

# The Future of Religion and Illusion: Psychoanalytic Trends

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## Abstract

In recent years post-Freudian psychoanalysis has shifted its focus of interest from the origins of religion as a cultural phenomenon to a concentration on personal religion in the case-history of the individual. This change becomes evident when one analyzes the most recent contributions from psychoanalysts of different schools. The idea that psychoanalysis of religion can be fruitful only when it refers to a personal developmental path has gained increasing acceptance. The first benefit of this change is the possibility it allows for circumventing all arguments about the truth value of religious beliefs. To achieve this aim, many authors adopt the notion of the “illusory transitional phenomenon” introduced by Donald W. Winnicott. While the importance of this concept is pointed out here, some problems that it entails are analyzed. Another recent trend involves the interaction of psychoanalysis with the neurosciences, cultural psychology, and attachment theory. Examples are presented and critically appraised as to their promise for understanding religiosity in individuals.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay echoes both the title of Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and psychoanalyst and Pastor Oskar Pfister’s polemical answer in his essay *The illusion of a Future* (1928). The idea of illusion grew up in the friendly discussion between the pair, and this had a considerable impact on psychoanalytic tradition (see Kepler Wondracek, 2003). This also started an important debate about the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. As my title suggests, the question about the general concept of illusion and its application to religion (see Aletti, 2004; Eigen, 1981; Jones, J. W., 1992; 1997a, 1997b; Lerner, 1992, Meissner, 1984; Wulff, 1997) is still open to future investigation (see Aletti, 2005; Aletti & De Nardi, 2002; Aletti & Rossi, 2001). Predicting the future course of this debate is impossible. However, reflecting on the existing situation, could allow us to identify some trends in action and to speculate on how the debate may develop. Of course by moving from an observation of current facts to a desirable or projected future, one is operating with subjective preferences. Thus, this article also reflects my personal orientation, which comes both from my thirty-year clinical practice with patients (most of them believers and some even religious professionals) and from my critical review of this topic in the literature of recent years. The relationships among religion, depth psychology and psychoanalysis, in particular, form an important part of the literature on the psychology of religion, even if, nowadays, controversies abound.

On the one hand, some researchers believe they need a deeper and “true” understanding of religion, yet on the other hand results from these studies are often rejected because they have emerged not from empirical research but from individual case histories. However, so-called “psychoanalysis of religion” (I will shortly explain my criticism of this expression) has undergone several important evolutions in recent years, such as better integration with the development of psychoanalytic models, as well as a clearer delineation of religion as a personal experience.

Ample and important reviews argue over the current relationship between psychoanalysis and religion (Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Heimbrock, 1991; Wulff, 1997). In particular, the last and critical essay, by Corveleyn & Luyten (2005) presents an up-to-date overview of several psychoanalytic approaches to religion, topics recurrent in the literature, and methodological problems linked with

the necessity of an empirical verification of the theories. My aim here is not to present another similar overview, but rather to propose new perspectives which can involve other topics and new methodologies. In pursuing this goal I will discuss:

- a. new models of psychodynamic psychology. In particular I will underline how influential the shift of perspective from drive to relation has been during the “post-Freudian era” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), and
- b. the proper object of the psychology of religion, and the limits and tasks of the psychological and psychoanalytical investigation of religion/spirituality.

Some psychological sub-disciplines have influenced the evolution of both psychoanalysis and psychology of religion. In particular neuropsychology (see Aletti, 2006), cultural psychology (see Belzen, 2006), evolutionary psychology and attachment theory (Kirkpatrick, 2005a) have played an important role as well as so-called postmodernist epistemological perspectives (Blumenberg, 1974; Lyotard, 1979).

These theoretical concerns help to indicate the individual’s personal religion as the proper object of the psychology of religion, thereby overcoming the question about the truth of ontological assertions in religion. I would like to point out, however, that psychoanalytic research on religion is possible only within the individual process of analytic treatment, not outside it (Aletti, 1998a, 1998b; Fossi, 1990). As my personal contribution, then, I will try to demonstrate how Winnicott’s model of illusory transitional phenomena, applied to an individual’s religion, can adequately respond to these new demands and perspectives (Aletti, 2007).

## **1. FROM RELIGION AS A GENERAL CULTURAL PHENOMENON TO A PERSONAL ONE**

In the last few decades, the progressive shift within clinical activities and psychoanalytic theories from a drive perspective to a relational perspective (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983) has provided new opportunities for understanding individual attitudes toward cultural and religious experiences.

The literature about this subject is considerable (for an open and wide overview of different post-freudian models cf. Aletti & De Nardi, 2002; Black, 2006; Beit-Hallahmi, 1996; Finn & Gartner, 1992; Heimbrock, 1991; Jacobs & Capps, 1997; Wulff, 1997, pp. 258-471).

Religion, with its relational valence, has re-awakened the interest of psychologists and psychoanalysts. Their focus is now on personal religiousness and not on religion as a general cultural phenomenon (cf. Aletti, Fagnani & Rossi, 2006; Belzen, 2003, 2006).

At the same time, discussions about the complex human phenomenon of religion and its origins, causes and evolutionary goals become less relevant, as do inquiries concerning the psychological “explanation” of religion. Such reductionist intentions, which pervaded the psychology of religion, were encountered even in psychoanalytic interpretation for a long time, as we can see in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). This reductionism was the cause of a long period of sterile controversies between some scholars of religion and some psychoanalysts. Similar controversies sometimes shifted the focus of discussion to the validity of psychoanalysis as an instrument of psychological enquiry.

The split object of psychoanalytic investigation on religion (namely as a general-cultural phenomenon or a personal-individual experience) in some sense reflects the distinction between “applied” psychoanalysis versus “pure” psychoanalysis and related theoretical questions (Aletti, 1995). Many issues exist with respect to the “applied” form. Its theoretical justification is the presumption of an analogy between individual psychical processes and the psychical functioning of groups, society and cultural phenomena (cf. Freud, 1921: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*). This last essay, with which even Freud himself was not really satisfied, tried to formulate in

theoretical terms an idea that had already found expression earlier. Consider *Imago* (1912), whose subtitle proclaims it a “Journal for the Application of Psychoanalysis to the Humanities.” This is the reason why Freud’s first essay on *Imago* (which will become the first of four essays in *Totem and Taboo*), is based on another analogy: “Some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics.” It is known from Freud’s correspondence that he was unhappy about this work, and uncertain of its contents (see Jones, E., 1955, chapter 14; Conci & Marchioro, 1995). In the introduction he admits to some confusion about the analogical method adopted in the essays: “They represent a first attempt on my part at applying the point of view and the findings of psychoanalysis to some unsolved problems of social psychology [*Völkerpsychologie*] [...] I am fully conscious of the deficiencies of these studies [...] An attempt is made in this volume to deduce the original meaning of totemism from the vestiges remaining of it in childhood – from the hints of which emerge in the course of the growth of our own children” (Freud, 1913, pp xiii-xiv).

Nowadays, most psychoanalysts tend to dissociate themselves from such an analogy (namely that society and culture reproduce phases and processes observable in the psychoanalysis of an individual, cf. Badcock, 1980). Instead, the trend is to emphasize that authentic psychoanalytic knowledge is founded solely on the relationship between analyst and patient inside a definite setting, as was subsequently systematized in models and theories. These have only heuristic value, measurable in the capacity to understand further psychic facts in other treatments. By the same token, numerous essays on the psychology of religion cannot be considered psychoanalytic works because they only provide an exegesis of Freud’s opinion on religion (something like: “what he really meant is...”) on its consistency and acceptability from historical, philosophical, moral and theological perspectives. Least psychoanalytic are those polemical works which claim to find causes and motivations for Freud’s polemic against religion in his personal life or perhaps in his neurosis as, for example, Meissner (1984) and Zilboorg (1958, 1962) did. Sometimes such works contrast with what is evoked by the word “psychoanalysis” in contemporary culture. In fact for many decades the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion was cluttered with polemics between representatives of psychoanalysis and the churches (with reductionist claims from one and pseudo-apologetic demands from the other).

Likewise, the essays on the influence of Judaism in Freud’s personal life (Krüll, 1986), in his cultural training (Gay, 1987; Magnani, 1996), and finally on his theoretical formulations (Bakan, 1958; Klein, 1985; Robert, 1974; Yerushalmi, 1991) should not be considered psychoanalytic works. The same could be applied even to the influences of Christianity (as in the famous case of Freud’s Catholic nanny, cf. Vitz, 1988; see also Zilboorg, 1958, 1962), the Enlightenment and positivism (Magnani, 1996) on Freud’s scientific views and his approach to the psyche.

While all such works are discourses on psychoanalysis and its founder, they are not truly psychoanalytic essays. In fact, they were produced by philosophers, theologians, sociologists and historians, or by psychoanalysts outside their clinical activity.

## **2. FROM THE TRUTH OF RELIGION TO THE TRUTH OF THE SUBJECT**

Nowadays, the debate tends to steer clear both of any general questions on the origin, validity, and truth (Aletti, 2000; Black, 1993; Blass, 2004) of religions and of general polemics about psychoanalysis (scientific, heuristic and therapeutic values, cultural matrices). Psychoanalytic observation is limited to real psychoanalytic discourses. Therefore, the religious patient’s speech is treated as other patient’s speech, without blind spots or privileges (Aletti, 2003a; Rizzuto, 2001a, 2002; Shafranske, 2002).

It seems very important to focus the discourse on individuals, their representations of God, and their relationships with divinity. Psychoanalysis does not know another God than that of psychic

reality. Thus, to think that as analysts we are able to know nothing about God (the God of actual reality, cf. Meissner, 2001) would rest on the presumed existence of an epistemological area unrelated to psychoanalysis. This question cropped up already in the correspondence between Freud and Pastor Oskar Pfister (Freud & Pfister, 1909-1939). Generally speaking, if analysts belong to both fields (i.e. to both a theological field and psychoanalytical field), this might not allow them to cross into the area of psychoanalytic “neutrality”. If it is true that psychoanalysts recognize the patient’s choices and thus his attitude toward religion (belief or unbelief) with a ‘benevolent neutrality’ (as Freud said; see also Milanese & Aletti, 1973), this is possible because the analysis deals with psychic objects, not real objects. The same applies when reference is made to the believer’s God (not God but a mental representation of God). It should be observed that in this case, Karl Barth’s distinction between “religion” as a human construction investigable by human sciences on the one hand and “faith,” which has divine origins, on the other, becomes meaningless: since faith is part of human experience, it can become an object of psychological research. A patient’s possible conviction about a direct intervention of God in his psyche will be an object of analysis as much as any other subjective certainty. If, on the other hand, psychoanalysts suppose that God intervenes in their interpretations, then they have not properly grasped psychoanalytic epistemology and technique.

In the last few decades, the focus of observation on religion has moved away from considering its truth content (as if that could be verifiable) or conceiving of it as sublimation or repression of drives, and toward regarding it as a relational modality (Kernberg, 2000). This shift opened up a path to considering religion as a system of internal objects, which have the function of “containing” the feelings, thoughts and fantasies arising in individuals who practice a religion. Like internal objects in psychoanalysis, religious objects do not have an external and material existence; rather they have a heuristic function (Black, 1993). Even if the extrapolative use, by this author, of the concept of internal object could be questionable, it has brought religious experience back into the psychoanalytic arena. When psychoanalysis refers to religiosity, it is interested not in religion *per se*, but only in the psychic functioning (Aletti, 2002, 2004; Aletti & Ciotti, 2001).

The attention aroused both by Vergote’s *Psychologie religieuse* (1966) and *Dette et désir* (1978) and by Leavy’s *In the Image of God* (1988) is reflected in the official journals of international psychoanalytic institutions (Wallace, 1991). Reviews of these works contributed to religious experience being brought back into psychoanalysis. It was in fact improperly subtracted during the period of polemic debate among supporters of different ideologies (both “religious” and “psychoanalytic”). Then the broad discussion that arose following publication of Rizzuto’s works (1979, 1996, 1998a, 1998b) was decisive (Beit-Hallahmi, 1995, 1996; Finn & Gartner, 1992; Jacobs & Capps, 1997, McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1984, 1987). Moreover, the question “*Does God Help?*” in clinical activity has been raised again in an articulate and extensive book edited by Akhtar and Parens (2001) in which they conduct an extremely rigorous and frank debate on personal religion and relationship with God during psychoanalytic treatment. The theme of religion and spirituality in analysis is raised by Rizzuto (1979, 1993, 1996, 2001a) and Shafranske (1996) with many examples of clinical cases, some of which involve religious professionals (Rizzuto, 2004a). Recently an international conference took place in Italy for the purpose of finding new clinical-hermeneutic perspectives; it was attended by psychoanalysts of different schools, ranging from a classic Freudian perspective of drive psychology and its recent Lacanian evolutions to ego psychology, object relations theory and self psychology (Aletti & De Nardi, 2002).

Instead of presenting a complete outline of all the approaches that depth psychology can take to religion I will employ the approach toward religion of some psychoanalytical models; they correspond to the purpose of this article, since they delineate new perspectives which bring the mental functioning of religion back into the general discussion of psychical processes.

I would like to add by way of preface that the variety of models proposed from psychoanalysis should not cause surprise because they are only *psychological models*. As such, they do not pretend to give an exhaustive explanation of the psyche; they claim neither to be true nor to reflect reality. They have only some heuristic or pragmatic-interpretative ambition to make it easier to understand some mental aspects of the extremely complex phenomenon of belief (or unbelief) which is, as psychoanalysis teaches, certainly over-determined: “The religious significant – symbols, metaphors, the words God or creator, and so on – are themselves multidimensional, and the inner desires, feelings, and representations of the subject are over-defined” (Vergote, 1993, p. 85). In this essay I have decided to present a few paradigms and illustrate only one (Winnicott’s transitional illusory phenomenon) for two practical reasons: a) that model seems to exemplify the whole discussion; and b) it allows a presentation sufficiently ample and therefore understandable even for non-psychoanalyst readers<sup>1</sup>.

### **Between “knowing” and “believing”. The model of illusion**

One of the most prolific genres of post-Freudian psychoanalysis on religion might perhaps be linked to Freud’s work *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). According to Freud, that *illusion* was religion and its future would be to vanish from human history with the progressive advance of science.

Illusion is a belief founded on wishes rather than on reason and empirical verification. Thus, it is impossible to give an opinion of its reality value: illusions cannot be proved and also cannot be refuted and thus, they are not false or in contradiction to reality. According to Freud, illusion is not a delusion. With regard to religious illusion, psychoanalysis is “an impartial instrument [...] If the application of the psycho-analytic method makes it possible to find a new argument against the truth of religion, *tant pis* for religion; but defenders of religion will be by the same right make use of psycho-analysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines” (Freud, 1927, pp. 36-37). Freud’s preference is certainly a scientific vision of the world; psychoanalytic knowledge would place itself on the scientific side, against illusions “derived from human wishes” (p. 31). But post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking takes over Freud’s distinction between “knowing” and “believing,” consequently between “scientific” and “religious” visions of the world.

Firstly, Pastor Oskar Pfister (1928) argued that each scientific construction is necessarily supported by a “desiring dimension” of “thinking,” that is to say, by an illusion in the Freudian sense. A bit later, Lou Andreas Salomé (1931) claimed that illusions are original and not reducible to explanations in rational language.

Lou Andreas Salomé fundamentally rethinks the concept of illusion, which will prove useful in understanding some basic human experiences, in particular of an aesthetic, erotic and religious kind (cf. Aletti, 2002, Aletti, Fagnani, & Colombo, 1998).

With these two psychoanalysts a real change of perspective occurred. Rather than seeing an opposition between “knowing” and “believing,” they came to view the later an aspect of human mental life: in the relationship between human beings and the world the new perspective

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<sup>1</sup> I would like mention only one other prolific approach: that of the Ego Psychology school. Freud’s drive model (an intrapsychic model based on drives and unconscious fantasies and their conflicts and vicissitudes) was integrated with an interpsychic and cultural model by Ego psychology. Erik Erikson was the most representative of this approach, even concerning religion. Erikson’s epigenetic paradigm of psycho-social identity development (which integrates Freud’s observations about psycho-sexual development) was applied to read the most important religious leaders’ life like Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Gandhi (Erikson, 1969); it offers useful perspectives on individual religious development, as Hetty Zock (1990) underlined and Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) verified in her research. This paradigm emphasizes the dynamicity of religious development across the entire life cycle and its interlink with personal identity development (Erikson 1950, 1959), pointing out the ambivalent outcomes of religious attitude; this refers to an individual observation of religious development

emphasizes the subjectivity, creativity and fantasy complementary with a scientific worldview. This trend found many expressions in contemporary British psychoanalysis, in particular with Bion's "faith" concept. According to him it is through "acts of faith" that an analyst can "see" and "feel" some phenomena about which he is sure, even if he cannot express them by means of current formulations (cf. Neri, 2005).

Winnicott argues that such "believing", as a dialectic moment of "knowing" becomes a constructive element of a wider concept of *illusion*, as a bridge between inner and outer world (cf. Eigen, 1981; Turner, 2002). I will focus on this model because it seems heuristically rich and able to provide an answer to many epistemological, methodological and technical questions concerning the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion.

### **The Winnicottian perspective: Religion as an "illusory transitional phenomenon"**

In Winnicott's works, the concept of illusion becomes central. Here, object relations theory focused on a dual and bipersonal context. He describes the vicissitudes of "primary emotional development" in terms of processes which, when taken together, may be summarized as a developing capacity to distinguish between the self and the external world, and to elaborate a rudimentary image of the self, of reality, and of the relations between them.

In this context of structural and relational complexity, the concept of illusion highlights the tension of the subject with regard to an object which is given to him: "The baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object" (1969/1971, p. 89). Reality and illusion are not in contradiction. Rather, illusion is the germinative and inchoate context in which internal and external reality is built.

The transitional experience is a fundamental step in an individual's process of growth; it refers to "an intermediate area of experiencing," i.e. "the use made of objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality" (1953/1971, p. 2). Winnicott analyzes the complex relations between what is perceived as subjective and what is perceived as objective. This happens in adulthood as well as childhood.

"No human being is free from strain of relating inner and outer reality [...] the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience [...] which is not challenged [...] This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play of the small child who is 'lost' in play" (1953/1971, p. 13). According to Winnicott, culture and with it, art, religion, and science, follow the goal of uniting what is subjective (internal) and what is objective (external) and in some way perform the function of a transitional phenomenon.

After Winnicott, many researchers applied the concept of the transitional phenomenon to religion with many stimuli, but this also presented some problems. A good example is Paul W. Pruyser's work in which, beginning from the etymological meaning of illusion as *in-ludere* (to play) he sees the "illusionistic world" interposed between the "realistic world" and the "autistic world," as a "world of play of the creative imagination in which feelings are not antagonistic to thinking" (1977, p. 334). In this outline, Pruyser considers art, religion and even science as functionally equivalent to transitional phenomena in the individual's mental economy. But with Pruyser, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Winnicott's model, there begins a possible misunderstanding that can be found in successive authors; this is to consider the transitional phenomenon as a process which happens at a conscious level, joining subjectivity to objectivity (often understood, respectively, as individual and social), such that the innovative model of Winnicott, which joins the inner to the outer world, risks being reduced to an issue of social psychology.

The ambiguity in considering the mediation between two elements as an example of the “transitional phenomenon” becomes clear among those authors who talk about concepts and ideas of a “transitional” God<sup>2</sup>.

Ana-Maria Rizzuto’s well-known work is more rigorously psychoanalytic and closely linked to clinical practise than that of many others authors who fellow the Winnicottian model. She considers the representation of God to be an illusory transitional object (in Winnicott’s terms). She brings back the representation of God to the dialectic between representations of the self and those of primary objects, and shows their formation, transformation and utilization during the life-cycle (Rizzuto, 1979, 1998b, 2001b).

She stresses vigorously that object representations and the representation of the self are composite memory processes, mainly unconscious and pre-conscious, which interact with each other. They originate from the bio-psychic adaptation to the environment. The representation recalls, with an ego organization, memories of each level: beginning with visceral, sensorimotor, perceptual, iconic, and later, also conceptual memories. During psychoanalytic treatment, the representation of God may in some cases reveal itself in a peculiar manner, even with primary dynamic processes which contributed to forming the patient’s most recent representation.

Rizzuto supports her theoretical formulations with examples from many clinical cases showing how, during treatment, relations and representations change as a consequence of modifications in object relations and in transference (Rizzuto, 1979, 1992, 2001a). This is because – according to Rizzuto – “the analyst is a transference and real object, occupying *locus parentis* (a position that facilitates the revival of intense emotions bestowed by the analysand upon the divine representations)” (Rizzuto, 2001a, p. 26).

In addition, Rizzuto emphasizes the indispensability of believing in a general sense (not religious), on both a conscious and an unconscious level, for a normal working of the mind (Rizzuto, 2002, pp. 435-436; 1996-1997). As a psychoanalyst, she is more interested in human mental functioning than in the content of beliefs; Rizzuto (2006) knows that this believing function is necessary to religious faith but is not sufficient to structure it in the subject’s mind. This leads us to a discussion about the specifics of psychoanalytic inquiry into personal religiosity.

### **From believing to religious faith. Psychodynamic processes**

Some authors with an interest in psychoanalytic theory supported the argument of continuity between the human experience of trust and religious faith. For example McDargh (1983, 1993) argued that, without any continuity solution, faith in God originates from the basic trust structured in early infant relationships with parents; he seems to confuse the search for a metaphysical transcendent reality with the need for self-transcendence of one’s own limits that is present in every interpersonal relationship (McDargh, 2001).

I think we must be careful: the terminology could induce some misunderstanding of this topic. In fact, many psychoanalysts consider some experiences such as “basic trust” (Erikson, 1950) ,“faith” (Bion, 1970, 1992), or a “secure base” (Bowlby, 1969, 1988) fundamental for mental orthogenesis. There is no doubt that relational psychoanalysis sees “faith” as a psychical phenomenon absolutely central to personality development (see Jones, J. W., 1997b; Rizzuto, 1996-1997, 2002; and also the

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<sup>2</sup> A concept cannot be “transitional”, because it can not be a cathected object. By the same token, a fetishistic use of the religious object refers to a drive investment which twists the transitional use. The erroneous reduction of the transitional model to a sort of bridge between individuality and collectivity appears clear in authors who study - occasionally following a confused “psychotheological” approach (McDargh, 1993) – the idea of God transmitted by ecclesiastical institutions or the assimilation of theological doctrine about the efficacy of Grace on real human life (Meissner, 1987, 1994). In particular the real efficacy of God in psychical life during psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Meissner, 2001), may fall outside the remit of psychology as an empirical science. Sometimes this is based on psychoanalytic theoretical misunderstanding and technical psychoanalytic errors (Thomson, 2001).

work of the theologian Zock, 1999). Winnicott's psychology in particular is a "deep phenomenology of faith" (Eigen, 1981, p. 413; cf. even Lerner, 1992).

We should remember, however, that what really matters in Winnicott's view of individual development is "believing in" something ("in anything at all", Winnicott, 1968, p. 143). Believing itself is more important than the specific contents of the belief (which might—but need not—be of a religious nature). The relationship between basic trust and the faith of a believer must, therefore, be carefully considered. A basic belief can structure even a psychologically healthy atheism (see Aletti, 2002).

Other authors who, in the wake of Jacques Lacan, have intertwined psychoanalysis with other humanistic disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, phenomenology and the history of religions, also support the indispensability of believing for both personality development and the construction of cultural phenomena. In this way Julia Kristeva, beginning from a vision of psychoanalysis as a narrative story in a context of trust and love (Kristeva, 1984, 1985), opens a perspective to a "pre-religious" and secular "need to believe" that is both essential for each human person and fundamental for religious belief (Kristeva, 2006).

Even Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, another Lacanian psychoanalyst, recently addressed the topic of the similarities and dissimilarities between faith and psychoanalysis and discovers, within the need to believe, both "a source and drive genesis which is not necessarily expressed with faith in the divine." Rather, its outcomes are multiple and some can even be dangerous; this need can give rise to forms of blind certainty that may end with pathological delirium or religious fanaticism. This risk of increasing "belief" is not absolutely negative, but rather underlines the strong vitality of the unconscious "need to believe" which can also exteriorize itself in an enthusiastic scientific discovery, as occurred with Freud and other early analysts, during the initial construction of the psychoanalytic adventure (de Mijolla-Mellor, 2004).

These notes on the ambivalence of "faith" and on the connections between the development of personal identity and religious identity underline a need for some issues which psychoanalysis must still confront, in both clinical practice and theory. These revolve around the relation between the unconscious and the conscious: the representation of God and the concept of God; the formation and transformation of divine representation and the conscious adherence to faith; and finally, the need for basic trust and religious faith in a personal God (cf. Aletti, 2002, 2007). The expression "unconscious representation of God" could be problematic, not only from a nominalistic perspective. I think it is culture which offers the name of God within all religions. The name of God, culturally received ("found" in Winnicott's terms), meets the individual's unconscious object representations. In relation to these, according to principles of economy and ego syntonia/dystonia, an attitude toward religion is structured (Aletti & Ciotti, 2001). But I prefer to think of unconscious object relations not as pre-oriented by culture, but as informal "representational magma", and thus a-religious (Aletti, 2005, 2007).

Certainly, the real faith felt by religious believers is much more definite than an unconscious representation; it is irreducible to mental processes of individual believing, in particular in Christianity. Psychology does not study religion as such, but rather human beings and their relation to religion in their culture during the construction of identity. The attitude toward religion and the construction of religious identity are observed by psychology as functions of an individual's structure, processes, conflicts and their outcomes (Aletti, 2003a, 2003b. Belzen, 1997).

The psychological assessment of religious identity involves a double reference: both to processes of religious identity construction (beginning from object representations) and coherence with a cultural view of personal religion (Vergote, 1999a). It deals with a dialectic, continually changing, with no pre-oriented outcomes as a function of the multiplicity of individual and cultural elements. Certainly religion, in its concrete structure, is based on a mixture of a "need to believe" (which I



define as a-religious) and cultural religious givens (Belzen, 2003, 2006; for the incidence of Christian Catholic givens see Rizzuto, 2004a, 2004b).

These questions are elucidated very well by Antoine Vergote. His work is a psychoanalytic view of personal and incisive revisions within classical and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Vergote underlines the relationship between subject and his cultural, symbolic and linguistic environment (Vergote, 1974a), taking into consideration the heuristic value of psychoanalysis as a means of understanding the fundamental structures of human beings (Huber, Vergote, & Piron, 1964; see also the collection of texts by Vergote edited by Corveleyn & Hutsebaut, 1998). Thus, psychoanalytic inquiry seeks the significant “archaeological” structures upon which each symbolic organization, especially religion, is established. Psychoanalysis as archaeology of theology (Vergote, 1974b) extends to the possibility (although not the necessity) of faith. From this ambivalence derives a refusal to use psychoanalysis for any apologetic purposes or religious coping. Illuminating the intimate junction in healthy persons between the affective-libidinal body and the language system with its capacity of speech-acts, psychoanalysis manifests a structural analogy with religious belief. This explains both the possible (religious) pathologies and the possible psychologically positive effect of religion; it also justifies the rejection of any functionalistic therapeutic use of religion as a “coping procedure” (Vergote, 2002, p. 4). Vergote argues that human components sustain very well both faith (truth, trust and engagement) and mental health, but that the instrumental use of religion as a coping mechanism destroys the real truth of religion and its beneficial characteristics (Vergote, 2001a). He prefers not to use the Winnicottian term “illusion” and adopts it only for the specific phase of infant transitional experience: illusion creates a psychological *humus* in a person which can become the soil where love and adult experiences of art and religion grow (Vergote, 1993, 2001b). According to Vergote, the value of religion does not reside in its utility. As in all sciences, the goal of the psychology (of religion) is truth. It aims neither to lead toward God nor toward non-belief. It sheds light on mental aspects (conscious or unconscious to a greater or lesser degree) of both religious and anti-religious convictions. Through the same careful search for truth, psychology of religion is useful for believers and non-believers. For believers there is a certainty: inasmuch as psychology explains the human truth, it makes human beings more able to find the motivations behind their belief, making them more autonomous and aware (Vergote, 2005).

### **3. FROM AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COMPARISON TO RECOGNIZING THE SPECIFICITY OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH**

Psychoanalysis knows that its activity is linked to the cultural environment in which both patients and analysts are engaged and other psychological sub-disciplines are involved. My intention is to provide some examples of the current debate on psychoanalysis and religion in a highly condensed form. In the following paragraphs my concern is rather to express my personal view that these disciplines, although useful for scientific research, could never replace the work that is done in the psychoanalytical relationship between psychoanalyst and patient, “on the couch”

#### **Psychoanalysis and neurobiology**

The interaction between psychoanalysis and biological science has always been difficult. First of all they came from two “closed” and polemical scientific worlds. But even when exchanges occurred, different methodological views and conceptions about “knowledge” set limits on them (Greenfield & Lewis, 1965).

Nowadays, the search for correlates between psychoanalytic assumptions and neurophysiological phenomena is occurring predominantly outside the environment of psychoanalytic practitioners (cf.

Tramonti, 2003). The supporters of so-called “neuropsychanalysis” are very few; they include Mark Solms (cf. Kaplan-Solms & Solms, 2000; Solms & Turnbull, 2002, and Arnold H. Modell (1993).

Psychoanalysis, which recognises the complexity of the interaction network between body-brain-mind (see e.g. the “drive” concept), tends to safeguard, even in specific field of psychology of religion, the peculiarity of the psychoanalytic approach which focuses on the subject holistically, as an agent of mental activity both conscious and unconscious. The subject-person represents both complexity and unity of individuals with their idiosyncratic specificity and intentionality of mental acts. By contrast, “reifying” the psyche leads toward annihilating it and reducing it to something else: neurology, chemistry, etc. Human facts, divested of meaning, become something organic and animal. These limits of the neurological perspective are well denounced by an acute neurologist such as Oliver Sacks, in his autobiographical testimony in *A Leg to Stand on*. It is a fascinating exploration of the physical basis of personal identity. He maintains that “Neuropsychology is admirable, but it excludes the psyche”. As a living creature, the human being, is by nature an active agent, a subject of his/her own experience, not an object. It is precisely this subject, this “living I” which is not taken into consideration (Sacks, 1984). It is clear that each relational experience, like all psychic experiences, necessarily has some corresponding factors at the brain level. To outline a vision of the neurological organization of mental functions, such as “repression” or “reality test”, does not necessarily means to adopt an organic vision.

Psychoanalytic reading, derived from its heuristic models of “understanding” (*Verstehen*), is not commensurable with the kind of “explaining” (*Erklären*) provided by neurobiological processes. It is indubitable that without neurological structures repression could not be possible nor could affective interaction, and least of all a transference relation. But psychoanalysis has a place downstream from the complex human experience that allows verbal interaction, and it does not study only one of many levels of speech relation: psychoanalysis looks at its syntax and perhaps its semantics more than its functional and instrumental conditions (Aletti, 2006).

### **Psychoanalysis and cultural psychology**

Psychoanalysis is a functional and temporary relationship established by verbal interaction within a special setting, permeated by affects (transference and countertransference). Psychoanalysis is placed at the level of linguistic-affective interaction (Aletti, 1998, pp. 18-26) inside a cultural symbolic context (Belzen, 2001, 2006).

Religious experience arises from the intersection between intrapsychic, interpsychic, relational and cultural components. This means that individual religious experience grows up and can be observed only inside a specific cultural symbolic context, both in a synchronic dimension (with regard to religious traditions belonging to different cultures in the same historical period) and a diachronic dimension (with regard to the historical evolution of one religious tradition; see Belzen, 1997).

Cultural psychology (of religion) meets some emergent indications of modern general psychology (Belzen, 1999). Phenomenological, hermeneutical, narrative, critical-anthropological, constructionist approaches emerged as a consequence of a critical awareness of the loss of knowledge derived from both an emphasis on “empirical” research and a generalization of abstract psychology on a *homo psychologicus*. But it would be impossible for a psychoanalyst to accept a de-culturalization of the personal religious experience. Psyche links the neurobiological and cultural components of the human organism, its wishes and its conflicts with the cultural environment. And psychoanalysis knows no other God than the one the subject “talks about” in a defined culture. To give a name to God happens in a symbolic context (Aletti, 1994).

### **Psychoanalysis and post-modernism**

According to different thinkers, we now inhabit the post-modern era. The concept of the “postmodern”, which is derived from aesthetic, philosophical and socio-cultural matrices, has been introduced progressively in all sorts of literature and applied to various human activities, becoming an elastic and comprehensive though ambiguous category.

Postmodernism is described by J.-F. Lyotard (1979) as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Enlightenment, Idealism, Marxism); this concept can be useful to psychological inquiry because it suggests some social and cultural characteristics of contemporaneity which can influence the development of psychological sciences.

According to postmodern thought, which rejects the notion that metaphysics and knowledge reflect reality, the truth is both an asymptotic path and a hypothetical autobiographic narration. Mental representation is a psychical fact, not an external one. This concept of truth and in general the relation between subject and object has greatly stimulated the interest of psychology.

Psychology is not extraneous to the success of “postmodern” thinking, mainly in the forms of Freudian psychoanalysis with its unconscious components about subjective behaviour, its surmounting of an objectivistic vision of physical reality, and its proposal of a representational mind. In the last few decades, some issues of “postmodern” culture certainly contributed to releasing psychology from naturalistic-scientistic and objectivistic pretences, toward hermeneutic and narrative positions (Aletti, 2003b).

As for psychoanalysis, hermeneutic and social constructionism have helped to surmount the theoretic rigidity typical of metapsychic constructions; also, they have remarked on the attention toward the interpersonal and empathic context of analytic discourse, which helps to overcome the vision of the “neutrality” in analytic relationships as distant and “aseptic.”

But psychoanalysis, as opposed to some extreme positions taken by “postmodern” philosophers, is defended by its concrete clinical reality from the temptations of a radical constructionism and relativistic ontology, because of the attention paid to the *hic et nunc* of therapeutic interaction (Holt, 2001). According to me, the idea of extreme postmodernists that every theory, including empirical paradigms, is anchored to (and united with) the socio-cultural environment leads neither to relativism nor to the conclusion that it is impossible to share analytic practice and theory, as, for example, Hoffman (1998) and Stern (1985) affirm. An object may be observed from one point of view or several points of view. But no object can be observed without a point of view, as John R. Searle has noted in his theory of the intentionality of mental states.

### **Psychoanalysis and attachment theory**

The psychoanalytic environment, during the last two decades has showed some weak but increasing interest in attachment theory. Attachment theory was previously popular in the field of empirical research on the development of both infant and adult relationships. Nowadays the theory, elaborated by Bowlby in the sixties on the early relationships between mother and infant (cf. Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1988), is richly structured and applied to many contexts of psycho-social life (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Nevertheless it was rejected by many important psychoanalysts (firstly Anna Freud) because it was considered too far from psychoanalysis in the way it reduced object relations to real and concrete contacts and neglected internal mental work (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Nowadays, other authors are open to an interchange or integration between psychoanalysis and attachment theory. One researcher thinks this is possible only in theory and not in clinical practice (Gullestad, 2001). Others, after a comparison with object relations models, identify a common nucleus in the two approaches. In particular Peter Fonagy, using the concept of “internal working model”, proposes a bridge between the topics of internal representations and empirical observation of external behaviours (Fonagy, 2001). More recently there was an application of attachment theory to religion (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1999; Granqvist, 1998, in press). According to this approach, attachment is a psychological system of evolutionary adaptation in which religion would

arise (Kirkpatrick, 1998a, 2005a). This perspective of evolutionary psychology, scarcely empirical (see Watts, 2006), is considered useful by those looking for a common theory in the field of psychology of religion (Beith-Hallahmi, 2006; Luyten & Corveleyn, 2007). With regard to psychoanalysis, some authors propose attachment theory as a place where psychoanalytic concepts could be empirically validated by case studies of individual histories (Granqvist, 2006a; for many controversies on such commensurability see Granqvist, 2006a, 2006b; Rizzuto, 2006, see even Wulff 2006; Luyten & Corveleyn, 2007).

I myself have argued elsewhere that attachment is only one component of relational mental organization and thus of the relation with God and that psychoanalytic and attachment theory could be complementary without any reductionism, since they focus on different aspects of the same phenomenon (Aletti, in press). The problem in applying attachment theory to religion lies in explaining how physical-biological attachment and psychological attachment are related, and whether such attachment is generally commensurable with the relationship with God (Aletti in press). From a relational point of view, it should be better specified what kind of connection exists between attachment to other human beings in childhood and in adulthood on the one hand and attachment to God on the other, in particular to the Christian God (Granqvist, in press). In addition, psychoanalysis faults attachment theory for not paying more attention to individual mental development, its processes, conflicts and outcomes. In particular the attachment models proposed to explain relationships with God (in continuity – “correspondence,” or discontinuity – “compensation”; see Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 1998b). sometimes appear too rigid. Through evolutionary psychological hypotheses (linked to attachment theory) developed by some scholars, moreover, the human psyche seems to have been coerced into omninclusive, anthropological-social and philosophical theorizations which are too far from the understanding of real individual mental functioning (Kirkpatrick, 2005a).

### **Psychoanalysis and empirical validation**

The topic of empirical validation of psychoanalytic constructs and paradigms is one of the most tormented areas in the whole history of psychoanalysis, beginning with distrust of Freud’s first intuitions by psychiatrists and physicians in general, and ostracism of Freud himself.

Currently, very diverse positions coexist within the field of psychoanalysis and religion. There are those who believe an integration of classic psychoanalytic approaches, namely combining the case study method with psychodynamically inspired empirical research (Corveleyn & Luyten, 2005; Luyten. & Corveleyn, 2007), is both possible and desirable. In line with this, as I argued before, some authors propose attachment theory as an area where psychoanalytic concepts could be empirically validated. Again, some concepts of attachment theory derive from psychoanalytic theorization, even if many people (including myself: see Aletti, in press) disagree with those (Granqvist, 2006a; 2006b; Wulff, 2006) who hold that attachment theory is in fact a form of object relations theory, because –in my view – it is based more on “real” relationships than the inner world. According to some (Aletti, in press, Rizzuto, 2006, Vergote, 1964) it is impossible to have an empirical validation of psychoanalysis with an experimental methodology. Interpretation of psychoanalysis is not pre-dictive but post-dictive . Furthermore, psychoanalysis is explicated inside the analyst-analysed relationship, unique and unrepeatable for its complexity. Therefore, other authors (like me) suggest that we should consider them two different approaches, empirical and psychoanalytical, which lead to different views about human religiosity. The scientific experimental method can illustrate aspects and variables definable operationally in a research project. This research on common religious characteristics in a group of people can explain only general categories. A psychoanalytic observation studies in depth, with a longitudinal view, conscious and unconscious motivations and the personal story which a subject utilizes to attribute sense to his experiences. This allows a deeper inquiry about idiographic characteristics of personal religious

experience (Aletti, 2003c). However it is important to remember that the psychoanalyst's knowledge derives from the subject's words: namely the language, its gaps, lapses, and redundancies. For example, the psychoanalyst does not know directly the patient's object relations. He hears the person's speech on his or her historical relationships (past, present, future). Only interpretation and reconstruction, within a transference/countertransference context in an affective relationship, provide the psychoanalyst with a link to the patient's object relations. The analyst, with a knowledge of both his personal experience and clinical practice, will be able to tolerate, better than an empirical researcher, the absence of a structured and exhaustive knowledge about the individual. Vergote's comments on Lacan's work are valid for all psychoanalysis: "What analyst could lay claim to a completed doctrine if he defines human beings by the gulf between signifier and signified and by a quest for truth that is asymptotic?" (Vergote, 1970, p. 29)

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