RELIGION AS AN ILLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR AND PROBLEMS WITH A PSYCHOANALYTICAL MODEL*

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ABSTRACT

The hermeneutical model of illusion, just as that of projection, has always been part of the psychoanalytic views of religion. The author presents a brief critical summary on this subject, and underlines that in relational psychoanalysis, the concept of illusion refers not to religion as such, but to the subjective experiences of desire and relatedness, that is, the source of the desire for God in man. Because of personal conflicts and their outcome, besides illusions one encounters also in such experiences, disillusion, disappointment, and even delusion. The author, while challenging the views of many scholars taking part in this debate: a) maintains that psychoanalytic interpretation is not concerned with the question of religious truth but with the formation and transformation of the process of believing; b) calls for special attention to the fact when speaking of religious representation, the focus is on the process rather than on the objects represented; c) raises his criticism at the often used expression, "unconscious representation of God", because according to him, religion gives a name to the object of desire only when placed at the conscious and cultural level. Coherent with his basic distinction between conscious religious behaviour and the deep psychological pre-conditions, the author underlines the differences (and not necessarily the connections) between the unconscious processes of desire and the religious concepts, particularly, between the representation of God and the concept of God; between the parental *imagos* and the transcendent God; and between the capacity to "believe in anything at all" (Winnicott) and religious faith. The author concludes that in the illusion model, it is suggested that as part of religious maturity, one could construct the representation of God as something that is deeply connected with primary objects, while at the same time, assuming the capacity to take the necessary distance from personal desires and projections.

Introduction: The Illusion Model, Its Use and Abuse

This article is intended as a contribution to an on-going debate, that had already started with Freud's famous 1927 work *The Future of an*

Illusion and Oskar Pfister's polemical response in his essay *The Illusion of a Future* (1928), involving many scholars regarding the interpretation of the term illusion. The basic dilemma that emerges from this debate between the two pioneers (see also Freud and Pfister, 1909–1939/1963) remains the same as psychoanalysts encounter it today, both at the level of clinical practice and in the elaboration of the theory. It can be summed up in a slightly simplified form as follows: should people be freed of their illusions, as Freud suggested, or is it what they should be freed from rather, their capacity for illusion, the human capacity for play (*in-ludere*) and for playing within illusions? The latter has been proposed by several authors, following Winnicott in particular, who base their theories on the relational model of psychoanalysis.

When psychologists speak of religious illusion, they are referring, of course, not to religion itself, but to the subjective experience intertwined with it; its path may be crossed by illusions, disillusionment, disappointments, and even delusions—all phenomena connected with processes of personal experience, with its conflicts and with the outcome of such conflicts (cf. Aletti, 2002).

This idea—namely of the multitude of paths in the personal religious history of an individual—became extremely clear to me while visiting the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, as I stood before a painting by Jan Steen (1626–1679). Its subject was "The meal at Emmaus," as narrated in the New Testament (Luke 24, 13–35), a subject painted by many artists over the centuries; its iconographic schema is surely familiar. Usually artists choose to portray the moment in which the disciples recognize Christ "as he breaks the bread": in such scenes one normally beholds a dazzling, radiant Christ, revealing his divine character. The classical depiction conveys the unfathomable certainty, beyond any doubt, of the disciples, and consequently of the community of believers and the artist. Jan Steen's depiction, however, presents a completely different and highly unusual situation; the painter has taken a provocative approach towards the exegesis and even the text of the New Testament. The two disciples appear to be in a state of obnubilated consciousness: overcome by physical exhaustion, drowsiness, and wine, they sink into a kind of stupor as their mysterious companion fades away in the background, having already lost the distinct contours of a real figure. Meanwhile the tavern employees go on carrying out their tasks with complete indifference, as if they had long since lost the ability to be astonished by any-

thing. The impression given is that upon awakening the travellers would ask themselves not only who their companion was, but also whether he had been truly real, or merely a dream, a vision, or a delusion. The artist divorces the apparition of Christ from the brilliant light of experienced truth and shifts it instead to the shadows of subjective convictions, where faith (or doubt) really lies. Desire, projection, and illusion are shown to be the routes towards the recognition that constitutes the basis of faith, with an accentuation of the subjective component; it would have been quite unusual for this kind of artistic expression to have occurred in the Roman Catholic world during that period.

The category of illusion as applied to religion opens up a wide field of debate with respect to contents, method and epistemology. In particular, Winnicott's concept of illusion has become very popular among psychologists of religion, and even more so among so called "religious psychologists" (see Beit-Hallahmi, 1992; Aletti, 2001), first in the Anglo-American literature (cf. J.W. Jones, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1997a; S.L. Jones, 1994; McDargh, 1983, 1993; Meissner, 1984, 1987; Pruyser, 1983; Rizzuto, 1979; and the collections edited by Finn and Gartner, 1992; Randour, 1993; Jacobs and Capps, 1997), then in European literature (Heimbrock, 1990, 1991; Zock, 1999), and, more recently, in Italy as well. (Aletti, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002; Stickler, 1998, 1999). All in all the debate is still ongoing among scholars.

My thesis (more thoroughly developed in Aletti, 2002) proposes that the salient points and suggestions made by Winnicott (and, following him, by a number of scholars) may be integrated in a model that observes the extreme complexity of the matrices (conscious and unconscious, individual and social) of the personal representation of God. Obviously, the thesis relates to both the process of embracing faith and of rejecting it in favour of atheism. Here, the psychodynamic point of view should be integrated with that of cultural psychology (Belzen, 2001a, 2001b, in press). The "transitional area" is not a "no man's land": as an individual matures, "created" and "found" religion (as Winnicott puts it) become intertwined in an always continuing transaction. In the human religious-symbolic universe, the word "God" is not spoken in the absence of other words, or speakers. (Hence we can only be sons "in the name of the father," for example.) Actually, the assimilation, construction and negotiation of word meanings are constituent elements in a person's attitude toward religion, as much as the representational and relational matrix

beginning with an infant's primary-object relationships (Aletti, 1994).

Winnicott's model of illusion can be placed in this perspective, and it is in many ways functional and suggestive, although it harbours some problematical points. Some of these, which I would like to emphasize here, share a common origin, namely the nexus of relationships connecting 1) the conscious representation of God, the concept of God, the beliefs, faithful adhesion, and religious behaviour (mostly manifested on a conscious level) and 2) what some scholars refer to as the "unconscious representation of God." I take the view that the latter could be better described as a parental *imago*, i.e. as a non-specific and non-religious relational representation, or simply a nameless desire which is even unaware of its own object. In such a formulation, religion gives a name to the object of desire, and this procedure, which is linked with the cultural-symbolic system, is to be seen as an answer (and a culturally specific one) and not as a question, nor as a natural "religious need." Questions about meaning are universal, since their roots lie within the phenomena of human experience: origin, death, and evil. The answers, being culturally specified, are multiple and polymorphic. In my view there is certain compatibility between the search for meaning and religious answers, although there is no necessary continuity.

Winnicott's Concept of Illusion

With Donald W. Winnicott, illusion becomes a central category in theorizing on the functioning of the psyche. Winnicott's contribution (consisting of knowledge, methods and models) to psychoanalytic elaboration is closely connected to the introduction of new epistemological paradigms. Such paradigms, starting from a structural and relational vision of infants, according to observations made in paediatric and clinical practice, actually come together to establish a general theory of object relationships. Winnicott's statement that there is no such thing as a baby, means simply that a baby is always to be understood as an entity consisting of baby-plus-caretakers (Winnicott, 1964, p. 88).

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).

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). The transitional object, "the first 'not-me' possession" (1953/1971, p. 1) facilitates development of the self through the perception of being separate from, or together with, the external object ("It's mine!").

Nevertheless, the transitional experience is characteristic not only of the initial stages in an infant's development. One of the fundamental functions of transitional objects, namely to foster "the task of reality acceptance" (1953/1971, p. 13) by bridging the gap between subjective world and objective reality, accompanies the individual throughout his or her adult life. All the cultural activities of adults—such as art, love, "creative scientific work," and of course religion—can be found within the transitional sphere.

I would like to point out that Winnicott never really concerned himself with religion as a theme, and the few references he made to it are intended only to locate it among the multitude of transitional phenomena in the adult world.

Furthermore, the emergence of individual piety is seen in conjunction with the general characteristics of the development of the self. It is sufficient to remember that in 1967, when Winnicott was asked to hold a conference on evangelisation in the family, he surprised his public by speaking exclusively of pre-verbal care, starting with the decisive importance of the way in which a child is held in one's arms. According to him, only a "facilitating environment," or "a good-enough mother," can foster those maturational processes (Winnicott, 1965) which are at the foundation of the capacity "to believe in" and "to be alone." And it is only in continuity with the pre-verbal experience of "human reliability" when a baby feels itself embraced, that he will be able to understand the concept of "God's eternal embrace" as he became adult (Winnicott, 1968/1986).

Ana-María Rizzuto: "The Birth of the Living God"

Among the authors who have applied this model of illusion (and, more generally speaking, object-relations theory) to religion, the most important is Ana-María Rizzuto, whose work has been internationally recognized since 1979, when she published *The Birth of the Living*

God. Basing her theories closely on clinical practice, she limits her research to the formation, evolution, transformation, and use of the representation of God in the psyche through the various phases of the life-cycle. She traces the representation of God back to its origins in the dialectic between representations of the self and those of primary objects.

Rizzuto considers the representation of God to be, in Winnicott's terms, an illusory transitional object. She stresses its universal character, at least *de facto* in our cultural context, and emphasizes its importance in a person's attitude towards God and religion.

Rizzuto's work finds its logical and methodological priority in revisiting the concept of representation in the psychoanalytic literature. She emphasizes strongly 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 of the organism to the environment, beginning with visceral, sensorimotor, perceptual, iconic, and later, also conceptual memories. Even if the "primitive" memories are unlikely to be recalled in conscious form, they still persist, perhaps in body language, posture, or behavioural habits that unconsciously perpetuate a person's experiences with a specific object.

During psychoanalytic treatment, the representation of God sometimes reveals itself in a peculiar manner, since "the analyst, as a transferential and real object, occupies the *locus parentis*, a position that facilitates the revival of intense emotions bestowed by the analysand upon the divine representations" (Rizzuto, 2001a, p. 26).

A very interesting thematic area in the works of Rizzuto is the distinction between the representation of God (of a mainly unconscious or preconscious nature and connected with the primary process) and the depiction or concept of God (elaborated in secondary-process thinking) on the one hand, and the relationship between them on the other. This topic becomes quite relevant when viewed from a pragmatic standpoint (for instance, with reference to religious education which usually emphasizes the religious content or knowledge) and even more intriguing in a theoretical light, when the discussions turns on the relationships between an individual's representation of God and personal faith or atheism (as will be discussed later in the paragraph entitled *The representation of God and the conception of God*).

An Overall Evaluation

A survey of publications by scholars who apply the object relations theory to religious phenomena allows us to identify some common features with regard to both content and methods.

The model evaluates the emotional, ethical, aesthetic, and play-related components that support an individual's creative appropriation of the religious-symbolic universe, along with the social and cognitive components which are usually privileged not only in the institutional religions, but also in the cognitive models used in psychological research. (Pyysiäinen, 2003).

More particularly, the model that considers religion as an illusory transitional phenomenon seems to be especially rich in heuristic and clinical perspectives. It allows us to perceive the psychological vitality of the religious experience but at the same time its ambivalence. For in fact the usefulness of religion as a transformational tool for the personality is accompanied by great vulnerability for pathogenetic distortions. These distortions are particularly characterized by narcissistic defence mechanisms and projections tending toward a perverse (for example, autistic or fetishist) organization of the religious experience.

Another important contribution of the model we are discussing is its ability to account for the interaction and negotiation that take place between idiosyncratic experiences and dynamism within the psyche, on the one hand, and the social-cultural environment, on the other. Or, to express it in Winnicott's terms, the model allows us to regard individual religion as a transitional phenomenon which can create a bridge between the subjective and the objective world. In addition it emphasizes the interaction of codified religious symbols and rites (dogmas, cults, and organizations) with the personal process of "giving meaning" to one's own existence, a process which can explain both the acceptance and rejection of faith. It can explain the utilization of faith in a deviant and perverse and/or creative and innovative way with respect to the institutional symbolic system.

Furthermore, the model, particularly as elucidated by Rizzuto, emphasizes the connections between the representations of God and those of both primary objects and the self, as well as connections with the subject's relational history, starting from the earliest experiences with parents. Nevertheless, a major problem remains, namely the nexus of relationships between unconscious representation and personal

behaviour, on one hand, and an individual's relationship with the primary object and "God object," on the other.

The model, as mentioned above, can also account for failure and possible de-structuring results of an individual's encounter with religion.

The illusion and the experience of relationships with objects are ambivalent phenomena, open to processes of growth and integration, but also subject to failure in the tasks of differentiating and of linking one's internal and external worlds. If religiosity loses its affinity with transitional experience, it can also appear, in a clinical context, with fetishist or autistic deformation.

In this manner, faith becomes corrupted, taking on the form of an *ideology*, and the type of religious relationship expressed by "I believe *in* God" becomes an assent to doctrinal content in the form "I believe *that* God . . ." Religious objects are reduced to talismans, and personal creativity, imagination and the ability to play deteriorate into stereotypes and repetitive acts. Religious symbolism degenerates into realism and literalistic fundamentalism applied to sacred texts, constituting a preferred application of sacred texts. Religious rites become obsessive or esoteric rituals, for initiated insiders. Belonging to the church or to a religious group is manifested in fanaticism or dependence. The faith in a leader degenerates into hypocrisy. Solidarity and internal cohesion crystallize into closed entities, leading to detachment from the rest of society, sectarianism, fear of the world, and the impossibility of growth.

Problems, Prospects, and Proposals

I certainly recognize the contribution of knowledge and of heuristic stimuli that the illusion model has made to the psychoanalytic study of religious phenomena, particularly Rizzuto's application of the illusion model (the representation of God as an illusory transitional phenomenon). Nevertheless I would like to offer some reflections in order to identify some real advantages, and problematical points as well. Such criticism moves around an axis of relationships between unconscious and conscious aspects: the representation of God and the conception of God; the parental *imagos*, and fatherhood of God; one's ability to believe in "anything" and religious faith; being embraced by one's mother, and "God's eternal embrace."

The Representation of God and the Conception of God

Some scholars who cite Rizzuto's works and model are actually unaware of her psychoanalytic elaboration regarding the concept of representation, and they misunderstand its meaning. Some confuse the representation of God with the conscious picture that an individual makes of Him, or with the concept of God elaborated by culture, and finally with the presentations offered by various religions and theologies. In a word, the mental representation of God is sometimes identified with the God of a specific cultural tradition.

What matters for psychoanalysts is not God, but the representation of Him, i.e., that movement imbued with desire by which man turns towards a reality that he feels owes him a response, a reality that summons the kind of ethical and aesthetic appreciation that precedes reasoning and structuring of judgment and that has its roots in preconscious experiences, at the preverbal level. Now, if it is true that such a desire does not rest on the subject, but thrives on the interplay between an unmatched subject and object, man's illusion (belief founded on his desire) still presupposes some object, which is felt as an object of desire. This is because the objects of desire neither exist on their own, nor as purely endopsychic products. What makes them objects of desire is the fact that they associate the mystery of their latent existence with that of our projective imagination.

Nevertheless, the desire has a transcendent opening because it subsists on its own non-fulfillment. The object of desire is always elsewhere. Religion gives a name to the object of the desire, indicating a goal on the horizon of our infinite desiring. But this name is "given," and not intrinsic in the structure of desiring.

The God figure of a religion which is perceived as being "given" and revealed, like the Christian religion, is situated in the realm of otherness, of symbolism, of the word, and of dialogue, as we are effectively reminded by Antoine Vergote in some of his most recent publications (Vergote, 1999b, 2002). Beyond any cultural reference, one would end up talking about abstract piety of endopsychic origin, about a religion which is easily definable as a masked expression of psychic needs connected with narcissistic tendencies and infantile omnipotence, derived from illusion and guilt respectively, according to Freud's theory on the origin of religion, which must certainly meet with frustration (Freud, 1927) or end in neurosis (Freud, 1907, 1913). It is important to remember that this is the

case which we usually face when, during analysis, patients introduce their religious experiences.

Parental Imagos and Transcendence

A problem that remains to be solved concerns both clinical practice and theoretical reflection: what is the relationship between parental *imagos*, and the idiosyncratic representations of and relations with the God of the believer's experience? Culturally the latter is transmitted by religions and especially in the Christian religion, by the self-revealing Father. The mediation of language in general, particularly of the religious symbolic system, in bridging the psychic experience with the God transmitted by a religion, appears to be of central importance.

The name of God that is pronounced by a subject is derived from the symbolic-linguistic system of his or her culture, and filtered through the imprint of the primary-object relations. But there is no "natural" outcome, nor a taken-for-granted reversal of the parental experiences in God's fatherhood, from the relational matrix to the believer's faith behaviour.

The "birth of the believing man" (Aletti and Ciotti, 2001) is a process closely connected with personality development. Of course, the appropriation of the culturally transmitted idea of God, which is a symbolic-linguistic interactional process, presupposes unconscious pre-linguistic representations, which provide an orientation. And the encounter of these representations with the conscious depiction of God, which is the result of personal elaboration of culturally transmitted information, constitutes a moment of possible "psychological" evaluation of belief and non-belief, according to the criterion of ego-syntonicity/ego-dystonicity.

Faith—like atheism—develops its structure in a conscious process, but it has its roots in (and interacts with) representations of the self, and of preconscious and unconscious objects. It is from these representations, and from their dynamics, that a long process begins, leading to the ultimate belief or non-belief of an individual. Of course, even atheists have their representation of God, with which they interact as they construct their non-belief. For atheists, too, the God that they reject is an "exalted father", as Freud observed with reference to the God of believers.

Analysts do not have access to their patients' "real" partners or

parents, however, but only to the ways in which they experience them in their relationships, which are revealed during the treatment. By the same token, psychoanalysts do not have access to God, but they do have access to the formation, transformation, and use of the representation of God of the specific patient on the couch—through his or her statements (Aletti, 1992a, 1998a). God is not a theme that concerns psychoanalytic work, but belief (and non-belief) in God is (Parens and Akhtar, 2001; Rizzuto, 2001b; Aletti, 2003). Certain questions have aroused great interest in recent years, both in the field of psychoanalysis and other fields of psychology, finding expression in articles with intriguing titles such as *Does God Help?* (Akhtar and Parens, 2001) or *Is Religion Good for Your Health?* (Koening, 1997). It would be wiser for psychoanalysts to stick to their own field of expertise and remain in an area which does not go beyond (but which also cannot ignore) the relevance to the psyche of *psychical* belief. In other words, the question is not if *God* helps, but if *believing in* God helps.

The Capacity to "Believe in Anything at All" and Religious Faith

Belief—understood in a global sense which includes having faith, trust, and confidence—is a broad function of the psyche fundamental to an individual's healthy development. Furthermore, it is intrinsic to every relationship and every desire. Every single desire presupposes, and simultaneously establishes, a relationship. The structure of the desire itself involves the recognition of the other person as an object that is not only desirable, but also reliable. Believing and desiring necessarily imply interpretation and evaluation on unconscious, preconscious, and conscious levels: if the other person is good, fascinating, and trustworthy, then he or she is also desirable.

There is no doubt that relational psychoanalysis—and Winnicott in particular—sees "faith" as a psychical phenomenon that is absolutely central for personality development. 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 religious). The relationship between basic trust and the faith of a believer must, therefore, be carefully considered.

The structuring of basic trust has its roots in extremely early experiences of well-being, on both the physical and emotional levels, with caretakers. Later on, individuals can evolve and transform themselves according to significant relational experiences, passing through all the paths and conflicts of intra-psychic life, as well as cultural interactions (Rizzuto, 1996–1997, 2001a, 2002).

Religious faith lies in experiences of trust, confidence and reliability, whereby such experiences are oriented to the recognition of a transcendent figure of reference, using the metaphorical image of the infant's primary caretaker. Religions (from the point of view of their psychological function) are shared systems of meaning that offer answers to the individual, in terms of self-consciousness or the need to be recognised by the other; in so doing religions make specific and defining reference to a transcendent reality. The individual, continually interacting with the religion provided by culture, re-"creates" the religion that he or she "finds" (Winnicott), according to forms that are always culturally determined, but re-articulated in an idiosyncratic way, depending the individual's own unconscious, preconscious, and conscious experiences of faith and trust.

The question therefore becomes one of the relationship between the psychical capacity to "believe in" something, and religious faith as it is experienced by believers and described by theological reflection based on the believer's experience. This question reappears and is echoed in several ways: the relationship with the other and with the "Wholly Other"; the anthropological-existential need for self-transcendence and opening toward the metaphysical transcendent figure; faith as unconscious and preconscious "basic trust"; and faith as a conscious and responsible answer to the Word of God that addresses the individual.

In my opinion, within the generic process of "believing in" something, religious faith is determined by the specific object, which is the recognition (or at least the intended recognition) of the transcendent figure as metaphysically real.

This particular subjective conviction of the believer appears not to be recognised by some scholars, who aim rather at emphasising the continuity between the human-trust experience and religious faith. Some propose a conceptualisation of religion as a realisation of faith, to be understood as a general capacity of the psyche (McDargh, 1983). Faith is then something like the psyche's religious infrastructure, or the anchoring of religion in the psyche. We should note, however,

that this view emphasises the function of religion in the psyche, without necessarily formulating a specific definition of religion. And, of course, faith, as basic trust, can also structure a person's psychologically sound and solid atheism.

Explicitly following "psycho-theological perspectives", McDargh (1993) appears to derive faith in God, without any solution for continuity, from the basic trust that individuals feel towards their parents, which develops from infancy onwards. He seems to confuse the search for transcendent metaphysical reality with individuals' capacity for transcending their own limits, which is present in everyone's relationship with the world and inherent in self-development. He therefore easily slips into a pseudo-apology for religion, which intends to demonstrate that faith in God is rooted in the deepest human psychic structures, as if the idea of the "divine" were innate in each individual. Hence he reduces Christian belief in a transcendent person to an expression of a psychic need on the one hand, but on the other he does not hesitate to maintain that the representation of God is the most adequate object of belief in the transcendent person, because it is developed starting with parental images, which play a crucial role in the construction of the self.

The lack of a "substantial" definition and the emphasis McDargh and other authors place on the functional aspect disregard the specificity of religious experience in relation to other experiences of trust. Consequently, they deny the right of psychology of religion to exist as a specific discipline. With Vergote (1983, 1993, 1995, 1999a), I prefer to consider religious faith as a form of trusting behaviour expressed within a defined cultural symbolic system that specifically calls on a transcendent being. Human beings do not invent the words with which they says "God," they receive them. With Winnicott, I would add that such an encounter structures personal piety only when an individual "creates" the religion that he or she "finds."

"Many Old Problems can be Looked at Afresh"

Winnicott and several scholars who base their work on his theoretical model have shown us that, even in the psychological study of religion, "[W]ith a theory of transitional phenomena at hand many old problems can be looked at afresh" (Winnicott, 1971, p xiii). As we have seen above, the models of illusion and transitional phenomena

do not escape the common and constant risk of psychoanalytic the-
orisation (not to mention the risk of popularisation), namely the
reification of heuristic concepts. To avoid misunderstanding, I believe
it is wiser to consider *illusion as a process*, according to its relational
tension, and not as an object-thing. Even on a linguistic level, it
would be better to use more verbs than nouns, not for stylistic pur-
poses, but to create a more tangible, active image. In Italian we
could use the verb *illudersi* instead of the noun *illusione*.

Then illusion no longer represents an obstacle to what is real, or
to faith, since it is not a question of believing in "something that is
an illusion" (in which the word "illusion" sounds very similar to
"mirage"). And the believer will not appear as deluded person who,
against all logic, says, "I believe in God, although He is an illusion."
The believer is a person who "dares to take a risk" in his or her
relationship with a reliable God. I have faith, i.e. I trust and I can
rely on God's Word. Hence in speaking of forms of religious rep-
resentation, attention may be paid to the representational process,
rather than to the represented objects, as if they were static and
reified psychic entities. We should consider, however, that the "inter-
mediate area" between the subjective world and objective reality, so
deeply connected to the basic structures of the personality, is a very
fertile ground, where anything can happen: faith in God can easily
germinate, just as sprouts of belief in the non-existence of God can
pop up.

For this reason, both the psychoanalysts, as well as the psycholo-
gists of religion, should be interested not in the issue of whether reli-
gion is truthful or not (as it seems suggested by Blass, 2004), but in
the psychic functioning as related to religious experience as a cul-
tural phenomenon (Belzen, in press). The real or valid question would
be: "What does this individual person do with this religion?"

One more point: in spite of deep roots in unconscious and pre-
conscious dynamics, the term "unconscious representation of God"
might appear inaccurate. Since it takes place in the unconscious, the
representation is given no orientation by a name, nor is it definable
in a specific way. It is culture and religion that give a name to the
object of the desire. It seems more adequate to think of the repre-
sentation as an unsaturated matrix, as an open-ended relational path,
as formless magma, and therefore able to form and in-form by itself
real objects, relationships, and beliefs.

Some scholars refer to the experiences of primary-object relationships, whose imprints are found in one's behaviour towards religion, as *pre-religious*. But a similar definition "pre"-supposes a connection with the religious experience, to which those "pre-s" would give access. And there would be no space to consider how a person becomes an atheist, since it would be rather strange, if not impossible, to talk about "pre-atheist" experiences!

It is therefore better, in my view, to talk about relational and representational frames of mind, which are in any case structuring factors in an individual's personality and deepest experiences, opening up further paths, that lead, in the specific area of religion, in the direction of both belief and unbelief.

I think that the religious experience of an individual results from interconnections between the intra-psychic, the inter-psychic, and cultural phenomena. Such relations presume psychological preconditions (which are non-specific, and of course non-religious), such as the capacity to "believe," and to trust, the capacity to have sufficiently structured object relations, the capacity for symbolisation, the ability to attribute meaning to events, and finally, the ability to distinguish between objects and their use. However, religious experience specifically requires the ability to give a name to the experience of believing, which comes from the interaction of the subject with a religious symbolic system, and, for Christians, presumes the revealing Word of God, as well as the ability to respond with all their being to God's interlocution.

In the illusion model it might appear to form part of religious maturity to construct the representation of God as something that is deeply connected with primary objects, and, at the same time, assume the capacity to elaborate the distance from our desires and from our projections.

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