

## Psyche—the Meeting of Mind and Soul: Current Psychoanalytic Views on the Mental Representation of God

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**The author presents an overview of two contemporary, related psychoanalytic perspectives on religious phenomena. Based on data from systematic interviews, Ana-Maria Rizzuto explores the way the human mind forms the idea of God as it evolves through the various stages of childhood and adult development. The object-representation of God is greatly influenced by the mental representations of mother, father, and other important adults in the child's life. Object relations theory and the writings of Winnicott play an important role in these concepts. William Meissner, a Jesuit priest as well as a psychoanalyst, addresses Freud's views of religious belief as an illusion, or when accepted with certainty as real, as a delusion. Instead, Meissner sees religious belief as a developmental process that resides in the mental realm of transitional phenomena where spirituality, creativity, appreciation of beauty, transcendental states, play, and the psychoanalytic process itself also take place. In psychoanalytic treatment, religious phenomena are not exempt from exploration and understanding, perhaps resulting in more mature development of object representations, ego functions, and the superego functions of conscience and ego ideal as well as more mature religious life. (*Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 2013;19:495–497)**

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Psychoanalysts are interested in all things having to do with human thought and mental function, including the psychic phenomena of religion. As a science, psychoanalysis would seem far removed from the intricate belief systems of the myriad religions that human cultures have created throughout their known history. Sciences are based on evidence, on systematic observation, recording, measurement, and experimental testing of tangible phenomena in nature and in human life experience. All findings are provisional and open to critique and revision based

on new evidence. In contrast, religion is based on mystical transcendent states, transmitted authority, myths about what is beyond human observation or knowledge, submission of the self, and sacrificial behavior—all of which are the foundation for complex rational systems seeking unconditional belief. Yet, as a powerful human phenomenon that often affects how people think, religion commands the attention of psychoanalysts.

Although he was a professed nonbeliever, Freud turned his attention to aspects of religion in several notable writings. Treatises such as *Totem and Taboo*,<sup>1</sup> *Civilization and its Discontents*,<sup>2</sup> and *Moses and Monotheism*<sup>3</sup> extended his psychological theories into the development of cultures and their religions. However, they had much more to do with anthropology than with the role of religion in the subjective life of the individual person. *The Future of an Illusion*<sup>4</sup> explored the nature of religious belief as an illusion that meets emotional needs for meaning and parental protection, but when firmly believed in qualifies to be called a delusion. Central to Freud's thinking is the idea that the growing child's idea of God is based on the idealized imago of the father drawn from experience of the father in very early life. Normatively, the libidinal investment of the father imago is eventually sublimated, and the father imago is repressed but transmuted into the broader concept of God. Freud, Jung, and Adler also believed that there was a genetically and/or culturally inherited sense of a primal father as divinity that originated with the earliest human cultures. The concept of the Devil may arise from the negative side of an ambivalently held parental imago that has been split into good and bad. Superego functions such as conscience and ego ideal later develop from an identification with and internalization of the father's morality and authority that is part of resolving the oedipal stage of development.

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# Psychotherapy

Non-belief, at least in males, is in Freud's view the culmination of maturation, an outgrowing of infantile patterns of thought.

After Freud, however, there was little development of psychoanalytic interest in the individual person's religious experience. Decades later, two Boston psychoanalysts revitalized psychoanalytic exploration of the phenomena of religion in mental life. In 1979, Ana-Maria Rizzuto, MD, published *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*,<sup>5</sup> which augmented ordinary psychoanalytic observations with findings from a structured, in-depth study of 20 people's religious ideas in the context of their life histories. Her book begins with a review of Freud's writings to which I'm indebted for much of the overview in the preceding paragraph. Going beyond Freud, she surveys the many new developments that have since occurred in psychoanalytic thought about object relations, the differentiation of the self-representation and the representation of others, and the vicissitudes of narcissism and self-esteem. All of these concepts have implications for the formation of a representation of God in the developing psyche.

Rizzuto counters the male-centered nature of Freud's thinking and his conclusions. One cannot ignore the powerful influence of the mother from the earliest moments of life, which has a commensurate role in the formation of a God-representation (and/or of a Devil-representation) through internalization of the parental imagos and their differentiation as good or bad. Siblings and other important influences such as teachers, clergy and religious educators, peers, and other role models play a part in modifying the effects of the earlier anlage as the internal representation of a God matures. Here is where the cultural portrayal of the deity also has an impact on the child's conscious idea of God—but the original imago remains deep in the archaic web of representations. The child encounters wildly varying views of God, Yahweh, or Allah as his or her religious education proceeds. Consider the vividly contrasting portrayals of God in the accounts of the deity in the Torah, the Christian Bible, and the Koran. As the God representation takes form throughout a child's development, its nature follows the trajectory of the child's formation of other object representations. These progressively become more structured and defined. Reliable differentiation of self and other takes place under normal circumstances. Splitting of object representations into good and bad part-objects, includ-

ing that of the father/God, is gradually resolved into a unified, albeit perhaps ambivalent, representation.

The second writer who explored the phenomena of religion in mental life and psychoanalysis was William Meissner, SJ, MD. Both a Jesuit priest and a psychoanalyst, he has understandably focused much of his writing on the presence of religion in the subjective mental life.<sup>6</sup> Both he and Rizzuto explored the nature of religious belief and spirituality and their relation to the internal representation of the outer world. As primitive religions evolved, the god-representation became more intellectual, abstract, and detached from the physical world, and a plurality of gods gave way to a single deity in a monotheistic religion. Some religions, such as Islam and some Protestant denominations, abjure any kind of symbolic physical representation of their god—no portraits, no statues, no icons. How can belief in the existence of a God one cannot detect with the senses in the outside world be reconciled with the ego function of reality testing? There is no way to find tangible physical evidence of the existence of God. Even what appears to be a supernatural event requires human interpretation to be called a miracle.

Meissner and Rizzuto called upon Winnicott's concept of "transitional space"<sup>7,8</sup> to locate the god-representation and belief—a realm of subjective experience that lies between complete inability to differentiate between self and the outside world, on the one hand, and experiencing life entirely through the verifiable representations of the outside world we call reality on the other. The concept bears some relationship to the young child's "transitional object" that is at once mother and not-mother. In the realm of "transitional space" lie fantasy, daydreaming, play, illusion, imagination, creativity, appreciation of beauty, transcendental states, spiritual revelation and belief—as well as free association, reverie, free expression, and the transference and counter-transference of psychoanalysis. How empty life would be without the world of make-believe!

There is still the problem of the believer's conviction that religious belief is a reliable representation of objective reality and has the same validity as any other representation of reality. As this point, Freud might say that it has passed from being an illusion to being a delusion! In contrast, Meissner might give it the status of received truth. In many cultures, religious belief is presented to the child from very early on, as in the Nativity stories told to infants at

Christmas-time and thereafter reinforced through religious education, particular dress or dietary customs, and ceremonial events such as baptism, *bas* or *bat mitzvah*, or confirmation. The parents, other significant adults, and older children present it and the child internalizes it as the truth. For some, an intense religious experience, however stimulated, overwhelms the psyche with a powerful affect and sense of awe that fortify belief in this state of perception as an ultimate truth. The god-representation is thus continuously shaped and molded throughout development and on into adult life. With it may come the sense of ultimate truth.

However, the development of the god-representation is so intertwined with the child's internal representations of mother, father, siblings, and other important people that it is prone to all the stresses, distortions, and internal conflicts that may occur as a child grows up. An overly strict or punitive religious upbringing may be internalized into a harsh and punitive superego. Emotional, physical, or sexual abuse by a parent or a religious leader may contribute to a very confused god-representation. These are just two random examples; the possibilities for distortion are endless. Thus religious issues are likely to be intermixed with many of the problems that our patients bring to psychotherapy. Meissner elaborates a "developmental typology or schema based on psychoanalytic parameters within which the full range of religious behavior and experience may be conceptualized" (p. 126).<sup>6</sup> He proposes it as a basis for future investigation.

In polite society, one is reluctant to probe another person's religious beliefs and practices. We respect what is so personal and so highly valued in the other's life. However, Freud repeatedly pointed out that if a certain church in a city were designated as being off limits to the police so that criminals could not be arrested there, every thief in town would be found in the church. In psychoanalytic therapy, nothing can be untouchable. We follow the patient's associations wherever they lead, and we work with the patient's defense mechanisms whenever something is pointedly avoided. Why it is avoided may be more revealing than the actual thing that emerges.

A recent contribution by Meissner<sup>9</sup> poignantly describes how a psychoanalyst may work with religious issues, using a vivid case example of a deeply troubled priest. The intent of psychoanalytic work is to facilitate the analysand's understanding and mas-

tery of whatever he or she brings to the table or discovers in the process, whether it involves religious belief or not. When religious issues are present, the outcome may be not the elimination of religious belief—or disbelief—but rather a further development to a more mature and insightful level of object representations, ego functions, and the superego functions of conscience and ego ideal. As stated by Meissner, "The basic difference lies between the condemnation and rejection of religion by Freud, and his implication that religion should be analyzed away like any other neurotic symptom, on one hand, and on the other Winnicott's more accepting view of religion as one of the basic areas for human creativity and ultimate self-preservation. For Winnicott, religion was not to be done away with as a mere neurosis, but rather once cleansed of its neurotic conflicts and compromises, it could serve important and basic human needs" (p. 34).<sup>9</sup>

This brief overview and my efforts to illustrate what I describe cannot do justice to the wealth of scholarship and inquiry that go into these writings by Meissner and Rizzuto, nor those of Sigmund Freud. I hope that it will spark the interest of some readers to explore them further.

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