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Sectarianism, religious extremism and radicalization

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Fanaticism: psychosociological roots and social consequences

Preventing and combating hatred and violence while safeguarding human rights

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Abstract

The subject of this paper will be developed from a psychological perspective starting from the most widely shared theories in the academic field, which have allowed a greater understanding of the complex psychological mechanisms that drive people to choose to adhere to a religion, to forms of communal spirituality or to ideologies of various origins. The possible psychological consequences of these choices on the individual and society will also be examined. They can manifest on a continuum that goes from the promotion of personal development and adaptation to society to the loss of confidence and self-esteem, with potentially destructive consequences on the sense of belonging. In this context, some food for thought on the psychology of the convert in the dynamics of radicalization will be provided. The second part of the paper will illustrate the documents issued by important international institutions that address these issues: the prevention and fight against criminal sectarian drifts, safeguarding the right to exercise freedom of religion, belief and conscience, international terrorism and the difficult task that States have to integrate and protect both the right of citizens to security and the right to exercise freedom of religion and belief.

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1. The psychosociological roots of fanaticism

In this paper, “fanaticism” means “a religious or non-religious sentiment characterized by rigid intolerance towards all those who do not recognize themselves or do not share the transmitted belief” (Samir 2017, p. 199)

To understand what the psychological and social roots of fanaticism may be, it is necessary to take into consideration the theories most widely shared in the academic field, which have allowed a greater understanding of the complex psychological mechanisms that drive people to choose to adhere to a religion, to forms of communal spirituality or to organizations based on ideologies of various origins, in an “all-encompassing” way, so much so as to significantly transform their social relationships and, in general, their very existence.

The development of scientific literature on the subject saw a surge in the 1970s and 1980s, when, in the United States, mass conversions to minority and alternative religious and spiritual groups occurred, often defined, in a criminological sense, as “sects”. The affiliations of many young people to this type of organization raised a series of social and political problems, related to freedom of religion, belief and conscience, and deeply involved both the legal world and that of mental health professionals, without forgetting the significant contribution provided by sociologists and historians of religion. The alarm over mass conversions attracted the attention of the media and the concerned families (Wright and Ebaugh 1993) and caused, due to their problematic nature and their relations with broader social processes, the rebirth of studies and research on the general phenomenon of conversion, which had mostly been abandoned in previous years.

In that period, and in the following decades, to explain the phenomenon of conversion to groups that were distinguished by doctrines and practices from the majority culture, a certain number of scholars used the notion of "brainwashing", according to which the transformation of the self and the conversion to a new belief would be imposed in a coercive way, so as to violate the person’s free will. Based on this theory, in parallel with mass conversions, the practice of “deprogramming” spread: people appointed by the families of young converts, together with former members and exponents of anti-cult movements, kidnapped and attempted to “deprogram” the followers by practicing a form of reverse “brainwashing” on them (Di Marzio 2012).

To briefly indicate the direction of the different psychological models developed to interpret the phenomenon of conversion, it can be said that they are placed in a continuum at whose extremes are found the concepts of "freedom of choice" (intrinsic model) and "coercive persuasion" or "brainwashing" (extrinsic model), with many intermediate positions. The "extrinsic" model considers the convert as "passive", while the "intrinsic" model, emphasizing the figure of the religious seeker, is fundamentally active (Di Marzio 2014).

Since then, field research has multiplied, in an attempt to understand whether, and to what extent, the "extrinsic" model of conversion really had the scientific basis it claimed or could, in any case, be considered empirically founded. In the United States, the debate on this point was further intensified by the presence, in the courts, of experts hired by the parents' lawyers who used the theory of brainwashing as a basis for accusing religious and spiritual groups of having induced the conversion of their children. During one of these trials, in 1983, the American Psychological Association (APA) decided to take a position on the issue and entrusted a task force called DIMPAC (Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control), chaired by Margaret Singer and other scholars, with the drafting of a report that would provide the essential basic information on the theories they supported. This report was essential for formulating an evaluation of the scientific status of the theory. On May 11, 1987, the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology (BSERP) office, on behalf of the APA, published a Memorandum rejecting the “final report of the task force” because it “lacks the scientific

rigor and balanced critical approach necessary for APA approval." With the 1987 Memorandum, the APA intended, on the one hand, to declare the brainwashing theory in the version typically presented by Margaret Singer (Singer and Lalich 1995) and the anti-cult movement as "lacking scientific rigor," and on the other hand, to leave the door open to other theories of persuasion and manipulation other than that of Margaret Singer (APA, Memo, 11/05/1987). Following this and other pronouncements by professional associations that are of the same position, for some decades, the scientific literature on the phenomenon has decidedly and officially expressed itself critically towards the different formulations of the "brainwashing" theory, and, in general, of the "extrinsic" or "coercive" interpretative model, since it is devoid of empirical foundation, and is therefore unscientific.

Decades after this pronouncement, research in the sector made further progress and currently a wide range of studies has ascertained the non-existence of an inexplicable or omnipotent psychotechnology that would make individual preferences irrelevant when a person affiliates with a certain religion, minority or majority, or joins a political group that advocates a certain ideology (Introvigne 2002). Research aimed at studying the type of people who join "unconventional" spiritual and secular movements, or who are attracted to such groups, seems to indicate that potential followers are not chosen at random from the population, but show certain personal qualities and interests that predispose them to that particular type of disaffiliation (Di Marzio 2010; 2016;2023;2024).

Also, since the mid-1990s, psychologists' approach to the study of conversion has changed, overcoming a vision of religious faith as the predisposing factor to psychological disorders (see Lukoff, Lu and Turner 1997): currently, many of them look at religion as an independent variable that can have both positive and negative effects on the personality (Aletti 2010; Hood, Hill and Spilka 2009). The most widely shared interpretative line is the one that sees affiliation and disaffiliation to/from this type of group as a process of active and conscious research, during which the individual chooses the movement that seems to best respond to his or her needs and requirements. This perspective, however, does not preclude the existence of influences, even undue ones, both from the leader and the religious group to which the person is affiliated, and from the antagonistic social groups active in the social context in which the religious choice occurs.

Furthermore, in the last decade, in the field of psychological studies on affiliation, the figure of the religious seeker has emerged (Streib 2014; Wright 2014). The religious seeker is a research subject who is fundamentally active both in adhering to New Religious Movements and, in general, to new forms of spirituality or aggregations characterized by ideological activism of various origins, which seem able to satisfy his/her needs and provide answers that are not available in traditional churches or "traditional" social groups, such as, for example, political parties.

In conclusion, the complexity of the phenomenon that we intend to study requires a dynamic, flexible and multidisciplinary approach that does not exclude contributions, theoretical and methodological, of different orientations.

2. Exploratory investigation of affiliation and disaffiliation in light of a holistic and interdisciplinary model

To understand this phenomenon – and the controversies that are related to it – it may be useful to explore, from a psychological point of view, the experiences of people affiliated and disaffiliated to/from minority religious and spiritual groups. Since some of these organizations are sometimes included among "cults" (a term used in a criminological sense by the media), even the decision to affiliate or disaffiliate to/from one of them can be interpreted in a negative sense, differently from how the same phenomenon is generally considered when considering mainline religious organizations. The

term “sect” has long been abandoned by scholars because it is generic, stigmatizing and discriminatory, while the media, anti-cult movements and hostile former members continue to use it. Scholars prefer to use definitions such as “new religious movements”, “alternative religious and spiritual movements”, etc. In these groups, individuals experience significant changes in their existence, from a cognitive and emotional point of view, which can also affect relationships with other reference groups. The evaluation of the outcomes – positive and negative – of these transformations, from a psychological point of view, is very complex.

The exploratory investigation that I conducted on 34 people affiliated and disaffiliated to/from seven different groups (Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, Hare Krishna, Damanhur, Church of Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, Associazione Archeosofica (Di Marzio 2023) and practitioners of the Atman Yoga School (Di Marzio 2024)) allowed me to examine the experience and the decision-making process that, for these people, had ended with their affiliation or disaffiliation.

Thanks to the survey of the scientific literature on the subject, it was possible to frame, systematize and interpret the experiences collected by placing the results in a consolidated and widely shared scientific context that falls within the general perspective of the psychology of religion, the branch of psychology that aims to observe the psychic act in its concrete intentional exercise (Milanesi and Aletti 1973), thus safeguarding the psychologist's neutrality when proposing data and psychological interpretations of religious conduct (Vergote 1993; tr. it. 2010).

The model chosen to carry out the critical and comparative examination of the interviews is the one developed by Lewis Rambo in collaboration with other scholars (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Baumann 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014), which is a useful reference paradigm for examining and comparing the experiences collected. Like many other researchers of those minority religious groups considered “controversial”, Rambo was interested in understanding the reasons for the extraordinary success of their proselytism, especially among young people. Differently from the position of those who attributed such success to undue persuasion techniques and forms of deceptive proselytism (Singer and Lalich 1995), Rambo’s approach (1993) avoids simplistic explanations and values the complexity of the dynamics involved in the phenomenon.

His model addresses the study of religious or spiritual choice within an interpretative paradigm that is structured in seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences:

- Context: one cannot adequately speak about a person's psyche without first contextualizing it. The matrix in which a religious and spiritual transformation occurs includes four dimensions: personal, social, cultural and the religious environment (Rambo 1993, 20-43; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 882-883).

- Crisis: scholars generally agree that a conversion is preceded by a crisis. Such crises create disorientation, but also opportunities for personal transformation, mobilization of energies, and revitalization of myths, rituals, and symbols (Rambo 1993, 44-55; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 883-884).

- Quest: it is a process by which one seeks to give meaning and purpose to one's life. While the classic literature of the psychology of religion described converts as passive people, psychologists and sociologists have recently begun to consider people as active protagonists in the creation of meaning and in the choice between different possible religious options. People are also motivated by a wide variety of factors, which can change over time (Rambo 1993, 56-65; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 884-885).

- Encounter: This involves contact between the potential convert and the “recruiter,” or missionary, who is in charge of the proselytizing process. Just as followers need leaders, leaders need followers. Rambo identifies four main components in the missionary’s strategy: the level of emphasis placed on proselytizing (degree of proselytism), the strategic style (strategic style), the method of contact

(mode of contact), and the potential benefits for the convert (potential benefits) (Rambo 1993, 66-101; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 885-887).

- Interaction: If people continue to remain in the group after the encounter, the interaction intensifies. In this stage the potential convert learns more about the teachings, lifestyle and expectations of the group, which offers various formal and informal opportunities to fully involve people (Rambo 1993, 102; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 887).

- Commitment: in the previous stage the individual makes the story of the new group his or her own, while in the commitment stage the latter is further internalized by the convert, who lives an experience of biographical reconstruction. Although attribution theory (Spilka, Shaver and Kirkpatrick 1985) can explain the convert's passage to the new life, every aspect of ordinary existence can be seen as a subtle process of reorganization of one's biography. Even in religious and spiritual conversion it is often required, implicitly or explicitly, to interpret life through new metaphors, images and stories (Rambo 1993, 124; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 888-889).

- Consequences: The consequences of conversion are determined, in part, by the nature, intensity and duration of the conversion process. Many contemporary scholars believe that an authentic conversion is a process of constant transformation. The initial change, although important, is only the first step in a long process that may also include subsequent affiliations and disaffiliations.

Based on this extremely synthetic examination of the stages of the Rambo et al. model, it is clear how the conversion process – for the authors – is a complex puzzle in which numerous factors interact: people, institutions, events, ideas, experiences, which all relate to each other within a field of forces in which social and cultural dynamics assume significant importance.

The data I have collected from the critical and comparative examination of the interviews with my 34 subjects, even considering all the limitations of an exploratory investigation, examined and interpreted in light of this model and others, allow me to advance the thesis on what could be the most appropriate methodology to address the phenomenon: the decision to join, stay or leave a group is a complex process that must be studied with a global, heuristic and multidisciplinary approach, thanks to which it is possible to evaluate the subject's choice from a psychological point of view, as a complex and free act, to the extent that any human choice can be.

In this sense, there is no individual choice that is not influenced by internal and external factors; research in this field can – if it meets the criteria of scientific methodology – identify which factors are at play and to what extent the individual's choice contributes or not to promoting his or her individual and social development. The task of the psychology of religion is precisely to identify both the liberating and limiting elements of growth and free choice in the religious field. The conclusions of the comparative and critical examination of the interviews made it possible to verify the validity of Rambo's model. Thanks to the data collected through interviews and observation, and despite the diversity of the movements to which the subjects were affiliated, it was possible to identify numerous common factors and dynamics that influenced the choice of a given group and that correspond to those included by Rambo in his model, for each of the seven stages.

The outcome of this investigation also allowed me to detect the correspondence of the data collected with those that emerged in other research and to consolidate the critical position of this work with respect to those theories that see the individual as completely "passive" in the face of the charismatic power of others, in line with the results of a vast contemporary literature on the phenomenon that attributes a generally active and conscious role to the convert (Di Marzio 2023; 2024).

These considerations, referred to a small group of subjects, do not allow us to exclude other possible outcomes of the process of change: instead of individual self-determination and responsibility, in some contexts, when the exercise of power within the group is abusive, there is a loss of personal confidence and self-esteem. In these cases, it is important to study the relationship that exists between the power dynamics present within groups and the individual's capacity for self-determination to verify

whether joining an organization can damage or promote the psychological well-being of the person and his/her attitude towards the social environment in which he/she lives.

3. Psychology of the convert in the dynamics of radicalization

In this section, we will refer to the contributions presented during a round table held at the Salesian Pontifical University in which fanaticism was examined from different perspectives, including the psycho-pedagogical one, in order to understand the motivations that have pushed some individuals towards the abyss of violence and to offer some perspectives for overcoming it (Marin and Kuruvachira 2017).

A particularly significant contribution in this regard is that of Samir (2017). He defines fanaticism as "a religious or non-religious feeling characterized by rigid intolerance towards all those who do not recognize or do not share the transmitted belief" (Samir 2017, p. 199) and identifies two key components: the subjective sphere and the collective one.

The personal roots are to be found in personality characteristics: these are frustrated individuals, incapable of assuming responsibilities and eager to obey a leader. The social roots are found in the disintegration of the social order, the fear of the future and the dissatisfaction of the present. The birthplace of the fanatic, for Samir, are mass movements, since it is not just an individual condition but "must necessarily have its roots within a sect, faction or movement" (Samir 2017, p. 204).

This category includes some individuals who have been the protagonists of violent actions and massacres. Among them there are three emblematic cases. The first is Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people in an attack in Oslo and Utoya in July 2011. His political-religious profile does not fit the canons of the "crazy terrorist". His ideas are clear and endowed with a stringent logic, so much so that he himself declared that the massacre he committed was "an atrocious but necessary act": he was obsessed with the idea that Islam could invade Europe, combined with a dose of anti-Marxism and anti-Semitism. The second is the Italian Gianluca Casseri, an admirer of Breivik, who cultivated the cult of neo-Nazism and denialism. He is the killer who in December 2011 killed two Senegalese in cold blood, before turning the gun on himself. The third is Ali Sonboly: in July 2016, he killed 9 people and injured 27 others in a massacre in a shopping center in Bavaria. He had no connection with ISIS and, while carrying out his act, which was filmed, he shouted "I am German" to underline his emotional bond with his nation (Samir 2017, pp. 209-210).

These are just some of the names that the press and the media in general have branded as isolated madmen, but digging deeper into the history of each of them, it is possible to find adherence to general principles on which an iron, solid and indisputable logic is based. Labeling as madness what in reality derives from a fanatical gesture does not allow for a real solution to the problem. One of the first steps to understand the thinking of a modern fanatic is not to conceive of him as mad, as mechanisms of extreme coherence are triggered in the mind: the fanatic is therefore characterized by inflexibility, the lack of compromise with empirical data and, obviously, by the absence of empathy.

This coherence, according to French demographer Le Bras (2001), is based on the spread of xenophobic and racist ideologies that must be linked to a factor that he calls "demographic ideology". The latter crystallizes in the form of a "population consciousness" that recalls class consciousness, but, unlike the latter, does not rest on objective conditions of exploitation, but is nourished by a history, a genealogy and a narrative of origins that are completely imaginary and fanciful. Thus a distinction is made between the native population and the alien one: the former becomes synonymous with stability and nation, the latter with instability and multiculturalism. This type of ideology, according to Le Bras,

is the same that fuels movements and parties such as the British National Party, the Front National and the Northern League (Samir 2017, p. 210).

Bellantoni (2017) examined the variables of fanatic-religious conduct from the point of view of the psychology of religion. Religion, defined as that complex of beliefs and acts of worship that expresses man's relationship with the sacred and with divinity, is never a solitary and reserved act, but a social one. Consequently, religious fanaticism cannot ignore the collective element. He identifies in fanatical-religious behavior four variables: genetic predispositions, life history and coping, the triggering event and personal freedom/responsibility.

Furthermore, in his model, to understand fanatical-religious behavior, it is necessary to consider the entire life span of the individual to verify the outcome of four different evolutionary lines, called fundamental existential motivations: 1) basic trust, dating back to the quality of the relationship with the caregiver; 2) the development of adequate relational intimacy, which refers to the experience of being able to share, in a "safe relational place", one's significant and emotionally relevant experiences; 3) support towards the experience of a substantial social consideration (self-esteem); 4) openness to a positive search for meaning, capable of giving trust and self-efficacy to a personal life project (Bellantoni 2017, 229-230).

The outcome of these evolutionary lines can determine the development of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of the religious fanatic, which also materialize in violent actions, once the individual comes into contact with an environment that supports and motivates him to act.

Bellantoni also refers to a further important contribution on the subject, that of McGregor et al. (2015). According to these authors, the most recent explanatory hypotheses refer to the concept of Aggressive Religious Radicalization (ARR), a motivational theory that, drawing on the fields of personality psychology, social psychology and neurophysiology, focuses on the theme of goal regulation. In this perspective, both personality traits (oppositional, anxious, identity and moral confusion) and the advantages and threats perceived by the group to which the fanatic belongs are taken into consideration. The perception, by the individual, of external threats that prevent/frustrate the regulation of his or her own goals and those of the reference group (subgroup), would contribute to the consolidation of the sense of alienation and reactive mechanisms. This would lead to the birth and maintenance of motivational drives towards the stabilization of an Aggressive Religious Radicalization (ARR), which includes the opportunity for immediate and concrete engagement in active groups fueled by conspiracy narratives, infused with cosmic meaning, encouragement to moral violence and sealed by unfalsifiable religious certainties. The authors believe that the ARR plays a fundamental defensive function, as it helps to mask/compensate for the vulnerability of the individual, otherwise “entangled” in an oppressive anguish.

These would therefore be weak and vulnerable individuals, but who have cultivated latent aggression for years. In this context, it is interesting to point out Geminiani's (2017) reflection on the relationship between the violent conduct of terrorists and neurobiological factors. In his opinion, it is not an aggression that derives from a brain malfunction but rather a conscious choice of behaviors that have the purpose of inducing fear and therefore social destabilization. "The personal history of the attackers, their relative young age and their social background suggest, more than motivations of social marginalization, the role of psychological processes linked to frustration, needs of belonging and search for existential motivations, accompanied by experiences of violence that determine not so much dysfunctions of the behavioral control systems, as the fixation of beliefs in a distorted system of values with consequent predisposition to commit acts of ferocious and indiscriminate violence. It should be emphasized that such beliefs have a significant emotional connotation and this explains the relative ease with which they can spread, beyond rational beliefs, through the well-known phenomenon of ‘emotional contagion’" (Geminiani 2017, p. 35). Regarding this phenomenon, Borgialli indicates the role of the psychologist when trying to identify the elements that favor it and the possibilities of containing

it: "The psychologist also has the task of contributing to the understanding of the way in which Evil spreads, because Evil generates evil, just as Good generates good. In particular, Evil can be contagious like a viral disease susceptible to spreading in the population if we do not equip ourselves to limit it. Emotional contagion is a phenomenon based on the immediate and involuntary transmission of emotions, without any cognitive mediation. The most 'contagious' emotions are the most primitive and least elaborated: fear, anger and aggression. It is well known that aggressive behaviors can spread with disturbing rapidity in stadiums, demonstrations, crowds or in any circumstance in which the boundaries of the Self are weakened. The Web is also a very powerful vector for the transmission of contagion" (Borgialli 2017, p.190).

4. Radicalization and deradicalization: conflict of rights?

Trying to understand the psychology of the convert who has undertaken a path of subversive radicalization is important in order to hypothesize an adequate methodology for the prevention and contrast of the phenomenon.

Interesting, in this regard, is the contribution of Pezzullo (2017). The author argues that it is important to avoid facing terrorism in a simplistic way and to advance absolute dichotomous discourses that contribute to ideological polarization. It is important, on the contrary, to propose "whenever possible more nuanced interpretations of socio-cultural phenomena, attention to social complexities, concerns for issues of marginalization and economic and social justice, more integrative models, of dialogue, of collaboration between different realities (ethnic groups, territorial contexts, political and ideological schemes)". Furthermore, "in prevention at the microsocial level (schools, families, associations), attention can be paid to the progressive changes in attitude of individuals or groups, which lead to 'separating' and 'closing one's mental world' in a simplistic, splitting narrative, in which all the good is on one side and all the bad on the other, and in which the person increasingly attributes to him/herself a role or active responsibility in the affirmation of the 'only' value system that 'must' be pursued. The breaking of previous family or friendship ties, combined with the loss of interpretative nuances and a sense of 'mission to accomplish' can be warning signals to be taken into due account." In this context, social psychology can help to understand terrorism, which is a phenomenon that is "deeply psychosocial in its aims, methods and paths of construction" (Pezzullo 2017, pp. 80-81).

The problem of radicalization and deradicalization strategies are inevitably connected with the right to self-determination and the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Professor Sabrina Martucci, coordinator of the Master's Degree titled *Terrorism, prevention of subversive radicalization, security and cybersecurity. Policies for interreligious and intercultural integration and deradicalization* at the University of Bari, underlines the importance of an approach useful for identifying vulnerable subjects and promoting their "disengagement from involvement in active militancy and violent ideology. This approach involves the possibility of starting anti-radicalization interventions on subjects at risk, or deradicalization paths for those who are already radicalized and have developed a certain level of adherence to the jihadist cause" (Martucci 2018, p. 3). According to Martucci, "The radicalized person, while representing in the imagination of the common man 'the enemy', the terrorist, is also the bearer of fundamental rights that cannot be coerced, represented more specifically by those rights and freedoms (such as, precisely, the non-coercibility of conscience) that, in constitutional democracies, operate as a counter-limit, in emergency situations, to the needs of security" (Martucci 2018, p.10).

In this perspective, an interesting and innovative experiment has been started, thanks to the collaboration between the Court of Bari and the University of Aldo Moro, which the author defines as a "secular deradicalization action", an action program implemented following specific guidelines. The

path starts from the premise that one of the causes of radicalization is "the perverse use of religion and not religion as such", as established by the Resolution of the European Parliament of 25 November 2015 (2015/2063 (INI). Through a dialogic interaction with the radicalized subject, his/her disengagement from violent ideology and his/her disengagement from active militancy is encouraged starting from "overcoming the distinction between us (Western values) and them (the "Islamists"); from the acceptance of the idea that the West is not at war with Islam and that fundamental rights are universally shared and concern tolerance, cultural and religious debate, peace, democratic control over the internal security policies of the Union" (Martucci 2018, p. 13).

5. The position of authoritative institutions on freedom of religion and belief and security

In the face of some cases of violence linked to religious and spiritual groups of various origins and the most recent terrorist attacks that occurred in West, international institutions have intervened to provide useful indications and recommendations to address this type of occurrence, which endangers the safety of citizens. In this section, only three important pronouncements that address the problem starting from different contexts will be considered.

a) Recommendation of the Council of Europe on sects (1412/1999)

In the years immediately preceding the approval of Recommendation no. 1412, some criminal episodes had occurred within organizations with sectarian characteristics. These episodes had raised concerns among citizens and required the intervention of the Council of Europe. After careful analysis of the incidents that occurred, listening to victims' associations, scholars in the sector and the religious and spiritual communities themselves, the Council of Europe issued a Recommendation to all member states in which, without minimising what happened in some States, in a balanced manner and faithful to international law on the defence of freedom of religion, belief and conscience, free association and the freedom of parents to educate their children religiously, it indicated ten actions that the States should undertake.

In addition to the request to strengthen the prevention of the phenomenon by promptly identifying the presence of groups that carry out illegal activities, abusing their members, and the duty of institutions to support the victims, in the Recommendation the Council of Europe also asked member states to "not use the word 'sect' because it is discriminatory", to "have reliable information on these groups that does not come exclusively from the sects themselves or from associations founded to defend the victims of sects", "the use of normal criminal and civil law procedures against illegal practices carried out in the name of groups of a religious, esoteric or spiritual nature", "encourage an approach to new religious groups that promotes understanding, tolerance, dialogue and conflict resolution", to "take firm measures against any action that is discriminatory or marginalizes minority groups" (Council of Europe, Recommendation No. 1412/1999).

b) Council of the European Union (EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief) (2013)

The Guidelines approved by the Council of the EU and also signed by Italy, state that Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a universal human right, protected by Article 18 of the International

Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). With this document, Europe commits to disseminate and accept these principles in its policies and establishes standards for foreign relations. The Guidelines promote freedom of religion or belief by trying to prevent violations and address situations in which these violations occur. They provide the EU with adequate indications to act and take measures against those nations that violate freedom of religion and belief. The Guidelines highlight how, from the point of view of international law, FoRB has two components:

- the freedom to have or not to have or adopt a religion or belief (which includes the right to change it) based on personal choice;
- the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, individually or in community with others, in public or in private, in worship, observance of rites, practices and teaching.

The Council of the European Union reiterates that "freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief applies equally to all persons. It is a fundamental freedom that encompasses all religions or beliefs, including those that have not been traditionally practiced in a given country, the beliefs of persons belonging to religious minorities, as well as non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. The freedom also includes the right to adopt, change or abandon one's religion or belief, exercising one's free will".

In Europe, freedom of religion or belief is in particular protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. A very important concept that emerges clearly from the document is that, while the free exercise of freedom of religion or belief contributes directly to democracy, development, peace and stability, violations of FoRB can exacerbate intolerance and often constitute the first signs of violence and conflict. Violations can be committed by both States and other agencies and groups and occur in many places, creating suffering everywhere, including in Europe.

c) OSCE Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security (2019)

The need to ensure the security of citizens has led some states to adopt measures and enact laws that violate the fundamental principles underlying the right to freedom of religion or belief. The key concept of this document is that of "integrated security": security is to be understood as comprehensive, cooperative, equitable, indivisible and based on human rights. The three complementary dimensions (political-military, economic and environmental, and human) of the OSCE's (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) comprehensive approach to security are considered to be of equal importance (OSCE 2019, pp. 9-11). Furthermore, freedom of religion or belief and security are complementary and interdependent rights and one cannot be promoted by constraining the other.

The document addresses some controversial concepts, including extremism, proselytism, and restrictive measures.

- Extremism

Although the OSCE has not provided a definition of violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, "radicalization leading to terrorism" has been described as "the dynamic process through which an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may possibly, but not necessarily, lead the individual to support, act in favor of, or engage in terrorism".

However, in some states, the term "extremism" is problematic in relation to the registration and deregistration of religious or faith communities. Indeed, the fear of "extremism" is often used by states to justify the need for strict control over the activities of individuals and religious or faith communities in the interests of security. The problem is that the term "extremism" is imprecise and lacks a generally

accepted definition, leaving it open to overly broad and vague interpretations and opening the door to arbitrary application of the law. "Extremism" is often confused with violence, although there is no empirical evidence to suggest a causal link or progression from "extremist" thinking to violent acts, or that "extremist" thinking underlies the intention to engage in violent behavior that justifies state intervention. The phenomenon of violent extremism must therefore be clearly distinguished from the concept of "extremism." Holding "extreme" views does not, in itself, constitute a security threat.

Furthermore, if measures to prevent and counter "extremism" focus on non-violent activities, there is a risk of human rights violations. International standards explicitly state that terms such as "extremism" should not be used to suppress legitimate manifestations of religion or belief, or to target individuals or religious or faith communities whose beliefs are different or deemed "unusual" (OSCE 2019, p. 32).

- Right to convert and to convert: non-coercive persuasion

The OSCE Guidelines clarify that the right to convert is absolute (not subject to legitimate limitations) as it is inherent to the internal freedom to have, not have and change one's religion or belief. Laws and provisions that limit conversion with measures such as having to be previously authorised by state officials clash with the absolute nature of the right to the freedom to adopt, leave or change one's religion or belief.

The Guidelines do not, however, establish a right to convert, which is generally referred to as "proselytism". This term is preferred to that of "non-coercive persuasion" when referring to communications or activities aimed at converting other people without using violence, intimidation, threats or other illegal forms of pressure. This definition is taken from a document of the United Nations General Assembly of 13 August 2012 in which the term "proselytism" is rejected because it is an indefinite term, with negative connotations.

A missionary is a person whose main activity consists in being a witness and in promoting a religion among people and communities who profess another religion or no religion, through teaching, prayer and other activities. The right includes the freedom to try to convince others of the truth of one's beliefs and their validity in order to improve one's existence. It is also necessary to understand that missionary activity, for many people, is a real religious obligation.

It is possible that the right to persuade others may be limited when dealing with vulnerable individuals, such as young people attending school or mentally disabled people, or when persuasion occurs between two people who have a different hierarchical position and one of the two is unable to decline the invitation of his/her superior. In any case, however, restrictions to this right by states must meet established criteria, be based on legal grounds, have legitimate purposes and be clearly defined, proportionate and implemented in a non-discriminatory manner. The state must provide certain and verifiable evidence that a given type of conversion has coercive characteristics (OSCE 2019, pp. 65-69).

- Restrictive measures

Concerns about organizations that advocate alternative doctrines may lead to restricting their activities in the name of security and social stability because they are "insulting to religious feelings" and incompatible with traditional values and social norms. As a result, these groups are subjected to unacceptable and illegal restrictions even if their activities are peaceful and are victims of negative stereotypes that arouse hostility and violence against them.

Restrictive measures established by states to protect the security of citizens must address criminal or illegal conduct, avoiding incriminating the faith or belief of these people, carefully defining the terms used in the legal field so as to avoid different interpretations and arbitrary applications. States

must not sanction communities for crimes committed by individuals or groups, and restrictive measures must be non-discriminatory, used as a last resort, and accompanied by guidance to minimize the potential for misuse or discretionary abuse by institutional authorities or administrators.

Freedom of religion or belief necessarily depends on exposure to new ideas and the ability to share and receive information. In light of the increasing opportunities for communication that exist today, with the changes in response and association that they evoke, states and other stakeholders should strive to promote security and social cohesion based on religious or belief pluralism. In discussing state responses to the "inevitable consequences of pluralism," the European Court of Human Rights has stated that "the role of authorities in such circumstances is not to remove the source of tension by eliminating pluralism, but to ensure that competing groups tolerate one another" (OSCE 2019, p. 68).

Conclusion

Events since September 11, 2001 have forced many scholars to ask fundamental questions about the individual and social reasons and processes that result in very serious acts of human evil, particularly that which is based, at least in part, on religious motivations. This type of evil manifests itself dramatically in the actions of kamikazes, but it also appears in less obvious forms in the acts carried out by indoctrinated and manipulated individuals within sectarian and violent groups, who advocate religious or non-religious ideologies.

Many disciplines deal with these phenomena, including the psychology of religion, which applies the methods and tools of psychology to religious behavior. One of the most qualified representatives in this sector, Prof. Mario Aletti, after the destruction of the Twin Towers, asked himself where the psychologists were on September 11th and the metaphorically significant answer was: they were "inside the towers" instead of outside:

"And yet...outside the towers there were two thirds of humanity, that is, psychic subjects, ignored by psychology. And not only in distant countries, of other cultures (and religions). In New York itself, on Christmas Day, thirty thousand houseless (read "tramps") lined up for a bowl of hot soup, testifying to their daily, systematic and ignored by scholars 'discomfort of civilization'. [...] Psychology has perhaps neglected to study the psyche of minorities, of those who live 'outside the towers', the psychology of the oppressed, the hungry, of those who, reduced to conditions of hard survival, have, for that very reason, a vision of life, an appreciation of life, their own and others', that is very different from that of the tenants and owners of the towers" (Aletti 2001).

Alongside this honest "mea culpa", typical of those who are careful to see in - even the most horrendous - reality signs of hope and possible solutions, it would be desirable to have a similar awareness also on the part of those who deal with fighting terrorism and religious fanaticism in all its forms, small and large. An effective action against these phenomena linked in various ways to the religious behavior of individuals should not be limited to police operations that are obviously indispensable, but not sufficient.

A parallel action to this should include the involvement in the fight against terrorism also of qualified scholars who are able to stand with detachment in front of the phenomenon because repression must go hand in hand with prevention, which cannot be implemented without knowledge of the phenomenon and the reasons why it manifests. Psychologists of religion, scholars who are little present in the media but very active in the academic field, both nationally and internationally, can and must be called into question in this historical moment. The Psychology of Religion, in fact, deals with both the religious attitude in its "benevolent" forms and in its unfortunately deviant ones, where it is

important to be able to understand how those persuasion mechanisms that manage to transform "ordinary" people into operators of evil work (Aletti and Rossi 2004). There is more than ever a need for scientific studies in this sector to find the right answers to the questions that we all continue to ask ourselves, questions that are now very pressing because, today, none of us can say that we "feel safe".

The phenomenon of fanaticism and violent extremism also requires a collective awareness, supported by important international institutions, of the fact that the safety of citizens is not promoted at the expense of freedoms and human rights. Safeguarding human rights is an antidote to violence itself, together with the contrast of any discriminatory or hostile action towards people and groups, completely peaceful and respectful of the law, persecuted and discriminated against or targets of artfully orchestrated hate campaigns. Civil society, states and the media have a duty to work tirelessly to simultaneously promote freedom of religion or belief and security for all, as these are complementary, interdependent, mutually reinforcing goals that can and must be pursued together: "sustainable security is impossible without full respect for human rights, as these are essential prerequisites for the trust that must underpin the relationship between the state and the people it serves. Without such trust, it is difficult for the state to effectively discharge its responsibility to ensure security and to protect and maintain a democratic society" (OSCE 2019, pp. 7-8).

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