



## The relationship between psychology and religion

The relationship between psychology and religion has been quite contradictory for most of the twentieth century. Each domain has been seen as superior: being a psychologist prevents you from taking religion seriously, and being a religious type of person hinders you from taking psychology seriously. Psychology involves observing people, understanding and analyzing their behavior objectively, taking into account all the events that had or still have impact on their lives. This has led to the fact that psychology of religion is obviously a paradox, an impossibility that undermines the belief in God. Here we are going to look at spirituality through the view of science.

Our first topic is **Freud**. As we all know the father of psychoanalysis, this method was used for treating neurotic illnesses. Despite being controversial but fascinating at the same time, in his articles he describes religion as less plausible and authentic, calling it even 'universal obsessional neurosis', which might have been comforting at one time, but is no longer needed in our enlightened times. Freud's most remarkable book on religion was *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Here he uses a piece of speculative early history due to Darwin, that over many generations 'hordes' of primitive men had been dominated by single dominant males, who had appropriated all the women and driven off or killed the other males, including their sons. The brothers then co-operated to kill and eat the father, and seize the women. This led to great guilt feelings, and possible collapse of the social group; the result was a taboo on killing the totem animal, taken to symbolise the tribe, and now symbolising the father, and becoming the god, and a taboo on sex with female members of the in-group. Both the totem animal and the god symbolise the father. His most influential theory about religion is that God is a projected father-figure, based on early experience of the real father, and who like him is needed as a source of protection, but who is also the source of fear and guilt (1910, and later papers). This theory is based on the theory of the Oedipus complex, according to



which small boys between the ages of 4 and 7 have a kind of love affair with their mothers, including infant sexuality with genital stimulation, which is frustrated by the father, a feared rival. This is resolved by identifying with the father and internalising his image as the super-ego. This attitude to the father develops during the long period in which children are dependent and need protection. The enmity to the father is repressed but guilt feelings still remain. This theory explains why God is seen as a father, and why guilt feelings are associated with religion. A central part of Freud's general theory is about sexual symbolism. He thought that there is widespread interest in attachment to physical objects of certain shapes depicting and resembling male and female reproductive organs. The idea that objects act as sexual symbols has been confirmed in research into nonreligious aspects of symbolism; pointed objects are recognised as male, rounded ones as female (Kline, 1981). Since religious practice is full of strange ritual objects and practices, psychoanalysts believe that these are often sexual symbols. Let us take for instance the story about Adam and Eva. This story consists of a great variety of sexual symbols but there are not many contradictions on that as well: it is considered that the snake represents sex (as it is a devilish creature); the apple is a breast; eating the apple is the intercourse, the tree could represent the father or the mother; and Eden may be perceived as a blissful relationship between a mother and a child (Wulff, 1997).

**Jung** is the father of the collective unconscious. He did not think that religion was a neurosis like Freud did, but he saw it as needed for personality growth. His main 'discovery' or new idea was that certain common themes could be seen in the dreams of his patients, in a number of world religions and myths, and in alchemy. Later he recognised that these themes also appeared in works of art (1968). His method was to study dreams, both of patients and from historical records, and to study religion and myth. Anyone who has had such a dream, has had any acquaintance with primitive religion, or has paid a visit to an art gallery will confirm that symbols like these are indeed common and some of them recur. On the other hand they have been of great interest to religious thinkers, have been used in devotional practice, and have been widely used in psychotherapy. The archetypes are the sphere of religion for Jung, and it is accessed by dreams. The sun is



symbolised by a lion, gold, and a king, and represents the power for life and health. It has been worshipped in some primitive religions, and we can see why this is an archetypal theme—the otherworldly power and energy, the daily and seasonal rise and fall, life and death, and the night journey into the psychic world. Mother means the principle of maternal care and sympathy, fertility and rebirth, but also the underworld of the dead. Mother is symbolised in many ways, by goddesses, the Virgin, the sea, night or moon, and her evil side by deep water and the grave. Father is similar, but there are other male archetypes such as the Wise Old Man. This stands for understanding, meaning and moral qualities, and is symbolised by a priest, professor, etc. The child is about the origins of life, growth and self-realisation, and symbolises the hidden potential for marvellous growth. Symbols for the child include a monkey, a jewel or a golden ball. The treasure is symbolised by a jewel or other valued object, sometimes protected by a serpent or a dragon, in a cave. However, it is really self-realisation or salvation, the discovery of the self. The Self represents God, and is the archetype of wholeness, the integration and perfection of the personality, the result of individuation. It includes conscious and unconscious, and contains the balance between opposites in the personality. It can be expressed geometrically by the mandala, by kings and queens, by religious figures like gods and goddesses, Christ and Buddha, by animals like the dragon or lion, by the alchemists' philosopher's stone, which is able to transform gold, and by the Holy Grail. One of Jung's patients reported 400 dreams, of which 71 contained the four-sided mandala. These different symbols all stand for an archetype that is both God and at the same time the centre of the self. The self and God are closely related, the self being God within us, 'God, who is present everywhere, is most accessible to us within our own souls' (Bryant, 1983:41). The shadow is the suppressed, unconscious part of the personality, and is symbolised by the Devil, a snake or original sin. It is in contrast to the persona, the public self, which conforms to social expectations. The anima is for males the female principle, part of the shadow derived first from the mother; good parts of it are symbolised by saints or fairies, bad versions by whores. For women the shadow contains the animus, the male principle, which can be symbolised by a variety of male types. Jung was very sympathetic to religion, and assumed that religious experiences could be accepted at face value. But he saw them all as symbols of his archetypes.



God is an archetype, an unknowable part of the collective unconscious, but experienced through symbols. These have taken a variety of forms in the history of religion, including Christ, Buddha, kings and queens, dragons and other animals, and God is known through numinous religious experiences. The Trinity: Jung observed that similar groups of three gods appear in other religions, but he believed that a symmetrical four-sided pattern, the mandala, would make it more complete. The fourth side could be Satan, a shadow, making further growth possible in the self, or it could be feminine, and he approved the promotion of the Virgin Mary by the Catholic Church. The eucharist: Jung recognised that this has been a very pervasive symbol, but of what exactly? First he traces it back to early shamanism, with its mysteries and sacrifices, including sacrifices of gods in order to be reborn and fertilise the crops. The Christian eucharist recalls how God sent his own son, who is also himself, to be sacrificed; however, the son rises again, and so do participants in the eucharist, who sacrifice the selfish, broken-off part of the ego, and the self is transformed (1954). Christ: for Jung the main archetype is the 'self', which also corresponds to God. Christ is one of the main symbols for the Self, though there are others, such as the philosopher's stone. He is seen as perfect, but incomplete, since he lacks a 'shadow'. The separation of Christ from God, at his birth, symbolises our human separation from our parents. Christ's death symbolises the necessary sacrifice of the ego in order to become more complete. Religious dogmas arise from religious experiences, and together with rituals give protection against further disturbing religious experiences. Protestantism abandoned the Catholic dogmas and rituals and as a result modern man has been in a state of restlessness and fear ever since (1938). The spiritual journey, 'individuation': the integration of the personality is self-realisation, the achievement of wholeness, which consists of the combination of opposites, of conscious and unconscious, accepting what has been repressed, finding the self. This is a particular task for the second half of life, and for psychotherapy. It is also a religious quest, since the self is a religious archetype represented by religious symbols. The worship of God gives liberation from human inadequacy; such transformation is found in initiation rites. Symbols of transcendence represent man's striving to attain the goal of self-realisation. There are many symbols which point to these archetypes, such as the bird (transcendence), the snake (healing), animal sacrifice (suppressing our animal



nature), human sacrifice and rebirth, also the rising sun (growth by abandoning part of previous nature). Watts and Williams (1988) suggest that seeking knowledge of God is like trying to find the true self and then living it. Individuation is a kind of therapeutic and also a religious process. Is all this true? We don't know yet; there is no relevant research. Other religious ideas include gnosticism. The gnostic set of beliefs saw the world as in a state of conflict between good and evil; for Jung this symbolised the inner conflicts in the personality, an example of opposites. Salvation could be obtained by mystical knowledge which could reconcile the two sides. Alchemy was about experiments to transform base metals into gold, which Jung saw as symbolising the transformation of the personality as it achieves integration. Jung interpreted the biblical story of Job as revealing that God Psychology and religion himself has a dark side, a shadow, which is violent and unjust. Job comes to know this and God has to atone by the incarnation. This part of Jung's writings is not popular within theologians.

Source: <https://alingavreliuc.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/m-argyle-psychology-and-religion.pdf>, pages 77-85

### **Erikson: Basic trust**

Erik Erikson devoted little interest to the phylogenetic origins of religion, but was more elaborate than Freud in specifying which personal experiences with parents (mother) that were thought to be linked to the individual's subsequent faith; that is, in elaborating on individual differences in religiosity, and their ontogenetic origins. Taking his own stage theory of psychosocial development as the point of departure, Erikson (1959, 1963) claimed that such experiences with the mother that help the infant to favorably resolve the first crisis of life, to obtain basic trust rather than mistrust, is the cornerstone of faith and hope in adult life. As in the Freudian ontogenetic analysis, Erikson linked the adult's use of myths and rituals to regression as a defense mechanism, but rather than implying that this would be



immature and something which the adult should sustain from, his analysis implies regression in the service of the ego, that is, regression that serves important mental survival functions and, hence, potentiates mental progression. Religion thus becomes a symbolic and collective arena in which the individual may be helped to continually resolve the crisis of trust vs. mistrust. According to Erikson, there are three factors in the child's life that determine the development of the child's God image, each being a characteristic of the child's relationship with his or her mother: (1) the affective tone of the relationship, (2) the presence or absence of mutual recognition, and (3) the experience of being abandoned by the mother. The affective tone, in favorable circumstances, is described by Erikson as a kind of sanctified presence, leaving behind a reminiscence of which the feeling of God's invisible presence (e.g., in rituals) is an adult religious counterpart. Concerning mutual recognition, the important task is to establish a sense of being "seen" by and being able to "see" the other face to face, and to feel accepted as an individual during these encounters. An analogy in religious life is to feel accepted and loved by a benevolent and caring God. In Erikson's theory, this mutual recognition is the foundation of a later sense of identity. The flip side of developing the capacity to differentiate between self and (m)other, however, is a sense of feeling abandoned by her. In essence, it is this conflict of developing one's own self (underlying identity formation), while feeling abandoned in doing so, that religion helps the individual to come to terms with. In establishing a personal relationship with the deity, the individual may reestablish the security associated with "the paradise lost". Erikson did not devote a collected effort in any one book or paper to develop a unified theory of religion. Instead, his thoughts were scattered across books and papers without ever being fully formalized. Others, most notably Fowler (1981) and Oser (1991), have used Erikson's stage theory (in addition to Piaget's, Kohlberg's etc.) to derive more formalized accounts of the development of religiosity. However, such applications have been more inclined to describe maturational religiosity development, applying the notions of discrete and hierarchical stages quite literally. In addition, when individual differences have been described, these applications concern more "cognitive" differences, depending on the solution to the particular maturational task at hand, than, for instance, differences in the affective tone of the God image and relationship with God.



Source: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:161469/FULLTEXT01.pdf>,  
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Another vigorous area of research is that of religious conversion or spiritual transformation. The effects of religious conversion on personality change was one of the first topics studied with empirical research methods when psychology emerged as a science over one hundred years ago (James 1902, Starbuck 1899). The term „spiritual transformation” is used here to denote what is understood widely in the psychology of religion literature as a “conversion experience.” Some researchers have begun to use the term “quantum change” to highlight the profound nature of this religious experience (Miller & C’de Baca 2001). However, it must be noted that one’s spiritual transformation can be profound whether it occurs gradually or via a sudden experience. Much of the contemporary scientific psychological research examines the relationship between the self or personality and spiritual transformation. For example, Zinnbauer & Pargament (1998) gave a group of spiritual converts, a group who experienced gradual religious change, and a group of religious adherents who reported no religious change (all subjects were Christian undergraduate students), measures of stress, life events, motivation for change, and sense of self. The authors posited that spiritual conversion should lead to radical personal change. However, they found that self definition changed markedly for both spiritual and gradual converts. In addition, the spiritual converts reported more preconversion stress and perception of personal inadequacy, more improvement in their personal competence, and more spiritual experiences after conversion.

Kirkpatrick (1997, 1998) has published two longitudinal studies of religious conversion. In his 1997 study, 146 women readers of the Denver Post were surveyed approximately 4 years apart (times T1 and T2, respectively) about a variety of religious commitments. Of concern was whether different adult attachment styles predicted religious commitment. He found that when religion at



time T1 was statistically controlled, those with an insecure-anxious or an insecure-avoidant adult attachment style were more likely than those with a secure attachment style to report finding a new relationship with God by time T2. Insecure-anxious subjects were more likely than those who had secure or ambivalent attachments to report having had a religious experience or a religious conversion during this time period.

These results were interpreted as supporting the compensation hypothesis in attachment theory: God serves as a substitute attachment figure for those having difficulty forming human bonds. These findings were replicated and extended in a follow-up study (Kirkpatrick 1998) in which college students were assessed for their attachment styles and religiousness approximately 4 months apart.

Based upon their systematic review of the literature, Paloutzian et al. (1999) argue that spiritual transformation experiences appear to have minimal effect on the “elemental” functions of personality (the Big Five). The Big Five personality traits are *Openness to experience*, *Conscientiousness*, *Extraversion*, *Agreeableness* and *Neuroticism*. However, they suggest that spiritually transforming experiences can result in profound life changes at the mid-level functions of personality such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, these researchers posit that “self-defining” personality functions (such as identity, life meaning) do change dramatically after a spiritual transformation. Few studies published to date are immune from methodological shortcomings such as reliance on cross-sectional, retrospective designs and near total reliance on measures of self-perceived change.

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### **Socially desirable responding**

When people feel that their behavior is being monitored, they tend to cast themselves in a positive light. If God primes make people feel watched, then they should also increase socially desirable responding. Although previous research demonstrates a positive association between religiosity and socially desirable



responding (e.g. Burris & Navara, 2002), we are unaware of any experiments demonstrating a causal relationship. We hypothesized that, because perceived social surveillance increases socially desirable responding (e.g., Sproull et al., 1996), implicitly priming God concepts would also increase socially desirable responding. God primes increased socially desirable responding, an effect entirely driven by High Believers. These findings converge with the first two experiments to demonstrate that, for believers (and possibly some nonbelievers), thoughts of God increase perceptions of being under social surveillance.

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*This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This web site reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*