

# Religious delusion

An observational study of religious delusion in a population of 313 acute psychiatric inpatients

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## Summary

*Raja M, Azzoni A, Lubich L. Religious delusion. Schweiz Arch Neurol Psychiatr 2000;151:22-9.*

**Objective:** Little is known about the clinical features associated with religious delusion and how religious delusion may differ across various diagnostic groups. The empirical research on this topic is relatively scanty. The primary purpose of this study was to detect the demographic, sociocultural, and clinical features of patients with religious delusion.

**Method:** We studied 313 patients consecutively admitted to an emergency psychiatric ward and compared patients with and without religious delusion.

**Results:** Patients with religious delusion were older, had started their first neuroleptic treatment earlier, had suffered less acute psycho-social stressors, and had presented a worse global functioning during the last year than patients without religious delusion. Furthermore, they received higher SAPS, BPRS total and BPRS psychotic cluster scores and were treated with a higher mean number of different neuroleptics during current hospitalisation. Religious delusion was not related to any diagnostic group.

**Conclusions:** Our results suggest an alternative outlook on delusions that de-emphasises the importance of diagnosis and looks instead at delusions and other major symptom areas as psychopathological dimensions.

**Keywords:** emergency psychiatry; delusion; religious delusion; religion and psychology

## Introduction

Delusions are common and main symptoms in many neuropsychiatric disorders. Nevertheless, as Spitzer [1] notes, their nature is poorly understood, their aetiology is unknown, and their nosological status remains problematic. Furthermore, despite the frequency and the importance of delusions, a relatively small amount of research has been conducted in this field [2]. Questions about how delusions may differ across diagnostic groups are still unanswered.

Some forms of delusion are considered to be characteristic of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, however, no delusional content is specific of these illnesses. Traditionally, religious delusion, with or without hallucinations, has been associated with schizophrenia, affective psychoses, complex partial seizure disorder and drug-induced psychoses. Recent reports have associated religious delusion with epileptic postictal psychosis [3], psychoses characterised by self-inflicted injuries [4-6], psychoses induced by general medical illnesses [7, 8], and mystical-religious fervor [9].

Although religious delusion has regularly been reported throughout the history of neuropsychiatry, surprisingly, there is no systematic study of religious delusion in unselected populations of psychiatric patients. We conducted computerised searches of MEDLINE back to 1966, but we did not find empirical studies on this subject.

As our hospital is situated at the centre of Rome, near St. Peter's Basilica, we have the opportunity to visit an unusually large number of patients with religious delusion. Many of these patients are referred to our centre because they display bizarre, shameful, or dangerous behaviour associated with their psychotic symptoms nearby the Basilica. Visitors to St. Peter's Basilica or to the Vatican displaying an abnormal behaviour are interviewed by town police officers and then referred to our hospital if they are considered mentally ill. This prompted us to undertake the present study to detect the demographic, sociocultural, and clinical features of patients with religious delusion

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