

Religiousness and psychopathological risk: considerations from a forensic cases study

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Abstract

Through the analysis of four expert cases, this study aims to illustrate how the combination of certain religious beliefs, sub-culture of belonging and so-called types of personality pre-morbid can influence individual and group conduct and assume importance in Forensic Medicine. Where the religious dimension is deprived of its authentic anthropological content, it can be transformed into a phenomenon that is not only pathogenic but also at least deviant, if not even criminogenic. In the first case, the technical question concerns the identification of the legal entity to which to entrust a minor, a seriously autistic child belonging to a parental nucleus undergoing separation. This nucleus is conflictual and presents a maladaptive religious dimension. The second case raises the problem of evaluating the practical suitability for the religious life of a man who, after experiencing an acute psychotic onset and the development of bipolar disorder in the third decade of life, not only introduces the cause of marriage nullity but intends to become priest. The third case concerns the complaint by a Franciscan nun in the fourth decade of her life of alleged sexual abuse perpetrated against her by two friars and two priests. The fourth case poses the problem of assessing the existence or not of a mental disorder of the protagonist as the same, under the particular irrational ways of living the faith (shared by the whole family). It leads her to live for more than a year with the mummified corpses of the two sisters. Paying attention to the effects that the synergy between abnormal religiosity and obvious psychopathological risk factors can have on behaviour could be very useful in the diagnosis, prognosis and therapy of these conditions, as well as in the prevention of deviant and criminal behaviours related to them.

Keywords: Religion, Religiosity, Psychopathology, Crime, Deviance, Marital and intra-family relationships

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Religiousness and psychopathological risk: considerations from a forensic cases study

1. Premise

This contribution aims to provide some food for thought on those factors in the religious sphere that intervene in identity polarization, with its strengths, vulnerabilities and intrinsic pathogenicity.

This is in the awareness that the alteration of the transcendent dimension brings with it all the structures of the human psychic being, from the affective sphere to the relational one, from the mnesic one to the cognitive one.

The religious experience allows you to access the depths of your being and to create psychological scenarios that have a double value: either consolation or punishment.

This depends on the fact that human beings are generally led to ask themselves fundamental questions about the meaning of life, death and the values to which they refer, especially when rationality appears insufficient.

If all this is true, the psychic structure of the human being is also negatively affected by those aspects of a pathological nature and of criminological importance that can sometimes be present in the religious sphere itself; as indicated by the expert reports set out below (McConnell et al., 2006; Koenig, 2009; Holmes & Kim-Spoon, 2016)

In fact, in the reported cases, not so much the adherence to a religious belief but rather the presence of qualitative and quantitative alterations of the life of the same integrates an anthropological dimension that, with every likelihood, assumes importance not only at the clinical level and by consequence therapeutic, but also at a forensic level; especially where the conduct of an individual, or of a couple, or of a group, such as those described here, recalls either criminal law, or civil law, or whatever canon law; these cases in which a criminological-clinical and psychopathological-forensic evaluation is essential (Wuthrich Grossenbacher et al., 2006; Tizzani & Gianini, 2011).

2. Case History

I case - Custody of a minor with severe disability (question posed by a civil court regarding the custody of a minor with a severe disability)

This is a couple formed by a woman from Central Italy, fifty years old, a healthcare assistant in a disability centre and a man, the same age, a school operator. Her story: second born of 4 siblings (3 girls and a boy), which whom she declares she has not had any relationship for many years; her mother was a housewife, affected by

chronic depression, and absent in the family (“...my mother has always been weak... she cooked because she had to but for all the rest she did not existed. She did not give you clean clothes, could not ask about school, how we were doing... she stayed home for twenty years without ever leaving the house”); father was an unsentimental figure, lacking empathy, selfish and absent at home (“... her children and grandchildren have always bothered him. He always thought of himself, not caring about his children and wife... it is like he was not married... He has never cared about everyone and everything... he had his life, his work, and that was it...”); her teenage years were lived dedicated to being stigmatised and excluded by her peers due to her underprivileged social-economic conditions; at the age of 16, with a classmate, she had her first sexual relationship lived in the limit between disgust and violence; her only positive note was the regular attendance at the parish oratory, experienced in acceptance, care and support; at the age of 19, she lived a sentimental platonic relationship with a drug addict, a year older, dead after three months by overdose; faulted by his mother, that accused her of being indirectly responsible of his death (“...they made me feel guilty... his mother used to say that I was not always by his side”), ends with the colluding with the woman’s manipulation and, to “atone for it”, decides - without anyone’s counsel, or confrontation with a religious figure, or secular, in this particular point - of “... becoming celibate” (“... it was something like this...something that it happened by itself... I did not ask anyone about it...I lived like a nun and did not date anyone... this being seen from a different perspective seems strange, but it helped me find a balance...I thought that it was God’s will for me...I have had found a religious dimension...”). This condition continued for 16 years, up to when, during a Medjugorje pilgrimage, she had a “divine revelation” and realised that “God’s will” for her would be different (“... I went to the Cross mount and, while I was going down, it is like there was something not from my thoughts, but from something external, it is not easy to explain something like that, I do not know how to say it, like an electric shock...like that, suddenly...I repeat, like an electric shock; I mean, I do not know, like something hard to explain... going down, I remember this fulguration from the sky that called me...in this, I realised that God’s will is something else for me, I mean that I would make me a family, with children, something like that... I felt a little disoriented by this; at that moment, I thought it was something positive, meaning that I had decided to make this vow, but it was not the right path for me because maybe God wanted something else. It left me agitated because suddenly, I found myself with these thoughts and things I had not lived for sixteen years. Before, I was at home

and work and had no social opportunities; I have not dated anyone else. These things took me back to when I was younger...”). She asked a priest to release her from this vow and, at 38 years old she meets a man of 44 years old, sacristan of the parish and school operator, that gets her pregnant after 8 months of dating (“... He was always on his knees praying the rosary and sometimes he even worked three masses...he studied law but never graduated because he had nervous breakdowns, or he said so before the wedding...he worked as a school operator, as a janitor, and then he was a sacristan at church...he told me that he used to go out at night for a period of his life because he couldn't find a girlfriend that he liked, that it was good for him, anyway... he said that he always asked the Lord to help him find a girl but he hadn't found one before, and according to him I was the right one because he had never found a religious girl... maybe in my head I thought at Medjugorje that someone from above had released me from my vow, put me beside this one that prays the rosary like this and obviously he is the right one...I do not know everything together. I thought that he was my life's project...”). During the pregnancy, she finds out that her partner suffered from a bipolar disorder, treated up until that moment in an inadequate way and fragmented by his parents with a surreptitious drug therapy which he didn't know about it (“they gave him medicine without his knowledge, because he lived and ate with them it was easy for them, when we got married after I got pregnant by being with me he wasn't under the effect of drugs anymore and all the problems came out...”). A shotgun wedding in the context of which arise the man's psychological problems (“...those were drugs that a specialist who they consulted prescribed, but he didn't know anything about it...once he tried to strangle me... another time after I was recovered for the birth he came to the hospital and he was out of his mind...after he said that it had happened because he had a diabolical vexation...for a period he went to mass three times a day...he was part of a very traditional catholic group...now he doesn't recognize Pope Francis, he says that it's not Pope Francis's church but Pope Benedict's, for him the real Pope is Pope Ratzinger, the other one is the Devil's tool...this church, I mean the current one, he says that it needs to be all excommunicated because it's evil...”). After three years of marriage, during which the daughter is diagnosed with a severe autism spectrum which causes her to be hospitalised in a protected facility, the couple separates and starts a legal battle for the custody of the minor (“...I was forced to separate because the child's problems made him out of his mind and I feared for her, as well as me...sometimes I have even thought that this child was a punishment for me because a gave up my vow...other times I have thought that after all the Lord had sent me him and I had to take care of him also, other than the child, to atone for, precisely like when I made the vow, because I had gotten pregnant before the wedding...now he does not accept that the child is hospitalised...they give her some heavy drugs because otherwise she gets really violent...sometimes he said some insane things, even in front of her, like let's hope that they admit her and torture her, let's hope that she will die soon...other times he says that the child

does not need to be in society, that it is all the Devil's deed...he lives alone, never went back home to his parents...he knows how to fake his problems to not lose his job as a janitor...he never accepted our separation, just like he does not accept that I built a life for myself...”). After almost an year, the woman moves in with someone with the aim essentially to be supported, but it is still conditioned by severe criticism (“...we are together because I can talk to him and I did not felt heard before...but we live like brother and sister, for me it is not heavy but it is for him, I do not want to sin so I say no, he accepts it and that is it but I know that it weights on him...I am accommodating him in my house...the main problem for me is not just the child, but also her father, because now he is alone, in disarray and can do anything...”).

The technical problem consists of identifying the legal entity to which at least temporarily the disabled child: the mother, affected by a polymorphic personality disorder (with significant schizotypal, obsessive, addict aspects) never treated before. Or the father, also who has bipolar disorder, never adequately treated? Otherwise, is the social services placement of the minor in the facility to which she is admitted? This is the most realistic solution, taking into consideration the conflict of the interpersonal relationship and the dysfunctionality of the individual psychological structure of both parts, which results in the forms of epiphenomenal pathological religiousness shown here.

II case – Specular problems: marriage nullity versus suitability to religious life (two technical questions: the first one on the psychic abilities of the Petitioner in a case of matrimonial nullity by an inter-regional ecclesiastical court; the second one on the psychic suitability of the subject itself for a possible religious ministry by a diocesan ecclesiastical tribunal).

Case of a person who is forty-five years old, born in the South of Italy, firstborn of two Germans, graduated in Business and Economy, ex-businessman, already a mason at the time of the facts, enrolled at the Superior Institute of Religious Science (I.S.S.R.) to get the required Bachelor for permanent diaconate. His father was an ex-businessman, Self-made man, unsentimental and authoritative (“...he built a business with his brothers from the ground up...he reached richness, but he did it all by himself...he was very determined, but also very strict...he could make you feel guilty just by looking at you...he never showed his sensitive side...it took a look from him to make you shake in your boots...now he considers me dead...there are many years that I do not speak with him and I only have news indirectly...”). His mother was a housewife, depriving, sometimes aggressive (“...she was really strict, like my father...also violent in the upbringing...when hands were not enough which she often used, she would get the belt specially with me but not with my sister...a hard woman like her husband, house and church and that was it...for her sex was a sin and for us a taboo...she was a bit pious...even with her I have not had a relationship for years...”). Had a regular educational path, even if discreet until the attainment of graduation with honours, in

his view” *...a moment of redemption towards all his relatives*”. In a prenuptial period, he reported two significant sentimental stories that lasted about four years and were interrupted by repeated cheating (*“...sometimes I have had relationships with other women, even when I had a girlfriend...other times I went to some spas where massages often included masturbation which I have never evaded, they were massages and that was it, then there were real encounters with women like geisha...she does not understand, it is another culture, another world...you are right Professor, other worldly things! However, you are smarter than me on this; help me to understand why certain things you cannot understand if not from a different perspective...maybe because now I am a new man and I am new because I have abandoned the old man like the sacred scripture says...first I needed this, yeah right a need that it was a spontaneous one...”*). In three decades of life, he gets to know in a particular night club his future wife (*“...it was a club where there were shows, I mean sexual exhibitions, not only striptease but other...sexual games, performance competition, things like that...”*), younger than him (*“...she was a fascinating type, stunning, brown hair, brown eyes, tall, a nice presence...she was elusive...with her there was a strong sexual connection, but not only that...”*). The woman became his employee (*“...the engagement years went well from the working point of view because she came to work for me...she was my employee, other than my lover, I mean my partner...It was a mixture of work and intimacy, but there was less time to build a trusting relationship...sexually it went well...I focused on work...but for money, for power, no!?”*) and shared all their life experience (*“...she accompanied me to dinners and at the business... I was also affiliated with a Masonic Lodge, where I have reached a certain degree...nobody knew but my brothers. The other came to know after...I was dealing with the top of the Industrial Association, you have got to believe in me...”*). In these contexts, for working reasons, the couple starts to attend an ecclesiastical community (*“...I managed a consultant business, one of my financial products was needed by this community so we started attend services there...then from working we went from there...me and her attended the community, we lived together, but the community let us attend it anyway, they welcomed us very, very well...they did not know that I was into Masonry...this weighs somewhat in my marriage because the community’s co-founder, that ended up marrying us, didn’t know that I was a Mason, it all came out after some spiritual exercises...that had a devastating effect...”*), under which he referred a progressive transformation of our lifestyle, up to the realisation of a marriage project (*“... Together with a couple of my colleagues from the religious community we attended some of their reunions...they asked which intention I had with my partner, then they said: «Either you marry her or leave her, you cannot tease her like this»...For them living together was not acceptable any more and I told them that I would marry her...I was a fan of numbers, and 7 was a lucky number, so we got married on July 7 because of some esoteric remnants we could get married. I talked to her, and she accepted marrying me...We started the preparations inside the religious community: our project was*

born from an external stimulus; we did not stop to think about it, to ask ourselves what we were doing, to share or not reasoning about parenting...there was not anything like that...”). After the honeymoon, embarks on a path of spiritual discernment, after which matures the awareness of becoming a minister, yet another change of his existential lifestyle (*“...it was the Ignatian exercises that enlightened me... it was the exercises of Saint Ignatus of Loyola that... I closed my activity, I left everything that I had in common with my family, I left Masonry...me and my wife transferred ourselves to another religious community where consecrated priests lived there and also families with children...she did not like this community life, she did not want to face this new lifestyle...it was all based on work and prayer, often she knocked heads with the founder of this community whom she had a very conflicted relationship with and that reflected badly in our relationship...”*). After double reproduction (*“...almost an year after the marriage the first daughter was born, died a few hours after birth because of a severe bad formation of the head and a year after that the second was born... we knew since the second month that she would be born without a head and that the mother would have taken a lot of risks, but we decided to carry on with the pregnancy the same...my faith told me to do it like this even with the risks for the mother...we became pregnant the second time because she wanted it, because I was not open to life, I did not feel ready, probably because of my first experience...”*). After the second daughter was born, he develops an acute psychotic break followed by a forced commitment, treatment and hospitalisation in a psychological ward during which was placed a “bipolar disorder” diagnosis with all the therapeutic needs of the case (*“...there was a particular episode in my life...we had finished the spiritual exercises and I did, let’s say it like this, a nocturnal worship session without consent...I will explain: I opened the tabernacle without consent...I do not know what made me do that...I wanted to pray...I felt the need to pray, but instead of doing it in my bedroom, this came to me at night, and this came from it...for a couple of hours, I was in church praying...there was in me this need to ask the Lord: “tell me really who am I”...then I felt bad, I walked away from home...I was admitted...I left home without my documents and money...I went to pray at the church where there was Sunday service with the community, but nobody could find me. I made some particular gestures...I am ashamed of telling it, but I confess because it is the truth: I took off my clothes and put on some garments I had found in the church...they were purple...then I tore off a curtain from the church, and I covered myself with it...I was not able to control myself...it was not something voluntary...I was not able to stop this rituality...I was like that all night, lying on the floor and praying...I do not remember if I also had opened the tabernacle there...this particular thing I cannot remember...maybe I did it, or maybe I did not, but I cannot recall it...I just remember that I wanted to pray with all my strength and ask the Lord for the revelation of who I was for Him and what He wanted from me...they called an ambulance, and then a riot broke out...I was admitted for a long term...they performed a TSO on me; that is what you call it,*

right? ...they diagnosed me with bipolar disorder...now they gave me 80% of civil invalidity...I did psychotherapy from 2011 to 2018...up till today I am under pharmacological therapy...”). After leaving his wife, he introduces the cause of marriage annulment and starts a formation process to get permanent deaconship; this institute is considered preparatory to his potential priestly ordination.

In the present case, the technical issue results twofold because on one side, it is necessary to examine the mental conditions of the appraised participant with specific reference to the rulers of marriage annulment on n.2 (“Severe lack of judgement on the essential marriage rights and duties if giving and accepting reciprocally”) and of n.3 (“Incapability of take the essential burden of marriage because of psychic nature”) of the 1905 Canon from the Code of Canon Law, the other once that it was demonstrated the annulment of the sacrament of marriage, it is necessary to critically and rigorously analyse possible mental and physical suitability of such subject for religious lifestyle; to the point that an affirmative judgement on the first realistically motivates a negative one on the second. In fact, just as in order to contract a canonical marriage, adequate psychological capabilities are necessary to formulate valid consent and to assume the prerogatives of the bond on a daily basis; thus, in order to be ordained a priest and carry out the consequent religious ministry, intact and adequate psychological functionality are also expressly required¹.

III Case - A history of abuse? (question from a diocesan ecclesiastical tribunal on the suitability of a nun to bear witness as an alleged victim of repeated sexual abuse in various religious places)

This is a Franciscan nun who, in IV decades of life, reports two friars and two priests for repeated sexual abuse. Investigation from the Public Prosecutor's Office, conducted by a female prosecutor, concluded not only with the closing of the case but also with formal distrust of the nun, risking herself of being prosecuted for slander and defamation. This is her overall life story: third born of siblings (four female and three male), all born from the same mother and the same father, which however had also another daughter from a former lover, this man described sometimes as absent for work, sometimes as violent with the wife dies when the woman is thirteen and according to her, his death was not accidental but an homicide which implicated the lover as well as a national Masonic Lodge, which the father had to do with; mother represented as submissive towards the husband but after his death starting a conflict with her daughters which she took numerous times to exorcism sessions; puberty at eleven, at the time which her mother had taught her: “remember that now you're a woman and for you man can a saint or a beast”; at twelve she is “...consecrated to Jesus through Mary” from her parish priest, that becomes also

the spiritual director; like her older sister decides to join the seminary and does it at seventeen, after getting permission to anticipate entrance, before finishing high school, with the motivation of: “...obeying God's calling”; even the sister, after a decade of monach lifestyle, will report two brothers of repeated sexual assault and will obtain then dismissal from the clerical state; from twenty to thirty-five our appraised is subjected to sixteen rectal and vaginal surgeries from several iatrogenic complications; contextually starts to develop a series of disorders that range on the depressive side (“...I was always sad, tired, shutting me in myself...I was more and more having trouble in doing things”) to that dissociative (“...sometimes I was confused, I would find myself in a room at the convent and not know what I was doing it there, or why I went here...”); contrary to her will, her superiors imposed on her to “turn to reliable specialists” and she did it “of obedience”; in the order, she was treated by two different psychiatrists (the first one had formulated a bipolar disorder hypothesis and had treated her with lithium for about an year; the second one had diagnosed a “strong depression” and prescribed anti-anxiety and anti-depressant meds, that she refused taking for fear of developing a medicine addiction); then she started a “psychoanalytic path”, interrupted however after about an year because of her therapist conduct (“...she was too close to me...sometimes she hugged me...other times she would hold me...analysis is not done like this and she also knows it...I do not know why she would do it; I have never asked her...”); finally, she consulted with three different therapists (one female and two males) for “supportive psychotherapy”, always interrupted because of the therapist's behaviour (“...I did not felt good with any of them...I went to them because of the discomfort that I lived inside and for what I realised was real abuse, and they told me that I should let it go and let me be loved...I was obliged to obey, so basically, they could do with me what they wanted according to them...but by doing this, they have increased my addiction. Therefore, I kept suffering those approaches...in the end, I stopped going because I told the Superior General that moved me to another convent...I thought about reporting them too, but I did not do it...they moved me from a convent to another and i was not feeling good, I did not have the strength, so I let it go, even because I was not going there anymore...”); both in the first, and the second venue, she would have suffered “by obedience” at times partial sexual relations, other times complete, with four different religious figures: two friars and two priests; it would be real abuse, as to her saying, the prompted addiction from the different psycho therapy done, would abolish her “capacity of discern rightly” and “defend herself”; she would have found the courage to report her abusers after a specific life experience: one night, caught by a “strong anguish”, she would flee the Mother House and take refuge at a relative's who took her in for a couple of days; during which at the same period a neighbour would have committed suicide, fact which she did not believe, so after some own “investigation”, she went to the police for a notification (“...they said that she was old, that she was sick and that she ended it, with medicines, but I sud-

1 Cfr. Pinto, 2001; Congregazione per l'educazione cattolica, 2008.

den have had a conviction that it was a homicide...the blinds' position, the lights, the son that comes in and goes out and then disappears...the son wanted to take her to a B&B with him and instead she did not go...the day after immediately there was a lawyer at the house...besides near there there is a school, maybe the children had seen something, why the C.S.I. team did not interrogate them?..."); after this episode, she had realised that "...she had the strength to talk about it and say what they had done to her...I do not know if that judge understood me, even if she was a female...she fails to realise that, if one grows up in obedience, one cannot defend itself...". Once the criminal charges were dropped, the Disciplinary Section of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith according to an "investigatio previa" in diocesan site, to evaluate the accusations from the nun towards the multiple brothers from a Canon Criminal Law point of view. The psychiatric evaluation ordered ex officio on the nun would formulate a diagnosis of "limit state" with a "significant risk of psychotic unbalance under stress conditions". Until now, as far as is known, no action has been taken, neither about her nor the accused religious figures, who have always denied the accusations. In the meantime, she "had accepted the proposal" from her superiors to have a Carmelite hermitage experience.

IV case - When the sleep of reason creates monsters (question posed by a criminal court on the imputability of a woman suffering from shared delusional disorder with a mystical content and surviving the death of her sisters caused by their refusal to seek treatment for electively religious reasons)

The present case involves three sisters, elderly, whose abnormal religiousness degenerates into a real shared delusional disorder (in that case, a so called folie à trois), in which, after the death of the first two, the third one lives for a year and a half with their mummified corpses completely isolated from the outside world. The original family consisted of five members: the older sister, T., the second one, C. and the last born, S.; the father, a bank clerk, is described as old-fashioned and unyielding (particularly dealing with gender roles), but at the same time as an affectionate figure; the mother, the housewife, is remembered as "really sweet". The family atmosphere is outlined as serene and affectionate, even if conditioned by the rigorous fatherly figure whose opinions were essential. The family has always been strongly religious, especially the mother. This latter had a habit of going to Father Pio every two weeks to confess with the three daughters, who used to interact with him, communicating their thoughts and asking for advice and judgements to be followed slavishly. For example, the friar from Pietralcina had advised them not to marry, considering them inadequate to marry. He would have had a strong influence over the entire family, to the point that their first encounter came about due to the mother's health problems; the friar would have reprimanded the father for his political views and ordered him to tear his political membership card. The father would have obeyed, and the mother would have had an

improvement. This suggestive event reinforced the family's convictions about Father Pio's abilities. All the sisters went to school (which titles did they possess? middle school? high school diploma?), but because their father old-fashioned ideas, none of them had worked until the same got sick and passed away. The family lived in a rented house in the city for a few years, even after the father's death, or until the moment when the woman started to feel persecuted by a neighbour "...maybe because of religious" (according to them, this man used to spread on their balcony a "white powder" to poison them, causing them respiratory problems and a weird sensation of "fire under their feet"). After trying to report the question to authorities, without any result, they became convinced that the neighbour had a strong hold over the police, for which they decided to buy a villa in the countryside and move. The first period on this site was very positive because they were part of a prayer group; they used their house as a service site and transformed their garage into a small chapel, later dedicated by the Bishop, who came to be their Spiritual Father. The purpose of this prayer group was to get close to the Lord and to "manifest" classified events like "gifts, prophecies and cures" (for ex., S. refers that on an occasion C. would have spoken Aramaic, or that other members of the group would have been healed from a few ailments after their prayer sessions). Their encounters happened once a month; in each session, one of the participants used to open the Bible randomly, putting his finger over a line and then doing the corresponding reading, giving it a meaning related to one's own life. S. claims that the references were always exact and that she heard a voice telling her which page to open. The encounters would last until C. was diagnosed with a brain tumour. The woman refused every treatment and asked her sisters to address this hardship solely with prayer. Due to this choice, they drove off everyone who suggested or indicated the need to see doctors. They ceased to meet people, and they seceded from the rest of the world, so much so that they purchased, through their neighbour, everything that they needed to keep living in this isolated way. The following years, therefore, were increasingly conditioned from isolation and the constant refuge in prayer. After an initial improvement, C. could no longer walk. After some time, T. got sick after a fall, and she too refused all forms of medical care; she too convinced of healing thanks to the practice of prayer. However, after the first period, he becomes completely bedridden and begins to manifest clear mental disorders, such as mental fogging, memory lapses, and a sense of detachment from reality. The prayer remains in the centre of the three sisters' lives as the sole healing tool. Additionally, they often felt the Madonna's presence or some Saints; they dreamed of them often and, on several occasions, would even have the impression of seeing them. Indeed, from a certain moment on, when all three sisters were still alive, a collective climate of expectation of contact with the Transcendental would have been created that facilitated religious interpretation of facts, behaviours, animals, plants, objects, etc. The women ex-

changed tales of each other's mystic experiences, strengthening their beliefs. After the death of the first two sisters, the last starts living in a state of mental confusion, divided between reality and dream, in a dimension in which she had spoken to saints and deceased, without any ability to make decisions and with rare flashes of awareness; to the point of going from faith in God's ability to heal the sisters to hope that He could even resuscitate them. Furthermore, she stopped taking care of herself and the house, eating in a significantly discontinuous way with the few fruits harvested from trees and some can of food found in the house, refusing to buy food, fearing that her neighbour too was influenced by their previous persecutor (she started to feel the "fire under her feet" again), gathering rainwater to drink and wash herself. In addition to all this, she kept watch over her sisters' bodies even after their deaths; she observed the corpses' transformation, and she used to decorate them with "relics" (i.e. objects which she had attributed religious significance). The physical presence of the corpses allowed her not to perceive the detachment from her sisters, even if afterwards, she admitted to feeling guilty whenever the police would come into the house ("*...we always valued order and cleanliness...I wish things went different...It was a tragedy for us, a blow to the head really*"). To the mental Health Centre's team, the lady presented herself in precarious hygienic conditions, dazed, slowed from a psycho-motor point of view, in a grave state of malnutrition and dehydration. After a first admission, which she was discharged on a "malnutrition, dehydration and paranoid syndrome" diagnosis, she was transferred to a geriatric facility.

The case's clinical classification necessarily requires an overall reading from a multi-cause perspective. Firstly, the weighty conditioning in the life choices happened as a consequence of the adhesion of the entire family nucleus to a religious model entirely unilateral as well rigid; a model based not only on dutiful respect of the imposed rules from a fideistic faith but also on supine acceptance of the direct mechanisms in search of divine signs that should have oriented the very existence, with a religious dimension consequence so long and serial in its form, as compulsory and productive in its contents, should become their only reason to live. Not by chance, the three sisters kept limited contact with reality due to the attendance of religious groups. When everything has failed, the relationship with others and the world has progressively vanished.

Furthermore, there are other events, realistically psycho-traumatic, that degenerate the situation: the father's death, whom they were utterly dependent upon, for which, in his absence, they appear inadequate in interacting with objective reality (in fact, the sisters develop persecutory delusions that lead them to move to a villa away from the town); the progressive isolation of the sisters provoked by their respective sickness, faced and lived until the death in a religious dimension characterised by fanaticism and abstraction; the death of T and C after and consequently of which S does not take care of herself any more.

In this situation, it is possible to identify in C's figure the inducer subject that dominates on others, in which is present a solid emotional dependence, up until the onset of a full-fledged shared psychotic disorder, a condition which can regress when the relations with the inducer subject are interrupted; unsurprisingly, once admitted in hospice, S. presented characteristics of an individual "affected" by such conditions and not responsible "promoter" of the same. Therefore, by what the projective tests have reported, it can be concluded that with the surviving sister, at the time of the specialistic observation, there was not any psychotic event in effect. However, in certain moments of environmental distress, the same could function in the registry of some mechanisms of the psychotic array.

3. Critical remarks

Before critically analyzing the case studies presented, it is appropriate to premise: both the fact that it is not possible to proceed with a systematic classification of mental disorders in which religion represents the pathological core, since every mental illness can involve individual religious experience, giving rise to real forms of pathological religiosity; and the fact that in this contribution neither mass suicides with a religious background, nor religious ones other than the Catholic Christian one, were taken into consideration, since the expert case studies presented do not concern these different cases (Takahashi, 1989; Schwartz & Kaplan, 1992; Di Fiorino & Corretti, 2001; Mancinelli, 2002; Kassem et al., 2020; Felthous, 2024);

The first three cases presented the psychiatric pathology of the subjects (a bipolar disorder in the two men, a mixed personality disorder c.d. in the lady, and a limited state in the nun) that affects their religious dimension that transforms into an authentic form of pathologic religiosity. Hence, to try to clarify the toning in a psychopathologic sense of this fundamental existential category seems appropriate at first to invoke the distinction between religion and religiousness - while being aware of the complexity and the difficulty of the theme - and, subsequently, analyse not only the psychological importance but also the anthropological figure.

If religion is understood as a doctrine that explains the relationship between the human being and the other-worldly sphere and that motivates the practice of rites and ceremonies passed on for generations, religiousness consists in the sense and the meaning of a particular vision of the reality of human connections, of suffering, of life and death that every person develops with the sacred world (Barbieri, 2022).

In this regard, there have been both "substantial definitions" as well "functional definitions" of religion recognised (Lambert, 1991): while the first focuses on its same content (e.g., theological beliefs, eschatological, etc.), the second instead highlights the cultural-historic role (e.g., how to deal with so-called life events, or the individual change in the different phases of existence itself, etc.), even

if the substantivity and functionalist perspective tend to unite in the social-emotional reality, because, if in the first the functional aspect is not always absent, in the latter the contents of fideistic-doctrine order cannot be abolished entirely (Cipriani, 2009; Mariconda, Caponetto & Auditore, 2013; Ponnudurai, 2012).

In the context of the current consideration, if in the anthropological field “religious concept expresses itself in symbols, in myths, in ritualistic forms and artistic representation that forms the general systems of guidance of thought and explanation of the world, of idealistic values and role models”. (Comba, 2008, p.3), from a phenomenal point of view religion would derive from the sacral experience; in this regard, moreover, has been highlighted how it lies to men in the “perception of a Other”, with consequent sacral experience which in turn qualifies the *homo religiosus* from the several historical cultures of humanity (Ries, 2012). With this in mind, each religion is inseparable from the *homo religiosus* because it motivates his *Weltanschauung*, elaborates his explanation of the human destiny and underlies a behaviour that, through rituality and symbology, actualises sacral experience (Ries, 2012); to the point that: “if the story can promote or paralyse new religious experience, it never fails to abolish the need of a religious experience. The Hierophanies dialect allows it to fully and spontaneously rediscover all religious values, without distinction, in whichever historical level a society finds itself or the individual that makes the discovery (Eliade, 1976, p.256).

Therefore, the question - repeatedly posed over time (Eliade, 1967, 1976; Filoramo, 1994; Di Nola, 1996) - in what consists of the perception of this “totally other”, that is, if religiousness is precisely represented from the understanding of all that, it is possible to answer that this “totally other” is the “sacred”, which, in and of itself, not only rises as pre categorical and ante predicative foundation of the “religious”, but it qualifies as a fundamental structural dimension of Psyche (Callieri, 1995, 1998; Rizuti & Callieri, 2004); so much so that “the religious experience is that of a relationship between man and otherness, with Another, that is a Totally Other, and the religious experience is, therefore, transcendent, that is of an inherent and imperative calling to another world, which the subject interacts with that other by itself that ends up constituting him. As such, it then becomes a manifestation of the functioning of the Self, one of the most important, if not the most complex and articulated. Indeed, it necessarily implicates the subject’s psychic maturity - that is, sufficient completeness and a sufficient organisation of all his mental capacities - since the religious sphere is not a separated behaviour sector but is an integral part of the psychic structure, all the more evolved and complete, as much as possible able to integrate, organise and harmonise Past-Present-Future (space-time dimension), Self and Other than Itself (objectual-relational dimension), Life and Death (anthropological dimension), Immanence and Transcendence (ontological dimension). The concept of Self, moreover, defines itself as referring

precisely to the construction of a relationship, given that each human being exists only because he is part of a relationship with another and as part of such relationship is realised: the distinction between Self and Another, the constitution of Self from Another, the communication and the exchange with Another. That is why our «Being-there» is always a «being in a relationship» and a «being in a situation». In this perspective, the religious experience contributes to establishing and organise the personal identity because it allows you to qualify the identity/self-hood related to Transcendent and in this perspective, it qualifies as a paradigm «over-subjective» sooner than «inter-subjective» and more than «subjective»...” (Barbieri, 2022, p.160). As a result, whenever a psychic pathology jeopardises this organisation of sense and significance, a real sickened religiousness occurs, as with the first three cases.

Because of these reflections, it is not at all easy to always make a differential diagnosis and distinguish between “pathological religiosity” and “psychiatric pathology” with religious content.

Some immature behaviors in adults represent the consequence of psychological disorders of developmental age because a clear relationship has been demonstrated between immature religiosity in adults and disorders of childhood psychological development (Dacquino, 1980).

Mental disorders due to pathological religiosity can present manifestations with a religious content, or also refer to an institutional and relational system.

In the first case, psychism and its dynamisms appear detached from the laws of authentic logic to regress to pre-logical, archaic forms of functioning and behavior.

In fact, some of the regressive manifestations of the ego, which loses its fundamental function of examining reality, consist of: delusional and/or hallucinatory psychoses, phenomena of dissipation of thought, hyper-compensatory increase in self-esteem, megalomania, persecutory impulses, fantasies of destruction of oneself and the world, disorders of the sphere of consciousness (such as dissociation, derealization and depersonalization), ecstatic or ascetic-mystical attitudes.

In the second case, the construction of subjectivity is based on: absence of divergent thinking, isolation, cognitive and affective rigidity, authoritarianism, dependence, denial of healthy processes of identification and differentiation, self-referentiality of thought and relationships.

Added to this are forms of religiosity of a dependent, or obsessive, or hypomanic, or depressive type.

The discourse becomes even more complex when the attention shifts from the individual plan, in its psychological and anthropological declination, to that social and group, in its historical and cultural combination, as with the fourth case. It has been, furthermore, observed that the post-modern era seems characterised by the following paradox: the more a society becomes rationalised, the more it grows men’s needs to draw in sacral and transcendent universe (Aletti, 1994; Aletti e Alberico, 1999; Carella et al., 2008). In answering such needs and realising as a model of meaning (Park, 2005), religion is proposed

as a communication system (Pace, 2008; Grattagliano, 2009) built, socialised and acted narratively. In particular, by offering beliefs, stories and shared meanings, religion contributes to providing order to social reality by suggesting several forms of “communicative contract” (Mininni & Ghiglione, 1995): “if” and “how” recipients will accept this suggestion opens a comprehensive scenario of possibilities and positions (Scardigno, 2010). Whereas at one end arise, atheists, those that refuse such suggestion, at the opposite end arise instead those that take on a magical-idolatrous behaviour that accepts the Transcendent only where it is possible to experiment with human senses; between the two poles of this continuum, the relationship between humane and divine is “mediated” by “vicarious” figures which can be divided into three groups: the first one includes a few privileged that claim of receiving, in spoken divine words; the second comprises of those that carry out ritual tasks assigned from a religious institute; the third includes those who affirm of having specific capabilities introducing a subject to “another” dimension than the ordinary. For various reasons, such figures offer believers the possibility of building a trust-based relationship, although they tend to be asymmetrical and almost reverential towards the guide.

On the other hand, between asymmetry and deference lurk more than potential pitfalls: in particular situations, these figures can try to take advantage of their position; therefore, the words and rituals that should offer meaning, values, comfort and hope can become dangerous communicative tools for those believers that build their relationships in “good faith”, up to lead to significant criminal, other than psychopathological situations. In the fourth case, moreover, the refusal of specialised essential care, not only persistent but mainly motivated from an always and in any case pathological reality angle, places a whole series of questions also from a criminal behaviour study point of view to the extent that a few rules on the exercise of the right to health care, in this particular case, have been most likely disregarded (e.g., regardless of the coexistence with mummified corpses, the question weak point can here recognise itself in sharing the denial of the surviving to seek life-saving treatment for herself, and for her sisters).

Indeed, if the religious occurrence represents a resource used by all the layers of the population, which resort to when you are not able to cope with specific adverse events (Barresi, 2000; De Martino, 1958, 2001, 2002; Glasenapp & Gallini, 1982; Pargament, 1997), those frailty conditions in which people can find themselves in certain moments represent a chance for some individuals of prevailing over other and dominating them (Grattagliano et al., 2014; Grattagliano et al., 2015; Grattagliano et al., 2018; Grattagliano, 2019; Introna et al., 2011; Corbi et al., 2012; Lisi et al., 2012; Grattagliano, 2013; Lisi et al., 2013; Marvelli et al., 2013; Margari et al., 2013).

The fourth case appears to illustrate its point because here, religion is lived in a downright delirious dimension, namely modulated by suggestive type and abstract mech-

anisms of essentially regressive nature; that is of a limit breakage between fantasy and reality, that can hinder or, even, impede regular action of cognitive process and develop even forms of “mental contamination” (Freud, 1921), with collective suggestibility phenomena powerfully enhanced in individual components the group, ready to make their own and to accept, emotions, convictions, behaviours that, with every likelihood, would have been refused in other conditions. Thereby, an uncritical and dogmatic thought can be structured based on the coercive intentions of those who exercise *leader* function and on the saturation of the ordinary spaces of reflections. On some level, it is structured that which Fromm (1992) defines “idolatrous passion”, understood as the mobilisation of the pervasive desire of an idol, in which, when a group is seized by such passion, it can adopt a fideistic behaviour, of insensibility regarding his conscience and of blind obedience to a figure that presents itself as an almighty idol. Not without reason, Freud (1919) defines *Unheimlich* as a hyper-adapted way of thinking, which considers familiar and usually socially unacceptable behaviours. The vagueness of it all, with its haziness quality of affections and values, can familiarise even this, which is usually seen as disturbing, with all the consequences this entails, even from the human destructiveness point of view (Maris, 1997, 2019; Forouzanfar, 2021; Barbieri et al., 2022).

Add to this the fact that for the adepts, the religious group represents a “security device” that deceptively protects the individual from isolation, difficulties, and ongoing crisis and allows him to reintegrate himself into a well-defined social-cultural horizon. In reality, though, many behaviours expressed collectively in symbolic and ritualistic form carry out a design that initially generates a sense of danger (e.g. the neighbour that wanted to poison the three sisters with the “powder” on the balcony) and, then, it soothes him in a fictional manner (e.g. in the face of severe and progressive pathologies, there is always and only prayer, that, firstly, must liberate the same from evil and then, in case of death, make it reborn). In doing so, “pretend” to protect the individual from uncertainty and danger, anticipating and addressing it symbolically (O’Dea, 1961, 1968; Witkin & Goodenough, 1981). Hence, the confirmation is that when religiousness rises as the sole and abstract category of reality interpretation, it reveals itself inherently sick for lives of deeply defective and dysfunctional relations or established through sacralisation (Black, 1990; Nesci, 2000; Vijayakumar, 2004; (Ozawa-De Silva, 2010; Montaldi, 2021).

5. Conclusions

The presented cases appear emblematic of the fact that such religious dimension, fundamental from the existential point of view to the extent that rises as a basic psychological structure, where it is deprived of its content most authentically alter-egoic anthropological can become epiphenomenal not only of mental suffering, individual

and collective but also of the same human destructiveness. That is why it is advisable as it is the subject of careful examination in different criminal-clinical and psychopathological-forensic evaluations. This would allow not only a more precise application of the standard, based on in-depth cognitive analysis of a complexity that often - more often than we think - is at the very least ignored if not even removed, but also a more effective preventive treatment action, of all those situations which a "sickened religion" can become or cause, or consequence major psychopathological as well as criminal cases.

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