in the modern era religion is quite difficult to define. We will associate other considerations to this first one. We all need security, especially in the world of today, characterized by rapid changes in the economic and social spheres, by uncertainty about the future and by the progressive weakening of the traditional systems of values (Larini, 2022-2023; Grattagliano, Scardigno, Cassibba & Mininni, 2015; Groicher, Grattagliano, Loconsole & Maglie, 2022; Laera et al., 2022). The postmodern era seems to be affected by the following paradox: the more rationalized society becomes, the more man needs to draw on the universe of the sacred, holy and transcendent (Aletti, 1994; Aletti & Alberico, 1999; Carella Prada & Giammaria, 2008). To respond to these needs and stand out as meaningful systems (Park, 2005), religions are presented as communication systems (Pace, 2008; Grattagliano, 2009) constructed around narratives that promote socialization and action. In particular, by offering shared beliefs, stories and meanings, religions contribute to confer order on social realities, proposing various forms of “communication contract” (Mininni & Ghiglione, 1995): if and how the destinees accept this proposal opens ample scenarios of possibilities and positions (Scardigno, 2010).

Indeed, religions still seem to find it difficult to accept the idea that every human being possesses the tools necessary to live a full human life, regardless of their religious creed, whether this is implicit or explicit (Grattagliano,

Vitale, Ragusa, Pasquale & Catanesi, 2018). Insecurity generates a very human fear, and when one gives in to the temptation to reinforce a weakened or ever less consistent identity by pointing to outside enemies, for the purpose of reuniting a group against something or someone, this can not only arouse decidedly irrational and growing fears but also trigger dangerous mechanisms leading to violence. And those who are uncertain and a prey to fear are almost always the most violent. Clearly, a sense of security can also be built differently: by accepting the meeting with others, in the sense of strangers, even (perhaps above all) if one does not understand them or one fears them. The opposite solution is to fence them in with simplified, obvious definitions, rather than opening out to a recognition of the stranger’s same humanity – however different from our own it may be and that could constitute a common basis on which to build civil cohabitation – allowing an interaction only with a rigid, immutable representation of the other (Larini, 2022-2023; Barbieri & Grattagliano, 2018; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Catanesi, 2019). Religious rhetoric has a serious human value only when it is not aimed at defeating an adversary but a lie. Therefore, in the dialog with a stranger the true victory is when together we can build a meaningful path forward, a possible tomorrow rather than when, with the force of arms or words used as clubs, or else the use of images, emotions, contingent situations, we humiliate the “adversary” and compel his/her surrender. This possible tomorrow may be a complete or partial convergence, or else a peaceful divergence where we acknowledge that now is not the right time to come together, but that anyway the other has the right to exist, in a different way from our own (Larini, 2022-2023).

Finally, elements of strength and positivity of religion are obtained when, during the psychological processes that lead to a healthy evolution of the ego, the existence of a “transidnesstional” space of knowledge, neither subjective nor objective, is acknowledged and allowed to evolve (Winnicott, 1970). In this space the tension between subjectivity and objectivity is temporarily suspended and the individual can feel free without straying outside recognized reality. This feeling is necessary to enrich self-awareness, the source of vitality and creativity of the ego. It can also develop positively within the experience of religion. For this reason, religious practices stimulate a greater consciousness of these transitional spaces that foster intuition and transformation.

## 2. Religion: a factor of risk and protection for mental health and the wellbeing of a group, society and institution

Another interesting key point to consider is the links between the family setup, stress, pain, suffering, malaise, difficulties, family risk and protective factors – on one hand – and the choice of religious creed on the other (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Rossi & Aletti, 2009; Barbieri, Di Maggio, Convertini, Dassisti & Grattagliano, 2021; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Janiri, 2021). Indeed, religion is recognized as an important source of wellbeing and health, not just a mechanism regulating potential harmful behaviors; in short, a resource that facilitates access to support and assistance through relationships with other people who share the same values (Ellison & Levin, 1998). The definition made by Pargament is well known: religion as a search for meaning through means connected to the sacred, or also as an efficacious coping strategy (Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000; Pargament & Raiya, 2007).

However, although religion can contribute to improve humanity, in more extreme cases it can unfortunately even give rise to atrocities. Some Authors (Jones, 2002; Manenti, 2004) have attempted to explain this terrible ambiguity on the basis of psychological factors of the individual adept who belongs to a specific type of faith, assessing whether the religious experience may promote maturity or else pathology. Being a psychological investigation, this has no implications on the contents of the faith themselves nor on the objects of faith and what is or is not regarded as sacred. Among the various psychological factors, Jones individuated idealization as the central core that moves people to have faith in a religion. In every cult, there is an idealization of something (texts, rituals, experiences, an institution, authority, vestments, gestures, words, symbols...) and it is because of this idealization power that religion is able to produce effects transforming the life of the worshippers, that can motivate them to adopt self-sacrificing behaviors, driven by an excessive sense of sacrifice or guilt, or induce a sense of childish dependence or can also foment fundamentalism.

For Freud idealization is a childish maneuver that blows an object up with arbitrary qualities, so that by identifying with it a subject can contemplate a magnified version of her/himself. In this way, it can cause subjects to use others in order to love themselves or, in religious terms, to redeem themselves by invoking God. This is an aspect of the “primary narcissism” typical in childhood, that should be abandoned in adulthood in favor of realism, where there is no place for idealization in general (Barbieri, 2019; Barbieri & Grattagliano, 2018; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Catanesi, 2019). This implies that the constructive or destructive effect of religion depends on the type of relation with it that the subject establishes. It is the paradox of religion: a source of transformation and change in a positive or negative sense (Jones, 2002; Manenti, 2004; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Rocca, 2022). Religions and their idealization processes – that are

sometimes very pronounced, as will be seen in the cases presented herein – can lead the adepts and the pathways along which they are led to trigger the activation of rupturing mechanisms or processes whose bad and destructive parts often go unrecognized (Jones, 2002). Wickedness and aggression are thus exonerated, split, denied and projected outwardly, because the world is split into good/bad, sacred/profane, white/black, truth/error (the splitting process). The “bad” are demonized and the “good” idealized; the bad is projected onto the outside world and the good held close within the inner world. In this way, religion opposes transcendence and immanence, humanity and spirit, instinct and value, near and far, us and them, magnifying the group and demonizing those of others, while wishing for the wellbeing of the group and the spoils from other groups. This is not dictated by religion itself but by the bad relations encouraged, and extremist ways of perceiving the “religious”, or “holy”. Religion practiced in this way exalts its own purity, keeps its adepts in a state of childish dependence and leads them to become fanatics (Manenti, 2004). The sacred/profane dichotomy is not, therefore, an essential component of religion but rather the expression of a certain psychodynamic (and possibly pathological) approach and a closed, defensive structure (Jones, 2002; Manenti, 2004).

Religious fanaticism is another huge risk, again present in the case histories reported in this contribution. It is important to distinguish between fanaticism and orthodoxy of religious convictions and practices. The fanatic, or fundamentalist, is not characterized by his/her strong belief in the truth of a certain creed but by the way they uphold the truth of this belief. Again, the difference lies in the relational terms. “The fundamentalist believes that only a single religious teaching exists and clearly expresses the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, substantial and error-free truth about God and humanity; and that this essential truth must be vigorously defended, destroying the forces of evil that fight it; that this truth should be practiced, today, according to the immutable practices of the past; that those who believe and follow this fundamental teaching have a special relationship with the divinity” (Manenti, 2004, page 4). Generally, those who have this religious approach are more predisposed to violence and prejudice than those who take time to learn about a religious teaching: they are more remissive to the inner authority and more aggressive to those outside, not toward any particular group but toward virtually all minorities. This style of religious appurtenance is the consequence of the above-mentioned splitting of the world into good/evil, that foments crusades against all that which is perceived as other and hence evil.

In general, the emotional bonds forged by a shared religion are linked to better physical, emotional and mental health (Diener, Gohm, Suh & Oishi, 2000; Muldoon, Trew, Todd, Rougier & McLaughlin, 2007). In fact, marital relations are negatively affected by failure to share the same religion (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), which arouses considerable difficulties between the couple in multiple as-

pects of daily life, as well as significant pressures exerted by people outside the couple (Barbara, 1989). The same thing occurs in parental relationships; indeed, the perception of the mother-child link can be influenced both by the frequency of their participation in religious functions and by the importance they attribute to religious practice, if that of mother and child is different (Pearce & Axinn, 1998). All this can lead, within a restricted group such as a family, where there is a system of “shared expectation” (Levin, 1994) but also a marked level of rigidity and religiousness, to strong pressure to drive the family members to conform to the norms, exerted by means of emotion-conditioning strategies, threats of affective deprivation, and reward and punishment mechanisms. The demand to conform to the values system may be further reinforced if the cultural climate in the group is dominated by this same paradigm. Becoming a member of a religious group offers strong socializing experiences, that impose an interiorization of the way of conceiving human existence and pervasive behavioral patterns, that can even result in transformations of the personal and social identity of the individual (Speltini & Palmonari, 2007).

Naturally, sharing a system of norms gives the group a common perspective on reality, that can be used to deal with non-family situations and also for individual self-assessment. From this perspective, inevitably, the pressures exerted are not limited to the opinions and abilities of the subject but also require that the emotional and physical aspects be suitable to define the reality established by the group to which the subject belongs (Schachter, 1959). Belonging to this type of group necessarily means contending with the social structure in which the members occupy different roles and positions, which may be extremely asymmetrical. This disparity does not only determine expectations about how an individual in a given social position will behave towards others but also how the others should behave towards the individual (Brosnan, 1979), with all the implications inherent to such cases, that may also have a legal bearing. In the sense that role and power asymmetry represent an important risk factor from a criminodynamic and criminogenetic point of view, taking into account the proximal, intimate, and spiritual relationships that are determined in those contexts and that expose potential victims to the risks of arbitrariness, abuse and harassment by other members perceived, represented and experienced as hierarchically superior and legitimized by the institution and divinity.

### 3. Case series

#### Case I – A presumed sexual violence

This case deals with the possible sexual harassment of a minor, hospitalized for abdominal pain “...with the clinical characteristics of functional pain of somatic origin” and malaise “...when possible, symptoms of gynecological type were investigated”. The context in which this case devel-

oped was the religious order of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The family setup was characterized by strong conflict between the grandfather of the minor – who held an important position in the religious order and, as we will see, was the presumed perpetrator – and the child’s parents – who also belonged to the same religious order but who withdrew from it after the daughter’s denunciation. The quarrel between the young couple and the presumed perpetrator originated from the fact that the child’s parents were thought to have had premarital relations, thus transgressing the norms of the community. For this reason, the grandfather had censured and stigmatized their conduct during one of the religious assemblies, over which he presided due to his so-called institutional role. However, in this case the weight of the ethical-religious judgments was to strongly condition the development of the case.

In detail: during the first hospitalization, the mother referred to the doctors a confidence made by her daughter about repeated sexual harassment by a family member, after which she had deliberately avoided further meetings. In a later hospitalization, the diagnosis was made of “...recurrent abdominal pain”, confirming that “...the investigations made...were all within normal limits” and that “...after repeated talks with the parents, diagnostic elements emerged, interpreted as reasons for severe emotional disturbance in S., for which a psychological support program was scheduled”. The story started with a letter written for her mother after the minor had stayed with her grandparents together with her other sisters. In the letter she stated that she had been sexually assaulted by her paternal grandfather, and when they talked, she confirmed this.

The woman added that, when the grandfather was present, or even when he was just mentioned, her daughter went rigid and became serious and sad. She claimed she had always had a good relationship with the parents-in-law and that her daughter had no reason to invent such a story. Finally, again according to the minor, these episodes had already occurred on two or three other occasions in the grandparents’ house in earlier years. The father said he had no reason to doubt his daughter’s word because “she’s not a girl who lies”, also because their creed forbids them to declare falsehoods, so he asked his father to explain.

The latter denies what happened and only reports a harmless game (tickling) played with his wife and granddaughter.

However, the sister said she had been in the kitchen all the time. After the minor’s father showed his own father the letter, the latter said “...I didn’t do anything, after all I have taught you during my life, this would have destroyed everything I have taught you, all five children”. The father said that after reading the letter the wife said “I knew it, I could feel it”. In fact, before the wife met her husband she had met his father at the Jehovah’s Witnesses and when she was still a young girl, he had put a hand on her thigh and she had pushed it away. But she never wished to have these statements written down “for fear of accusing her father-in-law of particular behavior with young

girls, saying that perhaps she had misunderstood and interpreted things wrongly". The father-in-law, on the other hand, referred a very conflictual relationship with his daughter-in-law – because “she was jealous of how much I give my sons and other daughters-in-law, economically, spiritually and morally, and felt she was treated differently from the others” –, and also with her husband, his son “...who has always shown himself to be under his wife’s sway”.

After these events, the minor started to produce poor school work, waking up every morning at 4 a.m. and being unable to fall asleep again, and continued to complain of abdominal pain, and also slight fever. She underwent psychodiagnostic tests using pen and paper (Tree Test, Person under the rain, Draw a nasty and a nice thing, Draw the family, Free drawing), The Blacky Pictures, Rorschach Test, WISC-R protocol, yielding the following assessment: “Denial and isolation; projection onto the body; idealization; good function with some lacks (environmental); probably she would have preferred to remain a child; regressive needs for nursing that risk inhibiting adolescent separation mechanisms, secondary advantages of illness, a good internal world. Rorschach: need to keep together; good thought processes with integrated affection – without this affection poor, defensive thought (confusing “symptoms” with “feelings” at the WISC!); difficulties in processing things in her internal world through the preconscious; identity present, with good potential for development; defensive on the narcissist scale; anguish about regressive annihilation”.

Among the documents, however, a correct criminological investigation of the facts reported is lacking, as well as a suspect-victim assessment. In fact, what emerges from the declarations is an entirely atypical form of abuse, since the specialist literature underlines the rarity of this type of sex offender, who should have criminological, psychological and if proven, also psychopathological traits, that are highly particular and rare. Moreover, no technical assessment of the minor’s ability to bear witness was made (Gulotta & Camerini, 2014), since although it is true that a presumed minor victim can provide a reliable reconstruction of the facts (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995), it is equally true that various factors can affect the ability to recount an experience, and even the production of false memories (D’Ambrosio & Supino, 2014; Murphy, Loftus, Hofstein Grady, Levine & Greene, 2020), with all the attendant consequences, also of a legal nature (Merzagora, Verde, Barbieri & Boiardi, 2014; Barbieri, Violante, Biancofiore & Grattagliano, 2022).

In this case, it would be absolutely essential to verify: if and to what extent the story is congruous to the age and circumstances; the type of questions asked to collect the story; any presence of psycho-physical disturbances that could condition or even destroy the ability to bear witness. In addition, the complex scenario, of a criminological rather than penal order, can never be separated from the ideological and existential framework in which it developed, namely the Jehovah’s Witnesses religious order, with all its articles of faith and anthropological concepts, rituals and complex mechanisms disciplining the adepts (Park,

2005). In the end, the suspect was absolved, so the episode can be qualified, unless other points emerge, as a “false denunciation of sexual abuse”, regarding which the judges of the penal court pointed out both the weight and the influence of the cultural and religious aspects surrounding this complex legal case.

## Case II – A child custody issue

This case refers to a technical consultation carried out for to evaluate foster care of two minors born of parents belonging to the Mormon cult. The couple formed in the 1990s, when at his baptism Mr. XY met Mrs. XX, already faithful, because her family belonged to the same sect. The pair started to go out together but agreed to remain chaste until the wedding, in accordance with the dictates of their religion. The prenuptial relationship continued for about nine years, despite many interruptions and quarrels, always resolved by the religious community. When they decided to get married the brother of Mr. XY had serious health problems so the wedding was to be hastened, to the displeasure of Ms. XX provoking yet another crisis between the couple; in fact, the woman decided to spend a period abroad in another Mormon community. Five years later, after a reconciliation, again mediated by the community, the two married and agreed to a reciprocal management of the family. At that time, the man was working in a family-run business and the woman was a professional singer. Because of a first pregnancy, she decided to leave her job to devote her time to her daughter. After two years another daughter was born, and about a year and a half later, the man decided to leave the Mormon church and to devote himself to ecological issues, in full agreement with his wife. However, the next summer, during a holiday spent by the wife and daughters with her parents-in-law, a furious quarrel developed between the daughter-in-law and her husband’s parents, and they sent her away, together with their son, while the daughters remained with them. As a result, the woman applied for a separation from her husband, and so the problem of foster care of the young daughters arose.

It is clear from the tale that the Mormon cult acted as a form of glue for the couple, diminishing incompatibilities, differences and barriers, with members attempting to help forge a stronger bond. In fact, each time a problem arose the community intervened, exerting a form of “psychological pressure” on the couple themselves. It is clear that some religious faiths can confer a certain order and meaning to social reality, proposing various forms of interaction and communication. Therefore, when the man decided to leave the faith she, who had been born and raised in that faith, said: “...I saw him through different eyes, but I still wanted to be with him.”; in this way she was separated from the religious cult she had followed until that time, and this created an unbridgeable gap between them. Her statement reveals her ambivalent personality and the deficits and critical aspects of her relationship with

her husband, so pervasive but conflictual, that had been held together by the religious group.

### Case III – “Between husband and wife never put...” the Movement

This couple were musicians, at that time in their thirties, both important members of the “Movimento di Comunione e Liberazione”<sup>1</sup>, and both from families belonging to the group. Their first meeting occurred in the professional field when they were young adults, because the woman sang in a choir directed by the man, and then became a student of his. She had never had a previous relationship whereas he had just ended a three-year experience, that ended by his ex-girlfriend. Consequently, he experienced “*great inner suffering*”, but without telling his family or friends anything. After a few years of active participation in the movement, the woman triggered a closer relationship, described by him as “*...a rational choice, made to find a spiritual union, a total union*”, but without a sufficient emotional-affective relationship (“*...things involved the head more than the heart, or gut, as you say professor...*”). During their engagement, that lasted 4 years, they lived “*respecting the value of chastity*”, because “*...those were the ideals of the movement, and they couldn't be ignored...*”, they had various quarrels and one crisis triggered by him, that was apparently resolved largely because of the woman's abnormal reaction and subsequent idealization of his role and function in the couple. On the basis of these dynamics – both maladaptive and structurally homeostatic – the outcome was that the woman suggested they should marry and he agreed, also on the basis of the expectations and encouragement of others in the Movement. On the wedding day, the man said he was “*confused*” and he had “*...no positive memories*” of the honeymoon; their married life together was always affected by their poor psycho-affective and psycho-sexual integration, despite two children, born quite a few years apart and “*practically by chance*”.

After the second pregnancy, while the man had had two different extramarital relations (the first lasted about three years and the second about four, always with colleagues), the woman realized her true nature (“*...she told me she had discovered an interest in women...yes, for women...but just an interest as I understood it, because I don't think she ever betrayed me...instead, I had a couple of affairs, because I felt as if I was single...because I couldn't go on living like that...they were colleagues, sensitive women but also vivacious...intense, creative women...just the opposite of her...*”). Their separation followed the unexpected preg-

nancy of one of his lovers. After his son's christening he had a registry marriage to his companion and because of the new conditions, in view of the new affective-relational condition and the teachings of the Movement – with which he had maintained “*friendly contacts*”, despite the formal interruption – he lodged a case for termination of marriage with the competent church authorities. Throughout the events, apart from the critical personality clashes (the man being of evasive narcissistic and the woman of dependent type), a dual relational pathology is quite clear: that of the interpersonal relationship between them marked by collusion of the woman (affective dependency) and idealization/manipulation by the man (partly narcissist – the knight in shining armor that must not let the woman entrusted to him suffer – and partly evasive – by accepting the relationship he neutralized the risk of rejection and abandonment as occurred at the end of his first relationship). In the same way, by accepting the woman's proposal of marriage he avoided the risk of disapproval and stigmatization because they were not respecting the ideals of the religious movement. The other pathological aspect is the relation between the couple and the religious movement: not only did they both work together but they also attended the same religious functions in the same city and were expected to live according to its precepts. In fact, above all the woman - who was very dependent on the movement also because her family had offered little affective support and then abandoned her (“*...her father couldn't wait for his daughters to leave the house and leave him free, while her mother had no say in anything and was just submissive...*”) – had at last found some support and guidance from the man, although in his family (“*...we loved each other but certain things were never mentioned...the priorities were work and economic security...*”). He, in turn, had found some personal gratification in his artistic talent, and also the above-mentioned advantages of escaping the risk of another experience of rejection like his first one, provided he did not betray the ideals of the religious group.

### Case IV – When “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”

This same-age couple was in their forties when the medicolegal investigation was made. The man was a graduate in Political Science and worked as a civil servant, the woman, with a degree in Religious Science, as a primary school teacher. They met in late adolescence, as members of Azione Cattolica and during their university studies they were invited by some study companions to enter the “*Cammino Neocatecumenale*”<sup>2</sup>, within which they then became a couple. They were affianced for 5 years, living

1 This Catholic movement was founded by the parish priest Don Luigi Giussani in 1954; very different judgements have been expressed about this movement over time, ranging from more favorable (see: Abbruzzese, 2001; Giussani, 2002, 2021; Borghi, 2021), to more critical (see: Pinotti, 2010; De Alessandri, 2011; Ascione, 2023).

2 This expression refers not to a religious “movement” but to a “*fondazione autonoma di beni spirituali*” (independent foundation of spiritual good), assigned a legal status as a public entity approved

in full respect of the chastity vow, always under the close guidance and control of the “catechists” of this Pathway<sup>3</sup> (the man said: “...to say that there were aspects of fanaticism is to understate...not to say rigidity...I had just graduated, and concluded military service, I had never worked, we didn't have a home, but the catechists insisted that we should wed because of the problem of procreation...we got married without ever either of us having any previous experience...we didn't have premarital relations because sex is seen by the Pathway as a sort of devilry...we hadn't had relations partly by our own choice but also partly because of the various conditioning...”). The couple's initial plan to marry had been presented to the group catechist and was then not only approved but strongly incentivized by him, and also all the other members of the group, so as not to leave the two engaged couples any alternative.

They lived together for about ten years but their marital life was adversely affected by persistent sexual dysfunction. After some initial attempts, always abortive, the couple asked other members of the Pathway for help, and a catechist sent them to a trusted gynecologist who, in turn, advised them to go to a psychologist, always a member of the same religious group.

After the failure of these therapeutic attempts, the problem was not only dealt with by the group, but managed and resolved by the catechist.

To mask the situation, the couple adopted a foreign minor. The choice, however, for the very reason that it was surrounded by a certain ambivalence and dictated by ends that were more instrumental than functional, then gave rise in the man to considerable “*malaise*” that he confided to a friend priest, who advised him to see the parish counselling center.

During his psychotherapy, he became aware not only of all the defects in his marital relationship but also of the dysfunctional relationship he had with the religious group. In the end, also because of having violated the clinical setting, he firstly separated from his wife, and then not only did he apply for divorce but also to the territorial Ecclesiastic Tribunal for annulment of the marriage, so as to be able to marry his ex-psychotherapist, who had become pregnant by him.

Faced with her husband's new relationship and subse-

by the Chiesa Cattolica Apostolica Romana (Roman Catholic Apostolic Church (see: Codice di Diritto Canonico, Libro I – Norme generali, Titolo VI – Le persone fisiche e giuridiche, Canone 115 §3; Decreto del Pontificio Consiglio per i Laici, Approvazione “Ad experimentum” degli statuti del Cammino Neocatecumenale, Stato della Città del Vaticano, 29 giugno 2002; Decreto del Pontificio Consiglio per i Laici, 28 ottobre 2004, Protocollo N.1761/04 AIC-110).

3 As to the operations of the Cammino Neocatecumenale – in general – and of its catechist members – in particular – very different considerations have been made, ranging from the most benevolent (see: Pasotti, 1993; Devoto, 1994; Blázquez Pérez, 2000) to the most adverse (see: Zoffoli, 1992, 1995, 1996; Conti, 1997; Marighetto, 2001).

quent separation, the woman undertook a series of actions aimed at defending herself against the Ecclesiastic Tribunal case, in accordance with what the catechists proposed. The reflections made by the man seem highly significant in this sense (“...to get me to go back to her, my ex-wife went to...Hospital, where there was another gynecologist, not a member of the movement, where she was operated...she had her hymen removed...very probably the catechists told her what to do...“hymenectomy” for an “imperforated hymen”...this may be so, but it was the whole thing that went wrong...she may have had pain, I don't doubt that, but if she always went rigid and was always afraid, and wouldn't accept treatment and always refused everything and always agreed only with what the catechist said, then the problem was really serious...I only know that by that time to be told that that was your cross to bear, even if there was no remedy, well, really and truly!?!...”).

In the whole situation, apart from the critical aspects of the individual personalities (the man's clearly anaclitic and the woman's markedly anankastic) there is an evident pathological relationship between the religious group and its adepts. Faith in the common values is often reduced to a sort of hypocritical obedience, also because the relationship between the individual and the reference value is in all cases mediated by a third person or “other” – the catechist – and it is not clear whether and to what extent his actions were inspired by a mature concordance with the same values or else by a role in which his duty was to impose, guide and control (motivating a manifest form of manipulation), based on institutional needs to guarantee support, guidance and advice (justifying evident forms of collusion).

#### Case V – “That they may be one...” ?

This couple were members of the Movimento dei Focolari<sup>4</sup>, both in their fifties when they came together. The man had a degree in Law and was manager of a multinational company, the woman, with a degree in Economics, worked in a bank. They met during their first year of University; the man was from a poorer and also dysfunctional family. Instead, the woman was born in a well-off, socially prominent family.

The man was not only attracted by the woman, but also by her family environment, and shared values and lifestyles. They were affianced throughout their university courses and not only did they observe complete chastity

4 The Focolari Movement (officially denominated Opera di Maria) is an international movement for spiritual and social renewal founded in Trent by Chiara Lubich in 1943, whose followers include not only Catholic Christians belong but also members of other churches and other religions. About these, too, judgments have been markedly different, from very positive (Gentilini, 2019; Rossi & Crupi, 2021; Bruni, 2023), to extremely negative (Patti, 2012; Pinotti, 2021; Dross & Nolan, 2022; Movimento dei Focolari, 2023).

but also true militancy within the religious group. He had a form of anaclitism that was a reflected image of the woman's personality, managing, decided, dominant.

Their plan to marry seems to have been motivated by the need to discover life as a couple, a reality they had not yet explored, as well as to satisfy the expectations of the religious group, and to respect the Movement values. Ultimately, this important choice seems to have been made on the basis of ideas and problems that were only realized later, after they had gone through traumatic experiences.

Their married life officially lasted fifteen years but despite the birth of a son, but a marked dysfunction in their sexual life appeared and become chronic, together with a poor psycho-affective integration, pseudo-rationalized by the woman and stolidly idealized, at least at first, also by the man.

In fact, five years after the wedding the man tried to resolve these problems in his own way, by starting on a double life. Finally, his double life was discovered by his wife, fifteen years after the wedding, with very traumatic consequences for both of them.

After the separation, following advice from some priest friends, the man started psychotherapy, that lasted three years and ended with violation of the clinical setting ("... my psychotherapy saved me, I'm not exaggerating when I say that... my psychologist made me understand who I really was... in the end I fell in love with her... why!? Because she had saved me, that's why! ...she said the psychotherapy could be ended and so we could start to get to know each other better... the fact is, we started to meet up and now we live together..."). Then he took out a case for annulment of the marriage at the Ecclesiastic Tribunal.

In this case, too, together with the critical personality clashes (the man being of passive-dependent type and the woman narcissistic-obsessive), the relationship with the Movement and at least some of the members is very obviously dysfunctional, in which the value of welcoming members has been translated into a severe, judgmental guidance and that of supporting them to develop into mature individuals, into containment of their actions, suppressing their subjectivity to keep it within a certain standard, or to fit a cliché.

#### 4. Discussion

Examination of the described cases confirms the thesis already presented in other parts of this work, that the development of a religious fervor pervaded by idealization and sometimes by true fanaticism (Fromm, 1992) hinders the proper development of the Ego, transforming it into a form of counter-dependency of a destructive nature, and of tribal identification (Maffesoli, 1997). This type of religiousness is characterized by associative forms whereby the group is largely held together by the need to feel a

sense of belonging<sup>5</sup> and, if certain pathological traits are present in the members, it can become particularly dysfunctional, also as regards the approach to the reference world.

One of the phenomena in groups of this kind, as emerges from the case series examined, is a combination of rigidity, isolation, vulnerability and dogmatism among the various adepts, that brings out a basic mentality, as described by Bion (1961, 1992), that is the fruit of an encounter and exchange of primitive, protomental values (Napolitani, 1987) among the members. In such cases the group becomes subject to a new, unitary identity that is strongly and reciprocally influenced by the mingling of individual needs and the collective organization needs, by means of a true psychic contagion. These persuasive influences and interferences are favored by the institution of norms<sup>6</sup> and a leader; the latter is a member but over time gains a special status recognized by the other members. This position is attributed a scale of prestige (Scilligo, 1973) and is a reference for the general pattern of social influence of the whole group (Moreland & Levine, 1982, 1994), affecting the hierarchical setup. The leader favors interaction among the group members and then these, according to the theory of expectations in terms of status (Ridgeway, 2001), share these expectations with the other adepts who, in turn, motivate the adoption of roles.

Another common aspect is the attribution to each member of a role that serves to define the identity of that member. In the cases presented, however, based on the "role theory" that affects the psychosocial identity of each member (Sarbin & Scheibe, 1983), the role was imposed not actively adopted. In other words, there was a form of polarization of the group, whereby the relationship between the Ego and the Super Ego was defective rather than integrated, so the leader developed a marked authoritarian syndrome, fed by the closed mentality of the other members. This is in fact the outcome of the structuring of relations of the Self with the surrounding reality; in such relations, change and transformation are seen as negative events (De Maria & Lovanco, 1995). Therefore, the relationship between the leader and the members is in bad faith, being a relationship of manipulative-binding type in which there is not only asymmetry and idealization of the group, based on an "idolatric passion" approach (Fromm, 1992), but also lack of thought (Arendt, 2004). Thus, the mentality is dogmatic and the thought processes are hyperadaptive. This leads to a pathological relational style in the group, immersed in the religious context (Harms, 1967). The described case series records a negative

5 According to Maslow's pyramid of needs, 1954, especially the third level (Maslow, 2010).

6 For Sherif (1984), a norm defines the limit beyond which a certain behavior can be blameful, earning disapproval or other penalties, according to the degree of gravity, while for Moreland and Levine (1982, 1994) norms are expectations shared by the members of a group as to how they should behave.



and hence pathologic approach to the correlation between the group identity and individual identity, whereby a subject belonging to the group becomes “depersonalized” through a process of proto-typicalization. This can ultimately lead to an overt metamorphosis and marked subordination due to the ambivalent relations among the members of the group, which can be perversely manipulated by the leader not only in the affective sphere (that was highly ambivalent in all the couples examined, especially in the female partner) but also in the patrimonial field and sexual and procreation attitudes (Winnicott, 1953).

Indeed, the power of the leader or group in such cases depends on the acquisition and use of specific resources, and is manifest in the subordination of the members, and the maintenance of this power, through the system of dominant meanings and values, made possible thanks to the constant control of the social conditions supporting it. This complex process contributes to the creation of a reality that promotes the group interests and organizes and affects their perception of society (Ballano, 2023).

Therefore, on one hand the strong commitment of an individual within the group appears to be motivated by emotional attachment, identification and personal involvement. It also plays a significant role because it influences the members’ propensity to remain or leave the group, to such an extent that subjects showing a strong commitment exhibit a proud behavior, respect the values and are ready to act in conformity with them (Zondag & van Uden, 2015).

On the other hand, vulnerable subjects in lower positions in the group, unable to access the resources necessary for self-determination, and living in a cultural context that drastically limits their freedom of choice, are at risk of developing group dependency dynamics, and becoming susceptible to abuse and prevarication. Inevitably, structurally pathologic identity aspects within the group are evident in the abnormal use of the spiritual authority to implement strategies of subjection and psychological, patrimonial, sexual and reproductive abuse of an “errant” member. All this originates from an improper use of power and radical violation of the individual right to personal privacy (Eugenio, 2023).

Another peculiar aspect, as in the cases presented, is the individual spiritual vulnerability that manifests when a subject’s conduct is influenced through persuasion that certain actions derive from the divine will, where there is an implicit conviction that obedience is essential to ensure eternal life or paradise. The impact on the psyche of these spiritual threats is comparable to that of physical threats (Sgaravatto, 2023). Indeed, this form of condescendence generates and reinforces the prevarication, leading to the total submission of subjects to the will of the group under the dominance of its power, also of a spiritual nature (Sgaravatto, 2023). In this way the religious community, adopting an attitude that fluctuates between justification and dissimulation, consolidates the abusive practice, on

one hand defending the authors of the oppression and/or other actors involved and on the other, isolating the victims and exploiting their dependency and loyalty. In other words, the power of the group exploits the difficulties of subjects who wish to break free and uses them to defeat attempts to reorganize their existence outside the community to which they have been bound by consolidated links or within which they have lived for many years. This is done through interference with both practical aspects and a rereading of the subjects’ life project, even when the environment is already in some ways perceived by them as perverse or corrupt (Raguso, 2023).

In practice, to weaken the links to the group, it is necessary to firstly develop a form of critical thought about the actions of the group; this is a fundamental requirement for doubts to be translated into loss of faith, and this, in turn, is a step in the wider process of shrugging off commitment (Zondag & van Uden, 2015). In the case series presented, this occurred only when the psychophysical conditions of the subject had reached a critical level, in other words when the subject was not only becoming ill but had reached a sufficient awareness of his or her suffering.

Finally, again in view of what is illustrated by the case series, it is reasonable to attribute an important responsibility also to those vicarious figures who were charged with mediating the relations between the human and the divine, occupying roles of “governance” in the community and, under various titles, offering believers the possibility to build a relationship based on faith, but tendentially asymmetrical and practically reverential of the guiding figure. The protagonists of the cases presented absorbed the negative relational models and reproduced them in their behavior not only in the family but also in all the contexts within which they lived, and their existential agenda resulted badly affected and compromised. After all, an asymmetrical and deferential attitude can be very insidious and in particular situations, figures of authority can not only take advantage of their positions but their words and rituals, that should offer values meanings, values, comfort and hope, can on the contrary be transformed into harmful communication tools for believers who have built on these relations in good faith. Such subjects are naturally vulnerable in these conditions, and subject to attitudes and actions that are undoubtedly pertinent to the criminological, psychological and psychiatric-forensic disciplines.

In fact, in all the cases reported spiritual enforcement was always involved, along with precise successive phases of subjection of the person, within a context of structurally pathologic aspects of the community identity and/or movements producing divisions into sects. This is the *humus* in which behavior of objective relevance to the forensic medicine field can grow. Indeed, the context itself must be regarded as an actor, that creates inextricably rigid and confused relations whose outcome is the control of the individual and annihilation of his or her identity (Eugenio, 2023).

## 5. Conclusions

An analysis of the case series presented offers a technical scheme of classification of some types of psychosocial characteristics of undoubted relevance to the forensic psychology field. These include a strong internal cohesion within the religious group, rigid closure against the outside world, isolation from other contexts, dogmatism, fundamentalism, congregationalism, hypocritical dependency on the leaders, series of rituals, authoritarian management of the existential agenda and relationships among the members. An added point is that a spasmodic quest for personal and collective fulfilment and the illusionary expectation of miraculous solutions to every problem can lead to the subjection of members and the delegation of all decisions to the leaders and/or group. This degenerates into a renunciation of vital aspects of the members' existence, subjectivity and relationships.

Unless otherwise demonstrated, no spiritual proposal that demands acritical adhesion can increase psychological wellbeing, but on the contrary it must be harmful. As reported in the literature, a mature religious experience requires the believer's close attention, continuity, emotional and relational stability, intensity, gradual evolution processes and definitely not a siege-and-conflict attitude that fosters in-group and out-group divisions; the latter, on the contrary, are typical of sects (Grattagliano & Tangari, 2015; Barbieri et al., 2024, in press). In fact, if it is necessary to enquire into phenomena that occur within the psychic and relational world of subjects found to be experiencing particular contexts and situations of markedly deficient and maladaptive type (Aletti, 1994), these may have a strong significance in the fields of clinical Criminology, Psychology and forensic Psychopathology.

In conclusion, if religion is a "community of faith in the alliance with teachings and narratives that improve the search for the holy or sacred" (Dollahite, 1998, p.5) and the religions are rooted in centuries-old spiritual traditions and historically transcend the individual and refer to a reality in which the person is an integrated part (Eliade, 2008), so much so that they have an incisive effect on the formation of personal identity itself, then the term "holy" must be taken to refer to a "transcendence" that has not only eschatological and metaphysical dimensions but also integrates the anthropological category of the "other", in the sense of intersubjectivity, objectivity, proximity and reciprocity (Barbieri, 2022). When the search for the holy or sacred, in order to organize a sense and significance of life aimed by its very nature at the wellbeing of the person, does not develop in this direction, the relationship between the believer and the religious group can become a source of growing suffering. Such a scenario is not directed toward the development of an authentic alter-ego but a false image of it, worshipped and masked as an idol. The consequences in such cases can be very serious both at the psycho-social level and in fields of medico-legal concern.

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