

Theoretical paper



Psicologia della Religione e-journal

Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione
<http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>

Becoming a believer, becoming an unbeliever. A response to Ana-María Rizzuto psychoanalytical model

Mario Aletti – Department of Psychology, Psychology of Religion Research Unit, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

Abstract

The work of Ana-María Rizzuto has been very influential in the field of psychology of religion, both for its contents and its methodology. It is a turning point in psychoanalysis towards a better understanding of the attitude of the believer as well as the unbeliever. Rizzuto's key contributions are the identification of the unconscious features of the mental representation process – including the 'God representation' – and the relationships between the mainly unconscious or pre-conscious God representation and the person's attitude towards God. This paper aims to illustrate some minor critical insights on the concept of the 'unconscious God representation' and suggest ways to avoid the ambiguity in articulating this notion.

Keywords: Rizzuto, God representation, psychoanalysis

Riassunto

Sul divenire credenti o non credenti. Considerazioni sul modello psicoanalitico di Ana-María Rizzuto

L'opera di Ana-María Rizzuto è di rilievo decisivo per la psicologia della religione, sia per i risultati raggiunti che per la metodologia proposta: è un punto di svolta del contributo della psicoanalisi a una migliore comprensione dell'atteggiamento non solo del credente, ma anche del non credente. Tra i risultati principali offerti dalla Rizzuto, vengono sottolineate sia l'evidenziazione dei tratti inconsci della rappresentazione mentale, inclusa la rappresentazione di Dio, sia l'indicazione delle relazioni tra la rappresentazione di Dio principalmente inconscia o pre-conscia e l'atteggiamento personale verso Dio. Questo articolo si propone di illustrare alcuni minori punti critici, riferiti al concetto di 'rappresentazione inconscia di Dio' e propone una via percorribile per evitare le ambiguità della formulazione.

Parole chiave: Rizzuto, rappresentazione di Dio, psicoanalisi

The work of Ana-María Rizzuto has been very influential in the field of psychology of religion, both for its contents and its methodology. Her most important work *The Birth of the Living God – A Psychoanalytic Study* (1979) is well-known (or at least it was and it should still be). My paper aims to illustrate some critical insights into its content, especially on the concept of the 'Unconscious God representation'.

Firstly, it's important to underline that the phrase – commonly referred to as 'psychoanalysis of religion' – is inappropriate and misleading. Psychoanalysis is not interested in religion itself, or its philosophical nor theological truth. It is not concerned with its origin and history, nor its social or evolutionary role. Psychoanalysis limits its focus to the experience of the individual – i.e. to the dynamic processes

involved in the internal representation of God. In a word – psychoanalysis aims not at the truth of religion but the truth of the subject. It focuses not on the truth of beliefs but the truth of the believer (Aletti, 2014, pp. 15-18).

Therefore, the focal point in clinical practice is the discourse of individuals, their representation of God, and their relationships with the religion they encounter in the culture to which they belong (Rizzuto, 2002). Specifically, when we become acquainted with the person in all its complexity through psychoanalysis, we accidentally encounter the individual who describes him or herself as ‘a believer’ or the one who claims to be ‘an unbeliever’, or even he/she who is not concerned about religion at all.

The ‘unconscious’ God representation

As it is widely known, according to Rizzuto “God, psychologically speaking, is an illusory transitional object.” (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 177) in the Winnicottian sense. Rizzuto studies the formation, the transformation, and the use of this representation throughout the human 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, 1976). Referring to this content, I would like to add some clarifications to the Rizzuto model.

Rizzuto is perfectly aware that “The psychic formation of God representation does not by itself elicit belief. Belief and unbelief are always the results of dynamic processes in which the sense of self and the prevailing God representation are linked in a dialectic of compatibility or incompatibility in the satisfaction of relational needs” (Rizzuto, 1998a, p. 264). Therefore, the same dynamic processes can form the basis for the conscious attitude of belief and non-belief.

Rizzuto’s awareness of these processes and the emphasis she places on dynamicity of the God representation encourages scholars to explore and define better – and perhaps question – the idea of ‘*unconscious* God representations’. In other words, despite the deep rooting of its unconscious and pre-conscious dynamics, the expression ‘Unconscious Representation of God’ (used by some) or even God representation (used by Rizzuto) may sound inappropriate. In my opinion, when considered ‘unconscious’, its representation may neither be defined by a name nor

an adjective nor through a preposition – i.e. ‘of...’. Hence, even the God-representation is nothing but a psychical process of the person who attempts to find a way of giving meaning to the word God offered by parents and the culture (Aletti, 2005).

Rizzuto herself stated, in her own words in private communication with me, “When I say God-representation I am talking about a complex unconscious representation that in the subjective experience of a particular individual s/he qualifies as God. ‘God’ functions here as an adjective to qualify a representation. Most frequently than not, the subject him/herself does not consciously ‘know’ such felt God.” (Private message, on the 23rd of June, 2014).

Two questions arise

In my view, from this model, two important questions should be asked:

1. How is an unconscious psychical process connected to a cultural image, or concept, or depiction of God?
2. Is it possible to have an unconscious psychical representation without any lived experience, and tangible referent, as it would be for God according to this model?

Indeed, the representation of the mother, of the father and the ‘Self’ originates from sensorial lived experience. For example, a maternal representation includes a multitude of experiential exchanges registered as memorial processes, “Unlike any other representation of a living being, we have no sensory-perceptual information about God’s being” (Rizzuto, in the aforementioned communication). Thus, is the expression “*unconscious* God representation” still applicable? According to Rizzuto, this is the result of other unconscious representations among them. In addition, I would like to highlight that psychologically speaking, religion and God are cultural products, and clearly, what is unconscious cannot be religious. What Rizzuto herself calls in Freudian terms the ‘thing representation’, remains in the realm of the unconscious.

I agree that inside each human being there is an unconscious general ‘need to believe’ (Rizzuto, 1996-1997) or, in Winnicottian terms, the need to ‘believe in anything at all’ (Winnicott, 1968, p. 143). This supports what other psychologists in different perspectives, such as the cognitive one, call ‘the need to

perceived meaning'. The cultural idea of God could be a response to this demand, but I strongly believe that it is one – not necessarily the only one – of the possible searches for meaning. Search for meaning is a universal feature of the human mind, whereas the religion and cultural representation of God is culturally determined (Aletti and Antonietti, 2015).

Therefore, the unconscious object representation – including the God representation – can be thought more appropriately as a never-saturated-matrix, featuring an asymptotic way of relating, like a shapeless magma able to shape every actual object when the language gives it a name. Further research, rooted in clinical practice, clarifies should clarify how interactions between the representation of the Self and the representation of primary objects can also shape the representation of an abstract object – that is to say not perceivable or concrete.

In my view, God is not unconscious, nor is God in the unconscious (unlike what V. Frankl states). Psychology is limited to what one can observe through psychological tools, in real subjects, belonging to a specific culture. Hence, personal religion stems from the interaction and the dialectics of the subject with organised religion, through cultural stimuli. Psychology cannot state that religiousness is something innate in the so-called – by some – *homo religious*.

The illusion model

Referring to the Winnicottian model that the baby creates the mother he finds, I am used to arguing that the believer creates the God he/she finds in his culture. Rizzuto agrees with my statement saying, “I fully agree with your assertion that the believer ‘creates’ the God he finds in his culture” (Response to Prof. Aletti, Boston Symposium, 2013).

What we should focus on is the relationship between the maternal and paternal thing-representation and word-representation ‘God’.

Rizzuto stated that “The God ‘found’ in the culture of the parents comes without a photograph. It has to be “created” by the child through internal processes capable of integrating the god offered with what the child has available to bestow upon it, a private personal and psychologically significant internal form” (Response to Prof. Aletti). In this respect, Antoine Vergote proposes the ‘structural analogy’ model in which the representation of God is strongly related

to the parental figures (Vergote, Bonami, Custers, and Pattyn, 1967). Both becoming a man and becoming a religious man follow the Oedipal complex, where the father is ‘law’, ‘model’ and ‘promise’ altogether (Vergote, 1966).

The ‘symbolic transference’ model – enhanced by Milanese and Aletti (1973) – seems more convincing, as shown in the therapies Rizzuto sometimes refers to – and which I have personally verified as a practitioner. In clinical practice, it becomes sometimes apparent that the vicissitudes of transference impact are connected to the attitude toward the parents and God. On this notion, Rizzuto says, “The analyst, as a transferenceal and real object, occupies the *locus parentis*, a position that facilitates the revival of intense emotions bestowed by the analysed upon the divine representations.” (Rizzuto, 2001a, p. 26).

The symbolic transference

The attribute “symbolic”, in Milanese and Aletti’s model (1973), aims at underlining that what is transferred is not only an ‘image’ of the real father, but the outcome and the expectations included both in the lived experience of the real father and the symbol ‘father’ into a structured order of language of the culture a person belongs to. I am referring to the idea of ‘fatherhood’ that sometimes leads some patients to tell us while recalling their past, “I have never had a *true* father”.

A masterful methodological work

At this point, what it is worth highlighting is that an extremely relevant contribution of Rizzuto to the psychology of religion is her methodological approach to the exploration of the believer. I hold the view that this can be very helpful for the discussion we are likely to have in near future. Rizzuto’s research is a prime example of an epistemologically valid approach to the psychological experience toward religion. She investigates the psychic dynamics of belief but she does not make statements concerning the truth of religion or the ontological existence of God (Rizzuto, 1998b). Rizzuto emphasizes this notion in the introduction to her book, “This is not a book on religion. It is a clinical study of the possible origins of the individual’s private representation

of God and its subsequent elaborations” (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 3).

In describing how she approaches her work, she states, “My stance, therefore, is strictly psychoanalytic. That means that we attempt to understand any conscious phenomenon or event as the organized manifestation of simultaneously present unconscious processes.” (Rizzuto, 2001b, p. 201). Despite the huge task she has undertaken, Rizzuto doesn’t call herself a ‘psychoanalyst of religion’. Instead, she says, “My self-definition favours the term ‘psychoanalyst of people’s experiences’ with their internalized religious objects and beliefs.” (Rizzuto, 2012, p. 194). In describing herself, Rizzuto exemplifies what it means to work ‘in the light of psychoanalysis’, setting the boundaries of her endeavours to delineate the individual’s experience in all its complex wholeness. A final contribution that Rizzuto makes to the psychology of religion consists of elucidating the role of psychoanalysis in a field of psychology of religion through increasing the adoption of quantitative research (for better or for worse!).

Recently, when a fellow scholar, Pehr Granqvist, suggested replacing, in the psychology of religion, psychoanalysis with attachment theory (Granqvist, 2006), Rizzuto clarified the relationship that exists between quantitative group research and qualitative individual case studies (Rizzuto, 2006). According to her, psychoanalysis “is first and foremost a method for acquiring unique personal knowledge – a method based on a disciplined relationship, unique in its fundamental rules and emerging events, aimed at discovering the inner workings of the mind. What makes psychoanalysis an unsurpassed instrument for investigating is the possibility it provides to explore the workings of the mind in a living situation in which affective relational engagement is the cornerstone of a transformational process.” (Rizzuto, 2002, p. 434)

Developing topics

The emphasis on the idiosyncrasy and dynamicity of the God representation suggests that, actually, the topic covered in *The Birth of the Living God* mainly concerns the possible development paths of the *birth of the believing (or unbelieving) person*. Thanks to Rizzuto’s work, we are now well-equipped to take on the challenging but ultimately rewarding task of describing, in the light of psychoanalysis, the indi-

vidual’s infinitely varied religious experience in all its complex wholeness.

References

- Aletti, M. (2005). Religion as an illusion: prospects for and problems with a psychoanalytical model. *Archiv für Religionspsychologie/Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 27, 1-18.
- Aletti, M. (2014). Religion, illusion and their future in the light of psychoanalysis. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal/Psychology of Religion e-Journal*, 1(1), 3-23.
- Aletti, M. (2017). Becoming a believer, becoming an unbeliever. The contribution of Ana-María Rizzuto to the psychology of religion in the light of clinical practice. In M. J. Reineke & D. M. Goodman (Eds.), *Ana-María Rizzuto and the psychoanalysis of religion. The road to the living God* (pp. 47-64). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Aletti, M., & Antonietti, A. (2015). Defending psychology, respecting religion: The distinctiveness of the psychology of religion. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal/Psychology of Religion e-Journal*, 2(1-2), 23-30.
- Granqvist, P. (2006). On the relation between secular and divine relationships: An emerging attachment perspective and a critique of the ‘depth’ approaches. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 16, 1-18.
- Milanesi, G., & Aletti, M. (1973). *Psicologia della religione*. Torino: ElleDiCi.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (1976). Freud, God, and the Devil and the Theory of Object representation. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 3, 165-180.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (1979). *The birth of the living God. A psychoanalytic study*. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press. Trad. it. *La nascita del Dio vivente. Studio psicoanalitico*. Roma: Borla, 1994.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (Winter 1996/Spring 1997). Belief as a psychic function. *Newsletter. Psychology of Religion. American Psychological Association Division 36*, 1-7.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (1998a). *Why did Freud reject God? A psychodynamic interpretation*. New Haven, CT-London: Yale University Press. Trad. it. *Perché Freud ha rifiutato Dio?* Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore, 2000.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (1998b) Psychoanalytic psychotherapy and pastoral guidance. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 52 (1), 69-78.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (2001a). Vicissitudes of Self, object, and God representations during psychoanalysis / Trasformazioni delle rappresentazioni del Sé, dell’oggetto e di Dio in psicoanalisi. In M. Aletti & G. Rossi (Eds.),

- L'illusione religiosa: rive e derive* (pp. 25-55). Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (2001b). Religious development beyond the modern paradigm discussion. The psychoanalytic point of view. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11, 201-214.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (2002). Believing and personal and religious beliefs: Psychoanalytic considerations. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 25, 433-463.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (2006). Discussion of Granqvist's article "On the relation between secular and divine relationships: an emerging attachment perspective and a critique of the 'depth' approaches". *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 16, 19-28.
- Rizzuto, A.-M. (2012). An accidental psychologist of religion. In J. A. Belzen (Ed.), *Psychology of religion: autobiographical accounts* (pp. 185-200). New York: Springer.
- Vergote, A. (1966). *Psychologie religieuse*. Bruxelles: Charles Dessart. Trad. it. *Psicologia religiosa*. Roma: Borla, 1967.
- Vergote, A., Bonami, M., Custers, A., & Pattyn, M. R. (1967). Le symbole paternel et sa signification religieuse, *Archiv für Religionspsychologie*, 9, 118-140.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1968). Children learning. In *Home is where we start from* (pp. 143-149). London: Penguin Books.

This text was first presented at the Symposium in honour of Ana-María Rizzuto during IAPR conference in Hamar, 2017, with the title *Becoming a Believer, Becoming an Unbeliever – the contribution of Ana-María Rizzuto to the psychology of religion in the light of clinical practice*. This analysis is based both on the frank discussion I had with my friend Ana during the Boston Symposium in her honour in 2013 (now published in a book edited by Reineke and Goodman, see Aletti 2017), and on the private correspondence, we have had over the years.

Mario Aletti, psychoanalyst, is an adjunct professor of Psychology of Religion at Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy (Milano).

Corrispondenza / email: mario.aletti@gmail.com

Citazione (APA) / APA citation: Aletti, M. (2017). Becoming a believer, becoming an unbeliever. A response to Ana-María Rizzuto psychoanalytical model. *Psicologia della Religione e-journal*, 4(1-2), 17-21. <https://dx.doi.org/10.15163/2421-2520/2017A45e>.

Online: <http://www.PsyRel-journal.it>

