
The genesis of religious thought in childhood - II. A Psychoanalytic perspective

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ABSTRACT: Freud grounds the origins of religion in the essential fact that every child loves and admires his/her father, who seems to him the most omnipotent being. These childhood illusions are the bases for constructing the perennial roots of God mental representations in the human being. He declared religion as an obsessional neurosis, whose symptoms characterized by disturbed repetitions are attempts to ward off guilty feelings. Diverging from Freud's driving model for the study of the genesis of religion, Rizzuto (1979) used the object relations model for her approach to religious phenomena, concluding that the construction of the sense of self is an outcome of a dialectical interaction with a God representation. This author understands God as a transitional representation, in Winnicottian terms, that can be recreated in each developmental crisis. For her, humankind is inherently religious, being religion a natural aspect of human development. God representation has the psychic function of self-integration and Ego cohesion, and religiosity starting in childhood can be a sign of health as a sign of pathology.

KEY WORDS: religion; origins; God representations; childhood.

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Introduction

This is the second part of a trilogy of essays focusing the origins of religiousness in the child. The first part, regarding a Piagetian perspective, was published elsewhere (Sousa et al., 2001a).

Our attempt here is to clarify the genesis of individual religiousness from a psychoanalytic point of view (the third part will focus the attachment theory (Sousa et al., 2001b), ending our investigation with an interdisciplinary view of religious constructs that regard a triple theoretical analysis. In the present essay we will examine the contributions of psychodynamic authors, starting with Freud.

Sigmund Freud

In 1914 Freud referred that “a little boy is bound to love and admire his father, who seems to him the most powerful, the kindest and the wisest creature in the world” (p.243). These childhood illusions are the bases for constructing the perennial roots of God mental representations in the human being, depending its consolidation on these omnipotent psychic images. It is a process of exaltation or idealization of the childhood’s internalized father. “God himself”, defended Freud, “is after all an exaltation of this picture of the father as he is represented in the mind of early childhood” (1914, p.243). This formulation points to the oedipal organization of the child’s mind and constitutes the roots of religious thought. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud “located the origin of religion in the history of the primal horde of sons who kill the primal father because he has prohibited sexual relations with the women of the clan. Thus is the oedipal drama enacted in the childhood of mankind. The evil deed is repressed but it returns as guilt. The need to overcome this guilt through reconciliation with the slain patriarch is projected first onto a totem animal and later onto a heavenly father” (Jones, 1991, p.35).

In 1913 Freud declared religion as an obsessional neurosis, whose symptoms characterized by disturbed repetitions are attempts to ward off guilty feelings. Unconscious killing wishes of the son directed to murder the father are the motivation for guilt. The idealization of the dead father is the main factor for the internal construction of son’s god.

In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) Freud stressed that the *illusion* was the religious thought of immortality, promising reward people in the hereafter.

The *future*, in the same Freudian assumption, “would bring a weakening of the religious illusion” (Jones, 1991). Freud believed that a scientific explanation of the world phenomena would substitute religious beliefs. For the reader interested in those subjects we recommend William Meissner’s 1984 book *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*.

Ana-Maria Rizzuto

Diverging from Freud's driving model, Rizzuto (1979) used the object relations model for her approach to religious phenomena. She collected data from three sources: (a) religious convictions of psychiatric patients (through interviews and patients' drawing pictures of their families and their gods), (b) on the families, (c) developmental histories.

As Jones (1991) pointed out (pp.42ss) Rizzuto proposed four main theses:

- (1) internal representations are constructed as very complex structures in the child; this construction includes, among other things, somatic sensations, affective experiences, abstract concepts and a full "image" of the *relation* with the object or significant other (and not the *pictorial* and *static* image of the mother);
- (2) these complex memories of early experiences "are consolidated into more complex sets of representations [. . .] an internal representation of the child's mother may be an amalgamation of sensations of being held and rocked, the sound of her voice and the feelings it generated, and the need to idealize her" (Jones, 1991, p.42);
- (3) as a real philosopher, the young child wonders about the origin of the world (things and people). Dana, a four years old girl, asked "who is the mother of all people?" "Does Father in Heaven has a [magic] rod, like the fairies?" Rizzuto's idea is that the notion of God is "developmentally necessary to ground our earliest awareness of the existence of things [. . .] the idea of God [is necessary] to answer the question 'why'" (Jones, 1991, pp.42-3);
- (4) the internal representation of God "is created from representational materials whose sources are the representations of primary objects" (Rizzuto, 1979, p.178) such as mother, father, significant others.

The Latin word *religio* means 'to bind together'. This central meaning summarizes the contemporary psychoanalytic comprehension of religion as 'binding experiences together', in the sense that the construction of the sense of self is an outcome of a dialectical interaction with a God representation.

Around the fourth or fifth year of life the child starts to deep questioning the world he sees and is beyond his comprehension. These are probably the moments of starting the construction of the internal God. The early experiences with the mother-father object (his integrity, coherence, affective reactions) are essential components of earliest internal God. But, what is the mental space this God representation is created? Following Winnicott, Rizzuto answered "the transitional space",

halfway between hallucination and physical reality. “In this realm of imagination, the child creates a *private* but *real* world of transitional objects—teddy bears, imaginary friends, security blankets, personal games, magical beliefs [. . .] [this is a validation to] the importance of fantasy and the imagination for mental health. . .” (Rizzuto, 1979, p.46ss, italics added).

“We have forgotten”, Rizzuto continued, “the powerful reality of nonexistent objects, objects of our creation [...] The fictive creations of our minds [...] have as much regulatory potential in our psychical function as people around us in the flesh [...] Human life is impoverished when these immaterial characters made out of innumerable experiences vanish under the repression of a psychic realism that does violence to the ceaseless creativity of the human mind. In this sense, at least, religion is not an illusion. It is an integral part of human being, truly human in our capacity to create nonvisible but meaningful realities [...] Without those fictive realities human life becomes a dull animal existence” (p.47). A central notion to be mentioned is that for Rizzuto (as for Winnicott and as many others contemporary researchers) ‘fictive’ means, paradoxically, ‘real’, in the sense that fictive entities (“muses, guardian angels, heroes . . . the Devil, God himself . . . unseen atoms, imaginary chemical formulas” (p.27) generally have a heavy impact on human life and “*their psychic power constitutes their reality*” (Jones, 1991, p.44).

Although we can diverge of Rizzuto’s emphasis on the “nonexperiential” (p.179) aspect of the representation of God (we have more coincidence with Winnicott’s original idea of a transitional space as an area of *experiencing*) we would like to stress the remarkable concept she developed regarding the differentiation between God transitional representation and other common transitional objects. She said that the infinite plasticity of God representation opens the fundamental possibility of creating “a God according to his needs” (p.179). In the Winnicottian theory transitional objects are not forgotten as well as not mourned, they are transformed by losing their meaning throughout life. God representation as a special transitional object runs through a different way where the acquisition of new meanings is the expected evolution. “Rizzuto focuses too much on the transitional *object* and not enough on the transitional experience. Thus she often makes God sound like a supernatural version of the teddy bear and then speculates on why the deity is not discarded like other such “objects”. But what is important here is not an object but the capacity for experience and perhaps one’s God is not discarded because it is the carrier of that capacity par excellence” (Jones, 1991, p.46-7).

As you would remember Freudian atheism was conceived as a norm for the mature people. Rizzuto’s position, on the contrary, understands that to reach maturity through life people need “God as a transitional representation [that can be] recreated in each developmental crisis if it is to be found relevant for lasting belief” (p.208). This central image of God carries an ongoing series of transformations, making that

the inner meaning of personal God is continually being updated, according to internal and external experiences through life (Jones, 1991). Maybe Rizzuto's conceptual frame is a little bit outdated, because she emphasized internalized *objects* instead of internalized *relationships*—this last concept more convergent to postmodern paradigm.

In conclusion, for Rizzuto (1979) humankind is inherently religious, being religion a natural aspect of human development. God representation has the psychic function of self-integration and Ego cohesion, and religiosity starting in childhood can be a sign of health as a sign of pathology.

Winnicottian notes

Struggling to go beyond the positivistic dichotomy *objectivity vs. subjectivity*, Winnicott (1971) carries into psychoanalysis a new form to approach reality, i.e., the concept of a third mental space—transitional space—where he describes the simultaneity of objective-subjective perceptions of the internal-external world. Of course this approach is part of a larger cultural concern (Jones, 1982), accordingly to postmodern paradigm.

Approaching reality through the Winnicottian *transitional process* implies three main components: (1) an *interpersonal matrix* relating internal and external worlds, (2) the psychic-somatic *use* of the external object in the service of internal psychic-somatic states (anxiety, fear, longing, hunger), (3) an external object *availability* that facilitate (stimulate) the transit from subjective world to objective world and vice-versa. Psychoanalytic authors have been applying this schema to psychodynamic studies of religion. Rizzuto (1979) stressed *imaginative and playing* aspects in relation to God representations constructed through life. Meissner (1984) stressed religious forms as transitional *objects*.

Concluding remarks

Our self is a relational self. This means that “the dynamics of selfhood are the dynamics of interconnection” (Jones, 1991, p.64) or, in Rizzuto's terms (1975), a dialectical or dialogical dynamics. She (Rizzuto) implies that the God representation would serve to ground the sense of self that originates in the early childhood.

Criticizing Freud's and Rizzuto's (1975) assumptions, Jones (1991, pp.62ss) in deepening studies on the relations between two central concepts—transference and transcendence—, introduced the notion of “*transferential ground*” (p.64), stressing as focus of analysis the person's *relationship*, i.e., her *affective bond* with what is sacred. He (Jones) claims for a new psychoanalysis of religion, pointing that religion is neither to be primarily defined as defense mechanisms against sexual or destructive drives, nor as a manifestation of internalized objects. Rather,

Jones (1991) continued, religion might be defined as a *relationship* “with God, the sacred, the cosmos, or some reality beyond the phenomenal world of space and time” (p.63). For Jones the origin of religion “would be found not in the need to ward off the return of the repressed nor in the process of consolidating internal object representations, but in the necessity for every cohesive and energetic self to exist in a *matrix of relationships*” (p.63, emphasis added).

For Rizzuto (1975), as for Jones (1991), the idea of God is necessary to ground (in development) the earliest awareness of the existence of things and probably to ground the sense of who we are (remember Dana’s questions referred above). “The child who feels secure grounds that security in a caring God; the child who feels guilty and terrible grounds that sense of self by reference to a wrathful God; the child who feels estranged envisions a distant deity or dreams of a compensatory, warm, and tender selfobject (in Kohutian terms) God” (Jones, 1991, p.63, explanation added).

RESUMO: Freud situa as origens da religião no fato central de que a criança ama e admira seu pai, para quem ele parece o mais onipotente dos seres. Estas ilusões infantis são a base para a construção de raízes perenes das representações mentais de Deus no ser humano. Freud declarou a religião como uma neurose obsessiva, cujos sintomas repetitivos eram tentativas de livrar-se de sentimentos de culpa. Divergindo do modelo pulsional de Freud para o estudo da gênese da religião, Rizzuto usou o modelo das relações objetais, concluindo que a construção do sentido de si mesmo na criança é o resultado de uma interação dialética com uma representação de Deus. Esta autora compreende Deus como uma representação transicional, em termos winnicottianos, que podem ser recriadas em cada crise de desenvolvimento. A representação de Deus tem a função psíquica de auto-integração e coesão do Ego, e a religiosidade que se inicia na infância pode ser um sinal de saúde como de patologia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: religião; origens; representações de Deus; infância.

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