

## INVITED ESSAY

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# What the Psychology of Religion Is and What It Is Not

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Often an unreflective perspective that governs the psychology of religion is vaguely philosophical, theological, or sociological. As empirical science, psychology starts by taking religion as a specific cultural fact. It does not have the competence to explain religion or to make truth judgments, nor is its task to supply sociology with accurate instruments of observation. It examines subjective factors: drives, desires, emotional reactions, and experiences that are involved in the ways individuals positively or negatively relate to given culturally contextualized religious tokens (language, symbols, behaviors). Many confused concepts must be broken down, including religious needs, experience, and maturity. Subjective religiousness and nonreligion should be studied as they actually present themselves, as dynamic processes of (re)solution of conflicting but interacting religious and psychological factors. When psychological and religious causes interact, research can focus on subjective religion as either a dependent or an independent variable. Only this perspective allows psychology to achieve proper psychological interpretations of particular subjects or populations and to set up lawful regularities.

This article aims to provide and defend my conception and broad outlines of the psychology of religion. I am conscious that my view is controversial. Within the whole domain of psychology, the study of religion especially is a hazily defined tradition. Having seriously read a lot of these studies in

different languages, I am convinced that an important task is to define the boundaries, to deconstruct our inherited modes of approach, and to determine clearly the competence and the possible scope of psychology of religion. Over the years my endeavor has been simultaneously to clarify the basic principles while applying and testing them in empirical research.

## PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION

Linguistically the terms *religious psychology* and *psychology of religion* can be considered equivalent. In scientific terminologies an adjectival expression often determines the object of a discipline. However, for many people *religious psychology* evokes a psychology that evolves within a religious conception of "humane" and that consequently tends to detect the psychological roots of religion, eventually fostering a natural, psychological, and religious disposition. Therefore I prefer the label *psychology of religion*, which clearly states the objective and empirical scope of that psychology. This label, however, also gives way to misunderstandings. It may suggest that psychology explains religion as such. Actually both views involve the preconception that religion has an essentially psychological nature. With this preconception two ways of thought have indeed been followed. Either the religious disposition is supposed to be a product psychologically reducible to natural, nonreligious psychological processes (e.g., Freud), or it is supposed to be innate to deep psychic structures (e.g., Jung). Today no psychologist would conceive the psychology of language explaining language as such, nor would social psychologists consider the development of social behavior as if it explained the institutional and cultural forms because they are aware that these forms shape the training of infants. With respect to religion, the confusion is still impressive, and simple theories often make the psychology of religion a muddled field. The reason probably is that in no other branch of psychology are psychologists so much personally involved with their own emotional reactions and implicit philosophical conceptions.

To safeguard the psychology of religion and the objective empirical research it should be based on, it is of the utmost importance first, to determine and view correctly the object of its study, and second, to outline the specific competence of psychology concerning this object.

## RELIGION

The mass of significant phenomena that can be considered religious or quasi-religious may seem so varied that to attempt a general definition

defeats all logic. This notwithstanding, cultural history tells of Hindu, Jewish, Greek, Christian, and so-called primitive religions. A religion, therefore, is a specific form, present within the world of culture. As such it is an objectively identified reality that historians study. Considering a religion, we can distinguish several observable components in it: rituals, symbolic figures, and different kinds of prayers. We call them specifically religious when they refer to beings or a being who is neither merely natural nor human but who is thought to be spiritual, divine, or transcendent, and who is supposed to be in some way at the origin of the world or (and) of the society, who has an influence on the lives of the individuals, on society, and eventually on natural events. These ideas are transmitted by a language, and by symbols and rituals. Hearing the religious language, watching the ritual practice, and perceiving the symbolic figures provoke a variety of emotions or "religious feelings." Individuals who are religious are in some way initiated into a religion.

My contention is that a psychologist should take into account the status of religion as an objective feature within culture. It does not follow from this principle that a psychologist studies only individuals belonging to a definite religion. Neither does the delimitation of religion imply that any form of religion is considered higher or definitively valuable. Nevertheless, without first setting boundaries to the object of study, there are no specific questions to examine.

There are also common factors between religion and other interests or institutions (in the sense of organized systems of personal and social values, rituals, metaphoric language, symbols, and emotional involvement). To call them all religious goes against natural language. To consider each system of values involving money, sex, hygiene, art, and so on "religious" and consequently to state that each individual is differently religious is a nonsensical pseudopsychological deconstructionism. One of the tasks of psychology is precisely a comparison of the processes involved in different systems of interest and of the effects they produce.

Having delimited religion as its object, psychology does not search for what is the essence of religion, as was the half-philosophical, half-psychological intention of James. The failures of his theory manifest the intrinsic contradiction of such an endeavor — indeed, having stated that the heart of a religion is a feeling, James (1902) nevertheless observed that an emotion is religious only when it has a religious object. Nor is psychology of religion a philosophical interpretation that should pretend to say what is the valuable core of religion. This claim is contradictory to psychology as an empirical science. An implicit philosophy of this sort is a backward preconception among some psychologists of religion and prevents them from examining psychologically how individuals relate to the religions in their cultural environment. On the other hand, to state what religion is in

itself, on the basis of empirical surveys about the contents of belief and practices, is as silly a form of positivism as to say what a nation or art is in itself, on the basis of Gallup surveys.

A psychologist should work like a cultural anthropologist: to study people as they relate to particular religions in their specific milieus, with a serious knowledge of the religion(s) that individuals refer to. A psychologist will not necessarily be a Christian believer to accept that the term "belief" is characteristic of the Christian religion and that for Christians it entails a specific relation with a personal God. This is not necessarily the case for Greek religion, as Vernant (1990) emphasized. In the Christian, as in the Jewish and the Islamic religions, belief in a personal God is linked with the belief in God's self-revelation through human mediators. These beliefs bear on religious expressions and behaviors. In the psychological study of these religions, one cannot abstract those beliefs, any more than the study of Greek religion can neglect the proper ways that Greek religious people conceived of the gods and their intervention in human life. To be sure, subjects adhere variously to their religions, or they reconstruct them from their scattered elements. These facts are psychologically meaningful if we observe the positive and negative psychological factors underlying their conceptions and consequences, but I will come back to this point. The acceptance of a doctrinal content is not itself a criterion of the religious attitude, but it has a meaning, for the representations of the divine or of God, and belongs to religion and qualifies the attitudes to it. To oppose faith against belief-contents, as have some theorists, is an arguable philosophical and weak theological interpretation that is not coherent with the viewpoint of a psychologist who does empirical research, because it weakens the setting up of working hypotheses.

In this context, I would also question the idea of mature religion, sometimes used as a criterion for evaluating the religions of the individuals who are studied. As a general concept it lacks a solid scientific foundation, because psychologists of religion judge to be mature the form of religion that agrees with their own conceptions. In the sway of an enlightened interpretation, some estimate as mature a kind of deistic religion that has "freed" itself from a "dogmatic" belief content and ritual enactment. Conversely, some authors in pastoral psychology call mature the religious attitude characterized by a full acceptance of a belief content and by faithful ritual practice.

"Maturity" is a very ambiguous psychological concept. Its application in comparisons between different cultures or religions judges them according to some criteria that are alien to a psychological maturity. If we would use it in religion, we should give it the meaning of the conformity of feelings, representations, and behavior of individuals with those we expect from individuals of their age, cultural context, and confessed religion. The religion of a child or an adolescent can be mature, relative to their age and

civilization, and the religion of a grown-up is still open to experience, challenge, and further "maturation."

To conclude my consideration of the object of a psychology of religion, I would stress the necessity for neutrality in psychologists working in this field. They should not slip from psychological to philosophical or theological statements and bracket questions about the existence or nonexistence of the alleged divine or supernatural entities that individuals refer to. In setting up measures and psychological interpretations they should, however, study subjects who are situated in their own cultural context and take into account religious conceptions they refer to, positively and/or negatively.

### THE ELUSIVE IDENTITY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology has been in a constant turmoil of deconstruction and reconstruction. Although it has acquired, since the 19th century, its status as a scientific discipline, its identity remains uncertain for psychologists themselves. It is manifestly difficult to reach a paradigmatic agreement about its proper object. As in other fields of psychology, some psychologists of religion nourish a dream to give their discipline a precise identity by developing a strictly experimental or laboratory psychology. However, few of the defenders of that project have carried it out. Only a few peculiar elements can be experimentally studied in this whole domain. To identify the youth of a scientific psychology of religion is too easy an argument. Those who are conscious of the complexity of these phenomena understand that it could not be otherwise. Why would psychology of religion be rejected if it is not experimental? Methods are subservient to the object to be studied, and they do not determine a science. Models of research and the theoretical frameworks of other sciences make us think as psychologists. However, physiology, anthropology, and linguistics are not determining models for an independent psychology.

The main problem with the psychology of religion is the same as that in most other psychological fields. If we think of social psychology, cognitive psychology, sexual psychology, medical psychology, psychology of architecture -these are all special fields within psychology that are also the object of other disciplines. All the activities of a human being are psychological, but nothing is merely psychological. So there is no unity in psychology: What is common to the different branches of psychology is a search for what is psychological in cognition, learning, social institutions, cultural training, ethics, and so on. The distinction between fundamental and applied psychology, borrowed from some other sciences, is deceptive, because each realm of human activity lends itself to the discovery of psychological structures and processes. Psychological studies of religion contribute to general psychological insights, and they are also tests of the

validity of generalized psychological statements on other observations. Should we think only of the failure of the preposterous pretension of explaining religion by a strictly behavioral conditioning?

Psychology is surely not competent to elaborate a general theory of religion. Freud rightly stated that religion is the most complex phenomenon in civilization and that there is no way of explaining it by only one factor. He himself, nonetheless, proposed two explanatory theories. Although this is not the place to discuss them thoroughly, I would call attention to their radical differences, because they are significant for the project of a psychology of religion. In "Totem and Taboo" (1913/1955), his first major essay in this field, Freud tried to reconstruct the events and psychological processes that could have produced the idea of God. I assume this essay is known, and do not insist on the psychologically inconsistent argument that guilt feelings arise from parricide in a still lawless "humanity" and that this "guilt" engenders moral consciousness, an idealization, and finally the divine aggrandizement of a father, who was not actually a father figure. It is significant that Freud was conscious that no individual psychological process could produce the God-idea. In "The Future of an Illusion" (1927/1961) he seemed to have forgotten that insight as he tried to reconstruct genetically the God-Father idea on the basis of an individual's driven desires and a memory of the infantile experience of a powerful and helpful father. With respect to this second psychogenetic theory of religion, a question that could be examined is whether it really comes up to the religious God-idea. I leave this aside and stress only the interesting element in this essay: That, among other elements, religion is anchored in human desires and that therefore, as Freud concludes, the validity of religious belief can be neither substantiated nor refuted by scientific reasoning.

I do not see any other explanatory psychological theory of religion that can match Freud's. But to aim at a psychological reconstruction of religion is simply to breed guesses that are never to the point. Psychologists always observe subjects belonging to a society instructed by a long cultural history, of which religious language and symbols are an important part. To try to reconstruct the origin of a culture's stock by means of what we observe in individuals is as extravagant as to imagine how we would construct language today if we did not have any linguistic training.

A consciousness of the limited competence of psychology is of utmost importance for asking meaningful questions and elaborating the right methods. Considering what has been said, I recall the often used expression of "religious needs," which is misty and should be broken down. To use this expression as an explanatory device is to make it the source of an individual's religion, which actually is the result of a complex process. This scientific misfire transposes psychology into a natural language that expresses elementary bodily experiences such as hunger.

Historians of culture know that "love" would not have its power if it were

not a major topic in language, literature, and films. Clinicians and educators have experienced the might that a cultural topic has in shaping an individual's needs, desires, and problems. The object of needs also causes them. Nowadays, in fields other than religion, most psychologists take this for granted, and it would be worthwhile to examine why some psychologists of religion do not do this. They reason as if religiousness is to be explained simply by nonreligious causes, motivations, or needs. We can, of course, make the thought experiment of imagining whether and which subjects of our civilization would become religious if they never had any knowledge of words like "God" or "religious belief." But the subjects in our civilization cannot be compared with the first human beings, and our ideas about them are only products of our imagination. The search for the religious needs as the basis of religion amounts to making the psychology of a horse while analyzing ourselves through the hypothetical imagination that we are ourselves horses. It is significant that there is no psychological study of people in our civilization who have never heard any religious language, never seen a religious symbol, and were not formed by an antireligious ideology or education. What we observe are people who pray because they have some idea of a God, whatever that idea may be. This means that God, as a linguistic symbol in the religious language game, refers to a specific being and exerts a causality on their religious behavior and thought. This causality can have positive or negative effects. To be sure, psychology also explains subjective religion, but religion as a cultural fact partly explains the psychological fact of what religion is. Its psychological study has to be pursued from this reciprocal and interacting causality.

### PSYCHIC CAUSALITY AND PROCESSES

Two main factors make the psychological study of religion in our modern society the most complex enterprise: religion itself and the fragmentation of our modern societies. As an objective fact within culture, transcending individuals as well as society, religion is a symbolic system entailing multifaceted language games, symbols, rituals, and ethical principles. The belief in a supernatural or divine entity pervades and unifies the different components of religion and specifically determines its character.

A second complexity of religion as an object of psychology lies in the fragmentation of our society. Obviously the situation is quite different in societies where people are involved in a network of common or shared religious language, symbols, and rituals. In this context the psychology of religion is mostly a component of an embracing cultural anthropology. In contemporary western society many people encounter different forms of religion and different conceptions of how to be religious with reference to a specific tradition, to the critics of religion, and to nonreligious philoso-

phics and ways of life. Moreover, subjects are differently educated with respect to religion and differently trained and prepared to make up their minds. It follows from this that topics, instruments, and interpretations of psychological research should take into account the specific reference systems of the subjects who are studied. Even populations educated in the same religion can give different results, depending on the sociocultural background of their "proper" religious education. It is therefore not easy to distinguish between sociological and psychological factors. Some large-scale researchers, preoccupied with representative samples that are presented as the psychology of religion, actually verge on sociology.

I suggest that what is distinctively psychological in religion is the elements that persons refer to subjectively in their desires, emotions, and personal interpretations of given religiously significant words or symbols. Those factors are of course interdependent. For believers in God, the desires they address to God are formed by the God-idea they know and the feelings that God-idea evokes within a given language game, and which they are capable of by reason of their own subjective history and innate dispositions. I would summarize my view in this way: Psychology of religion studies subjective factors that amount to the positive and negative responses a person gives to what a religion and antireligious conceptions that are encountered, propose.

From this perspective psychologists can do their research in two directions. On the one hand, they can examine the influence of psychological factors on the personal setting of religious belief and behavior. On the other hand, they can consider the influence of their specific belief content and behavior on an individual's mental health, personality, and social relationships. From both perspectives there are many correlation studies, with results that present interesting matters of fact, the psychological interpretation of which is, however, elusive. What causes which? How do we interpret research that finds that religiously educated adolescents with an autonomous identity refer explicitly to God as the norm for their ethical behavior and that other similarly educated adolescents who depend on their peer group do not? We might conclude that an autonomous identity determines the religious reference in ethics and that a well-developed personal religion strengthens their sense of identity. A similar remark should be made about the interesting findings of Allport and Ross (1976) concerning the correlation between extrinsic religion and intolerance, and intrinsic religion and humanitarian attitudes. I do not object to correlational studies provided that they are not set up to interpret the findings through a one-way preconceived causality. New directions in a systematic and cognitive psychology have forfeited this way of thinking.

Psychologists working in the field of religion seem to have a peculiar difficulty conceiving of an interacting causality. As psychologists they do not of course adopt the belief disposition of their subjects who eventually



believe that God (or the divine entity) is efficaciously acting in their life. Some belief in divine causality indeed belongs to the religious belief of many religious subjects. The psychologists as such can neither deny nor confirm this belief, given that divine action is not a possible object of empirical observation and must in principle be bracketed. But that does not imply that this reduces the term "God" to a mere religious language symbol. That would imply that religious belief is only a peculiar vision of the world. From their methodological reduction, psychologists should not slip into a philosophical reduction. This would entail their failure to recognize that for the subjects of their research, God is not just a language symbol, because their belief intention goes through the symbol itself to the acting divine reality they believe in. This specific belief is itself an important factor that has a causal effect on the psychological disposition of their subjects.

The principle of interacting causalities disturbs the wish for insight into clear-cut psychological processes, let alone for a one-way causal interpretation. However, to acknowledge this complex reality in religion as in other human behavior and experience should direct a search for the right questions to examine with adequate instruments.

I can only give some hints about the problems with methods and instruments. General statements about the belief (or not) "that God exists," about religious practice or confessed adherence to a specific religious community that are correlated with psychological factors, do not give psychological insight. They do not allow distinctions between social, psychological, and religious determinants, and to know the presence or absence of a God-belief, of "religious experience," or of religious practice in representative populations is surely not the object of psychology. Its task is to examine lawful psychological regularities.

Such lawful regularities can be discovered only if we know with precision the meaning that religious signifiers and emotional or behavioral expressions have for any subjects. When the word "God" belongs to the language game of a subject, it can entail very different meanings. So it has been observed that nonbelievers regularly speak of religious people as those who "believe *that* God exists." Christian subjects on the contrary say, "I believe *in* God." That is the common language of Christianity as a particular system of religious symbols. It is a language expressing a relation, and not merely a theoretical or quasi-philosophical statement that God exists. The reduction that nonbelieving subjects make is significant, and I shall come back to it. As for the subjects who "believe in God," we should try to know as exactly as possible the content of their relational God-idea. To be sure, this partly depends on the language about God in a religion and on the education that subjects have had within it—but not only on that, because they make a personal selection, stressing some elements more than others, eventually refusing some connotations of the proposed God-idea. Already the diversity in "Christian spirituality" bears witness to this subjective

appropriation. In any case, to identify religion with faith as opposed to a belief content makes no sense linguistically or psychologically (Smith, 1979). Different approaches are possible to the personal relational content of the God-idea, which I have pursued with my collaborators in a test cataloging different items that express "God is for me . . ." and in a test composed of items expressing the different components of the relationship a religious person may have with God, or in a semantic scale expressing the maternal and paternal qualities that can be attributed to God. I leave aside technicalities of the long preparation and composition of such tests.

The study of any religious component first requires an accurate knowledge of the meaning content it has for the subjects being studied. In studying the nebulous idea of religious experience, combining a semantic scale and a projective test seemed the best technical approach. The resulting data gave what I would call a "radiograph" of a particular element of the personal religion of a specific population. As I have already stressed, the aim of psychology is not sociographical. If we were to choose a representative population, it could only be because we work with the hypothesis that some psychological characteristics of this population are independent variables, as is age in a developmental psychology of religion or is the influence of training in the "hard" compared with the humanistic sciences (as with nurses daily confronted with suffering and death). To carry matters to the extreme, only one subject might be enough to discover psychic and religious causalities, just as discoveries can be made in the natural sciences and in clinical psychology from only one subject. The work of interpreting the findings from one subject requires experimentation and other comparative studies. Moreover, the psychology of religion aims to discover the possible personal forms of being or not being religious.

The further step is to sift out the causalities that are supposed to have produced the observed God-idea, or an asserted religious experience, behavior, and so forth. For some topics, personal psychological instruments allow a direct inference of psychological causalities. In a homogeneous population, the correlation of data from the Rorschach (1921) test with those of other projective tests examining the characteristic content of religious experience justifies, I think, an inference that the psychological structures of subjects determine their specific modes of religious experience. Similarly the curvilinear relation between an anxiety scale and religious dogmatism—in the sense of Robenack (1966), but examined with a scale purified of anxiety items—reveals the ambiguous influence of anxiety on particular religious attitudes. This ambiguity must, however, be clarified by an inspection of the circumstances and the lives of the subjects.

More often than not, an interpretation requires the discovery of dynamic processes that have evolved over time. Actually in our cultural context, personal religion is dynamic because of confessional processes, and a most deceitful perspective would consider the subjects as being or not being

religious. Researchers who have some personal experience of religion, or of religious people, know that a personal religion is the result of a long working through, positively or negatively, of inner conflicts over religious beliefs. These conflicts are both intellectual and psychological, which means that they involve desires, disillusionments, revolts, anxieties, identification with models, evolving experiences, and so on. It is my conviction that we can interpret the observed religious attitudes and behaviors psychologically only when we understand them as a conflict-solving process. It is by resolving conflicts that subjects produce their own religious representations and belief dispositions.

Two examples follow. The contents of prayers of demand reveal the desires of the subject and their corresponding God-idea. Disillusionment of expectations presents a conflict that may be solved by a change in the relation with God. That requires a critical restructuring of desires and of the God-idea. Reference to the religious God-idea invites this restructuring process, which is also profoundly emotional, as when subjects define God as loving and add that He is surely not a judge. The same subjects can interpret God as a diffuse power in nature and in people. Others who believe in a personal, transcendent God and attest to a personal relationship with God attribute to God characteristics of both love and judgment. Such findings do not allow a conclusion as to which factor determined the content given personally to the God-idea, although we may form the hypothesis that among subjects educated in the same religion, their guilt anxiety causes—if only partly—refusal of a personal God-idea. We may then search for a method to discover whether this interpretation of the God-idea has actually been the solution of an affective conflict. I think also that the developmental study of religion should adopt the same perspective, examining how the development of mind, of body experience, and of a growing sense of identity and autonomy introduce within religious belief conflictual processes that the subjects solve in various ways under the influence of their desires and anxieties.

It is clear from what has been said that in my conception irreligion is also the object of a psychology of religion. Nonreligious people who are interviewed have their intellectual reasons, as do religious believers, and as for these, within and underneath their theoretical arguments are dynamic and affective tendencies that to some extent determine their opposition to religious belief. Nonreligious subjects are often hurt by the idea of a psychology of religious unbelief, whereas religious people are not. To refuse a psychology of nonreligion is a significant denial, a repression, that is of course mostly nonpathological. Nonreligion often takes on the face of indifference, and interviews reveal that this indifference is the result of a conflict resolution that may be recent or old, preconscious or conscious. These subjects also take a stand in relation to religious language, symbols, and behaviors that they generally have some knowledge of.

My perspective does not involve an attitude of evaluation. The idea of what religion should be or can become in today's society belongs to neither the competence nor the interests of psychologists. The guiding preconceptions of this order harm psychology for they engender silly working hypotheses about the maturation of natural faith about humanistic liberation or the "normal" growth of modern humans as spiritual beings. We can only observe different forms of religious belief and nonbelief, but the neutral approach of a psychologist who analyzes and compares the conflict-solving processes in different subjects will give the psychology of religion its scientific status.

Because the processes implied in religion and in its changes or in nonreligious attitudes are very personal and largely preconscious, in-depth, semidirected interviews, conducted by trained scholars, offer good approaches to detecting conflicts and the ways subjects have solved them and continue to do so. Technical systems of content analysis then bring about coherent ensembles of underlying factors that interviewees are not conscious of, and which even trained interviewers do not clearly observe in the texts they interpret. Such interviews also give working hypotheses for setting up systematic measures and interpreting the obtained results.

### CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

The contribution of Freud has been immense for the dawning and elaboration of a dynamic psychology. More than any other psychologist, Freud proposed to psychology the task of understanding the dynamisms, representations, and structures that underlie human conscious thoughts, actions, and relational dispositions. Clearly, in-depth clinical observation brings sharply to light some general psychological processes and structures of which pathology is a precise distortion. To quickly describe the differences between pathology and normal psychology, pathology consists of an enduring incapacity for reasons unconscious drive representations and repression to solve psychological conflicts that normal people are capable of working through. Consequently, a serious knowledge of the pathological forms of religion calls attention to processes that are very important and that afford hypotheses for the study of nonpathological religion.

Two examples illustrate my thesis. When believing and practicing religious persons fall into a real depression, and not simply a depressive or sorrowful mood, they often say they can no more believe, pray, or practice their former religion. It is interpreted as an illusion and they elaborate a theoretical system in order to justify their present unbelief. When healed of the depression, their conviction of that deceptive illusion and the theoretical discussion wanes, and former beliefs are reestablished. Whatever might be the explanation of the depression, it is clear that a depressive collapse of desire and of the sense of personal worth voids the religious belief of the

vital affective sources that sustained and filled it with subjective meaning. From this experience, a psychologist learns the bearing of vital desire within religious belief and consequently pays attention to the relation between affective development, the capacity for religious experience, and the relation between belief and experience.

The experience of a clinical obsessional neurosis gives insight into some processes that psychologists could examine in nonpathological reactions to the religious reference system. From clinical experience we learn that some are tempted to master affective conflicts by displacing them to the level of theoretical discussions, which cannot be solved at this level. We also observe among such patients that an unreal ideal of moral integrity, a form of narcissistic self-image, is behind their anxiety-ridden self-accusation and behind their religious confessions of sin, which actually are more self-accusations than religious acts. We also observe a switching of conviction that God is a just judge and a cruel tyrant, whereas at other times we hear the refusal of God's judgment. Similar processes occur in many of the life changes of normal people who work through these conflicts in one way or the other. To understand the observed religious or nonreligious attitudes and the God-idea that any subject entertains, the psychologists should know how it may be a present, if not definitive, outcome of the evoked processes concerning a guilt-consciousness.

My view on the psychology of religion may be summarized in a few statements. It is neither the task nor the competence of psychology to form a theory concerning the essentials or origins of religion. Psychology starts by observing the fact that subjects refer to some religion(s) and that religion is always too complex to be interpreted under the head of a meaning system or as a strategy of adaptation to the world. Merely intellectualistic or functionalistic working hypotheses in psychology of religion never go to the point. Psychology examines the underlying and largely preconscious desires, feelings, and representations that are at play in encounters with significant religious tokens and that conditionally determine the way one constructs one's own response. The religious significant--symbols, metaphors, the words God or creator, and so on--are themselves multidimensional, and the inner desires, feelings, and representations of the subject are overdetermined. They are not in inner harmony and therefore change relative to life experiences and, for a religious person, relative to different religious gratifications or displeasures. To study changes that are conflictual experiences and their momentary solution is the best way to grasp the underlying representations, feelings, and structures that are (co)responsible for the observed states of both religion and nonreligion.

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