

The Psychology of Religious Representations - Development and Implications for Psychotherapy

Alexandru F. Popovici^{*iv}

***Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Psychology Department,
University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania**

Abstract

Introduction: *Thanks to a wider opening of psychology to the religious domain, mental health specialists need to be aware of their clients' spiritual orientation and religious background. Unfortunately, there are not many resources that facilitate the understanding of the psychological mechanism that form the spiritual dimension of life, but there is an increased interest for religious aspects in psychology. Regarding the therapeutic process, it is important to look at the ontogenetic experience of religiosity and spirituality as generators of meanings in understanding and assimilating the religious representations of God. Moreover, we need to understand the distinction between the image of God and the concept of God, the way in which they are developed through the life span and assimilated in terms of morals, values, and why and how they condition the perceptions of clients. Understanding the process of how representations are developed and structured and the psychology behind them, the therapist can intervene in the religious dimension of his clients, trying to make them conscious about the environmental factors which conditioned the forming of representations. Thus, the therapist and the client can construct a healthy representation based on the exploration of the client's primordial experiences.*

Objectives: *This paper aims to show how religious representations develop and how they can be used in therapy in the process of working with religious clients. Also, it aims to raise awareness on some spiritual issues starting with the need for understanding how religious representations develop. This is a primordial aspect of the therapeutic work because all the clients' perceptions about the world around them are developed under their notion and representation of God.*

Methods: *Literature investigation.*

Conclusions: *The understanding of how religious representations are formed is a key point in the therapeutic work. Since an insecure pattern of attachment may form a negative representation of God, the therapist will have the opportunity to work with the clients on investigating their past and their attachment to caregivers. At the same time, operating a distinction between the concept of God and the image of God gives a better understanding of how these concepts are loaded with meaning based on primordial social interactions.*

Keywords: *religious representations, image of god, concept of god, attachment style*

^{iv} Corresponding author: Alexandru-Filip Popovici, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Panduri 90, Sector 5, 050663, Bucharest, Romania. Email: filip_popovici@yahoo.com.

I. Introduction

God images, also called heart knowledge, refer to a pattern of internal representations of a divine figure and the relation between the attachment style and this image, as compared to the individual self (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013 apud. Davis, 2010). In other words, it reflects the emotional experience of the individual related to the image of God (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013 apud. Davis, 2010). The way in which these images are structured derives from the individual's life history. These cognitive images are learned and mentally encoded in a symbolic form. This fact is important because it speaks about the way in which the attachment to God is emotionally and physically experienced and perceived (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013). According to Lawrence (1997), the religious representations are different from other types of representations for several reasons. Firstly, they don't rely on a direct experience of God but on the association of events and memories created by the caregiver's actions towards the individual. And secondly, the individual can assign his own projections to these representations depending on his personal needs and his desire regarding how he would like God to be (Lawrence, 1997).

On the other hand, God concepts also called head knowledge refer to the set of personal beliefs about God. These beliefs are theological in nature and they define the whole relationship between the person and Divinity (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013). God concepts reflect the cognitive understanding of divinity and are determined by the theoretical and propositional knowledge of a community or religious group membership (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013; Hill & Hall, 2002). In other words, the individual associates a series of adjectival descriptors to God. The process of how God is represented in the mind is very important because the way in which God is conceptualized reflects the image of how God is perceived. This process can create a whole ideology which has the power to influence the person's worldview (Borg, 2009).

II. Integrating Psychology and Theology

In the Christian tradition, there were two models of religious representation developed in a pattern through history that reflects man's relationship with God (Borg, 2009, p. 65). This fact is highlighted by a series of research which revealed that God is conceived on the basis of two or three dimensions, ranging from masculine to feminine, benevolent to vengeful, loving to controlling or punishing (Meier & Meier, 2004 apud Vergote et al., 1969, 1980 Gorusch, 1968; Potvin, 1977;

Roberts, 1989). The first is the monarchical model which conceives God as a king, lord or father. This view leads to a relationship which involves a performative attitude from the believer. The second model is characterized by intimacy which leads to a positive relationship (Borg, 2009).

Regarding the first model, God is seen as a Father, and as a ruler of the Universe. In light of this, He is seen as omnipotent, as a lawgiver and judge. Emotionally, this conceptualization reflects the distance felt by the person (Borg, 2009). Because of the fact that God is perceived at the same time as loving and judging, the monarchical model is facing a dilemma. This dilemma translates into a conflict felt by the individual in his personal life. As a result of this, the monarchical model can result in anxiety and existential insecurities. The believer is striving to be thankful and at the same time attentive to the possible sins that might grieve God and cause a sense of guilt. The process of internalization of this image of God correlates with a low self-esteem and feelings of guilt, and at this level, God can be confused with the Superego (Borg, 2009; Faiver, O'Brien & Ingersoll, 2000).

The relational model requires a closer connection with God through a friendly relationship. This model emphasizes the closeness between man and God, unlike the monarchical model which highlights the distance. God is showing compassion and care about what happens to man. Although these metaphors signify the immanence of God, they also affirm His transcendence (Borg, 2009, p. 80).

III. Mental and neural representations

From a neurobiological point of view, these models form a series of neural circuits that activate the rational and the emotional processing systems (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch, 2013; Epstein, 1994). In neuroscience, there is an increasing amount of research designed to highlight the role of the brain in constructing the religious experience. On one hand, these studies take the form of pure physiological explanations as those proposed by Persinger (1987), in which the excitation of the temporal lobe and the neurochemical instability have an important role in mediating the religious experience. On the other hand, Albright (2000) believes that religious experience is more complex. He associates this process with a historical context where the person accumulates emotional information which has an important role in building the religious faith.

Moreover, Hamer (2004) believes that religiousness and spirituality have genetic determinants. The interest toward religion is generated by a protein

that mediates a variety of behavioral responses such as reward, reinforcement and associated emotions. Other studies provide important observations regarding the relationship between religion and its effect on individual lives, observing the relation between the spiritual and the material realm (Azari et al, 2001; Creswell et al., 2007; Newberg et al., 2003; Newberg și Waldman, 2009; Kjaer et. al., 2002; Kurup & Kurup, 2003).

According to the paradigm proposed by Siegel (1999), the way in which the brain processes information is substituted by a simple model where a mental symbol containing information creates an effect. This process originates in the interaction between the mind and the world around the subject (Siegel, 1999, p. 167). Such model is offered by Davis (2015). He speaks about the relational spirituality, which begins where the the mind, brain and social relations connect and link. According to him, when we talk about how people perceive God, conceptually and experientially, we are referring to the interconnections between the person's mind, brain and relationships (Davis, 2015).

IV. The development of religious representations

For Rizzuto (2007) religious representations arise in the context of a family's "dealings with the divinity" based on the relationship developed by the child's social interactions with his mother, father and himself. In Rizzuto's own words, "a similar phenomenon takes place in the transformation of the representation of primary objects and significant people in the course of life when new human relations call for some reorganization of the self" (Rizzuto, 2007, p. 29). So, the first primary objects identified by the child are his mother and father and those around him.

In this way, each new object learned by the brain will be classified and integrated into a class, mechanism through which an image is transformed into a concept or word. Regarding small children, they can only understand simple concepts because a deeper understanding of abstract concepts and complex words assimilation do not occur until later in adolescence (Ravid, 2006). In this way, Rizzuto explains the dynamics of representations that can be used to support or not a particular type of faith in God. However, whether the individual believes or not in God, the bonds formed consciously and unconsciously between the parents, himself, God and the culture, allow the individual to use and access his mental representation of God (Rizzuto, 2007, p. 29).

The quality of the relationships considered at an early age will be found later in adulthood in relation to how spirituality is experienced (Watts, Nye &

Savage, 2004, p. 89). Thus, the whole mechanism of how religious representations are formed (God image and God concepts) is subject to factors related to family and cultural conditioning. Considering the above, Rizzuto (2007) believes that the most significant aspect of the representations lies in the unconscious dynamics of parental representations and the way in which they are accessed and shared. From an early age, children project their emotions in internal images, thus creating a series of symbols from a large spectrum of emotions (Watts, Nye & Savage, 2004). This fact is due to their rich imagination. Also, the way in which the adults talk about Divinity in the presence of children will also have a role in forming the religious representations.

Some researchers believe that the image of the mother is the most important in structuring the representations although other studies contradict this idea (Jansen, De Hart & Gerardts, 1994, p. 106 apud. Strunk, 1959; Lawrence, 1997; Jansen, De Hart & Gerardts, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1992). However, this assumption takes into consideration the image of a wished-for parent (Jansen et al., 1994, p. 106, apud. Rizzuto, 1974, 1979; Birky & Ball, 1988) and the same-sex parent is considered as having a greater role in building the religious representations (Jansen et al., 1994 apud. Spilka et al., 1982).

The period of adolescence brings a reconfiguration and also an emotional release from the influence of parents' representations (Rizzuto, 2007 apud. Blos, 1979). This may coincide with a period of existential crisis and may impact the religious perspective of the young. Therefore, in Rizzuto's (2007) own words, "each new major emotional encounter with people contributes to modifications of God representations. Often they are silent and unnoticed; other times they appear as profound crises calling for a reorganization of the person's religious stance" (Rizzuto, 2007, p. 33). However, during adolescence, there may be a so-called period of intellectual independence. This implies that young people are becoming increasingly independent from their parents, both materially and physically. Also, they start to build their own values and direction in life (Watts, Nye & Savage, 2004).

An interesting conclusion is stated by a study on Dutch adolescents regarding the formation of religious representations. As the authors mention, the religion of adolescents is a pragmatic one, rooted in personal experience and defined by its functions and effects (Jansen, De Hart & Gerardts, 1994). In this way, the young are making their own religion, being reluctant to the religion of churches. In opposition to the

institutionalized religion, they prefer an abstract religion, without a specific content (Jansen, De Hart & Gerardts, 1994).

V. Two explaining paradigms: interpersonal relationship model and object relations theory

A notable contribution to understanding how representations are developed is the interpersonal relationship model proposed by Kirkpatrick and inspired from the work of Robert Weiss (Hill & Hall, 2002, apud. Kirkpatrick, 1992). Weiss has identified six relational bonds, starting from attachment – as the provision of security, affiliation – as a sense of social integration, persistent alliance – as commitment to the well-being of others, collaboration – as shared commitment, nurturance – as commitment to helping others and receiving help – as reliance on others (Hill & Hall, 2002, p. 366). Kirkpatrick applied this six relational bonds to the religious experience. Thus, he explained that the relationship with God can be seen as an attachment provision, and all other relational bonds can be regarded in the same way, structuring the religious experience and intermediating the God image construction through social interaction and needs satisfaction (Hill & Hall, 2002, p. 366).

This paradigm emphasizes the so-called "relational schema" – "the notion that people develop through the regularities they observe in their interpersonal relationship patterns" (Hill & Hall, 2002, p. 366 apud. Baldwin, 1992). This pattern emerges in a cognitive map used by individuals in their social environment and includes scripts and images of expected interactions with others and the self (Hill & Hall, 2002). This fact helps us to explain how the concept of religious representations is generated through the social relationships through which the person develops. For example, because Christianity involves a relationship with God, by studying the way in which the person relates, there can be found some certain assumptions regarding its image of God.

The relational perspective in building an image of God can be observed in the relational attachment type of the person. Regarding this, there were proposed two hypotheses. The first one suggests that religion serves as a surrogate to a person who is characterized by an insecure type of attachment. In this sense, religion represents a compensation for the lack of a securing attachment and relationship with the parents (Kirkpatrick, 1992). The second one is the correspondence hypothesis which considers that the foundation of the belief in God is based on the existence of a secure attachment (Hill & Hall, 2002). Kirkpatrick

(1992) believes that the child-parent relationship corresponds with the later development of relation with Divinity. In support of this hypothesis, a number of studies found a positive correlation between the formation of God's image and the preferred parent. Also, the loss of faith correlates with a weak relationship between child and parent (Kirkpatrick, 1992 apud. Bruder, 1947). In other words, the quality of the attachment relationship with parents in childhood plays an important role in the development of the level of religiosity (Kirkpatrick, 1992 apud. Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

Object relations theory is somewhat similar to the attachment theory, being developed from a psychoanalytic perspective. Some of the most important theoreticians are Melanie Klein, D.W Winnicott, and Otto Kernberg. According to this theory, as the young child will explore the world he will interact with various objects, including his own body. Besides this, the child's caregivers represent the most significant objects (Beck, 2006).

Therefore, this theory posits the primacy of relational experiences in shaping representations. Thus, according to Hill & Hall (2002), the small child experiences three realities: the reality of his own body and self, the awareness of others as objects and the knowledge of relations between his own self and others. As a result, interpersonal functioning is mediated by the representation of certain people, by the emotions attached to these representations and by the understanding of the relationship between self and others (Hill & Hall, 2002). All of these are constructing an entire representational field by which the individual guides himself in the world (Hill & Hall, 2002 apud. Sandler & Rosenblatt, 1962).

If the family background is supportive and the relationships with the caregivers are positive, the child will internalize a positive representational model of himself and others. Otherwise, the representations about oneself and others will be negative (Beck, 2006). If the child will grow in a religious context, he will experience the encounter with another "object", namely God. Because the concept of God is an abstract one for the child's mind, the religious representations (image and concept of God) will be formed through the relationships with others (Beck, 2006). These facts are relevant in the way that representations can be understood as a way of establishing a cognitive image of God through the relationship with others. Existing social exchanges in the family context help in building the relational model of the individual with Divinity.

VI. Implications for psychotherapy

The effort put in achieving a healthy model must take into consideration the need for a balance between the head and the heart knowledge. Regarding this, a healthy model consists "in the degree to which the various spiritual ingredients work together in synchrony" (Davis, 2015, p. 20 apud. Pargament, 2013). In this way, the concept of sacred which encompasses the manifestation of Divinity refers to the human potential that empowers the individual with the capacity of living his life with authenticity and vision and in an optimal regulation and equilibrium of his body, mind, and relationships (Davis, 2015). Moreover, a healthy spirituality can be defined as a congruence between head and heart knowledge or concept and image of God and as an expression of these in the life of the individual (Davis, 2015).

Opposed to these, an unhealthy representation refers to an incongruence between the concept and image of God (or head and heart). Investigating this types of unhealthy relation, Davis (2015) considered that this lack of congruence is determined by the "negative relational experiences" during childhood (p. 23). These findings are sustained by the theoretical framework described above and can be used by the therapist in his investigation of the case. For example, some individuals may feel very anxious and guilty when they think that they do not live to the moral standards required by Divinity. Also, they can experience God as being punitive and angry. In therapy, the psychotherapist must take into consideration the relational experience of his clients and must try to investigate the link between the caregiver's expectations and the head and heart knowledge formation.

Also, he must take into consideration that spirituality can lead toward different ways either as growth or decline (Pargament, 2007). This means that the process of concept and image formation must be deconstructed in order to understand how these representations were loaded with meaning from the interactions with others and from the social environment in which the client had lived.

Even if there are no specific techniques for spiritual interventions, there are a number of procedures that may help the therapist in dealing with his client's unhealthy representations. Regarding the head knowledge, an adaptive transformation can be made through discussion in order to develop the client's ability for critical thinking. Also, it is important for the client to confront his beliefs and the therapist must be open in accepting different views. Another method mentioned by Davis (2015) regards the acquisition of an accurate

conceptual knowledge of God, which can be made by the client's willingness to research and put into question his representations. Because the heart knowledge is linked to the head knowledge, here the therapist must take into consideration the experience lived by his client. He can use a series of exercises in order for the client to develop a deeper understanding of himself. In this aim, there are a couple of creative exercises derived from the experiential and gestalt therapy.

Introducing the client to therapeutic metaphors is a good way to raise awareness regarding the client's relational patterns and modalities of responses to different life events. For the therapist, this method offers freedom in designing therapeutic exercises depending on the client's needs and problems. Also, the client needs to be encouraged to develop a healthy relationship with others and with spiritual leaders from his social context.

As for the therapist, he must develop his spiritual ability in dealing with religious issues of clients. He must be willing to develop his sensibility to spiritual problems and give attention to the power of religious rituals and practices. Also, the client-therapist relationship can be a factor that contributes to a transformation of the incongruence between head and heart knowledge and can correlate with positive results rather than other interventions (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Being empathic and kind as a therapist, and also encouraging the clients even when they make mistakes can contribute to a corrective emotional experience (Davis, 2015).

VII. Conclusion

This paper synthesized a series of theories about how religious representations develop starting from childhood and from primordial interactions with the caregivers. Also, we emphasized the important distinction that needs to be made between the concept and image of God and head and heart knowledge in understanding the process of how the religious representation forms.

Because of the fact that these representations are incongruent, in the process of therapy, the therapist must be aware of the correspondence between the attachment style and how representations are constructed. Because of this fact, he must try to deconstruct these cognitive concepts and images together with the client. In the process of therapy, the therapist has the freedom to choose his techniques, but he must be aware of the client's needs in addressing spiritual issues.

References

- Albright, C.R. (2000). The "God Module" and the Complexifying Brain. *Zygon*, 35, 735-744.
- Azari, N.P., Nickel, J.P., Wunderlich, G., Niedeggen, M., Hefter, H., Tellmann, L. (2001). Neural Correlates of Religious Experience. *European Journal of Neuroscience*, 13, 1649-1652.
- Beck, R. (2006). Communion and Complaint: Attachment, Object-Relations, and Triangular Love Perspectives on Relationship with God. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 34(1), 43-52.
- Birky, I.T., Ball, S. (1988). Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation. *The Journal of Psychology*, 122(2), 133-137.
- Borg, M. (2009). *The god we never knew: beyond dogmatic religion to a more authentic contemporary faith*. Harper Collins e-books.
- Davis, E.B. (2015). Head and heart knowledge of God: Definitions, Development, Dynamics, and Change. <http://www.wheaton.edu/~media/Files/Academics/Faculty/DavisWard/Davis%202015%20%20Faith%20and%20Learning%20Paper%20Head%20and%20Heart%20Knowledge%20of%20God%20%20Definitions%20Development%20Dynamics%20and%20Change%20FINAL.pdf>. Accessed on August 2016.
- Creswell, J.D., Way, B.M., Eisenberg, N.I., Lieberman, M.D. (2007). Neural Correlates of Dispositional Mindfulness During Affect Labeling. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 69(6), 560-565.
- Davis, B.E., Moriarty, L.G., Mauch, C.J. (2013). God Images and God Concepts: Definitions, Development, and Dynamics. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 5(1), 51-60.
- Epstein, S. (1994). Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious. *American Psychologist*, 49(8), pp. 709-724.
- Faiver, C.M., O'Brien, E.M., Ingersoll, R.E. (2000). Religion, Guilt, and Mental health. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78, pp. 155-161.
- Gorusch, R.L. (1968). The Conceptualization of God as Seen in Adjective Ratings. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 7(1), pp. 56-64.
- Hamer, D. (2004). *The God gene: how faith in hardwired into our genes*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hill, P.C., Hall, T.W. (2002). Relational Schemas in Processing One's Image of God and Self. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 21(4), 365-373.
- Janssen, J., De Hart, J., Gerards, M. (1994). Images of God in Adolescence. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 4(2), 105-121.
- Kirkpatrick, L.A. (1992). An Attachment Theory Approach Psychology of Religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2(1), 3-28.
- Kjaer, T.W., Bertelsen, C., Piccini, P., Brooks, D., Alving, J., Hou, H.C. (2002). Increased Dopamine Tone During Meditation-Induced Change of Consciousness. *Brain Res Cog*, 13(2), 255-259.
- Koenig, G.H., Pritchett, J. (1998). Religion and Psychotherapy. In Harold, G.K (ed), *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* (pp. 323-336). London: Academic Press.
- Kurup, R.K., Kurup, P.A (2003). Hypothalamic Digoxin, Hemispheric Chemical Dominance, And Spirituality. *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 113(3), 383-393.
- Lambert, M.J., Barley, D.E (2001). Research Summary on the Therapeutic Relationship and Psychotherapy Outcome. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38(4), pp. 357-361.
- Lawrence, R.T. (1997). Measuring The Image of God: The God Image Inventory and the God Image Scales. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 25(2), 214-226.
- Meier, A., Meier, M. (2004). The formation of adolescents' image of God: predictors and age and gender differences. In Richard, D., David, O. (Eds.). *The image of God and the psychology of religion* (pp. 91-111). Binghamton: The Haworth Press, Inc.
- Newberg, A., Pourdehnad, M., Alavi, A., d'Aquili, E.G. (2003). Cerebral Blood Flow During Meditative Prayer: Preliminary Findings and Methodological Issues. *Perceptual Motor Skills*, 97(2), 625-630.
- Newberg, A., Waldman, M.R. (2009). *How God changes our brain*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing House.
- Pargament, K.I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: understanding and addressing the sacred*. The Guilford press: New York.
- Persinger, M.A. (1987). *Neuropsychological bases of God beliefs*. New York: Praeger.
- Potvin, H.R. (1977). Adolescent God Images. *Review of Religious Research*, 19(1), pp. 43-53.
- Ravid, D. (2006). Semantic Development in Textual Contexts During School Years: Noun Scale Analyses. *Journal of Child Language*, 33, 791-821.
- Rizzuto, A. (2007). God in the Mind: The Psychodynamics of an Unusual Relationship. *Ann. Psychoanal.*, 35, 25-46.
- Roberts, C.W. (1989). Who Is Created in Whose Image? *Review of Religious Research*, 30(4), pp. 375-386.
- Siegel, D.J. (1957). *The developing mind: how relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Watts, F., Nye, R., Savage, S. (2004). *Psychology for christian ministry*. London: Taylor & Francis e-Library.