

CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE  
IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION

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The occasion of an interdisciplinary meeting offers the opportunity to discuss concepts that, arising from one of the disciplines may shed some light on the others. Accordingly, in conducting a critique of the contemporary study of religion, I am concerned less with calling into question what other researchers are doing and more with bringing into focus an aspect of the problem which they neglect in their preoccupation with their own methods and concepts. One such neglected aspect--essential to my discipline, psychiatry--is the idea I wish to present in this paper; namely, the importance of distinguishing between the concept and the image of God. This distinction should be relevant not only to us, psychiatrists, but to all the researchers involved in the scientific study of religion.

The distinction between the concept and the image of God is not new. For many years the God of the believer has been sharply differentiated from the god of the philosophers. The mystics always took care that the God they experienced

in their mystic encounter would not be confused with the God presented in theological and philosophical treatises. Believers and mystics are dealing mostly with their images of God; philosophers and theologians, with their concepts of God. It is not that believers and mystics do not have a concept of God, rather they are mostly interested in their image of God. Likewise, it is not that theologians and philosophers do not have an image of God. It is that they address themselves to their concept of God.

Generally, human beings can be expected to have both a concept and an image of God. The failure to distinguish between them in an individual arises from the fact that up to now we have used the word God indiscriminately to name both concept and image.

I shall propose, then, the necessity of qualifying the word God in every instance depending on whether the concept or the image is meant.



The Significance of Distinguishing Between the Concept and the Image of God in the Scientific Study of Religion.

The word God is at the very core of any scientific study of religion. Let us see why. The word religion has been, and still is, the subject of intense controversy; its meaning is

difficult to circumscribe because of the enormous variety of behaviors and experiences that can be included under the term religion. These experiences are difficult to categorize or reduce to a common denominator. But if we attend carefully to the phenomenon, we find that there is a basic experience that gives rise to the behaviors we call religious; namely, the belief in the external existence of "something" signified as God. This God may be as varied as the religious experiences themselves: a cosmic god, an impersonal power, a hierarchy of gods and supernatural creatures, a transcendent reality, a trinity, or, simply, an exclusive godhead. In other words, the term religion in itself implies the assumption that there is a God or gods to whom human beings relate. Without such belief, the term religion would lose its essential meaning. It is true that religious behavior may also include concomitants of such belief as rituals, vestments, habits, social patterns, values, etc. But without the core of belief in an existing divinity or divinities, we would be talking about social rather than religious behavior. In other words, the Study of religion conceived as behavior oriented to the divine implies not only study of the believing subject but also of the divinity which is the object of belief. It is that very divinity which makes the behavior specifically religious. The same white dress used for a ceremony would be only a socially accepted ritual if it were not used to please the divinity. It is the intention of pleasing

the divinity that makes the behavior "religious" and the divinity "real." It is at this point, when we deal with the divinity "real" for the believer, that the problem becomes complicated: "divinity" is, after all, not "available" for objective study. It would be a little hard to obtain a taped interview from God!

It may be objected that it is however available in its objective representations: sacred books, sacred images, liturgies, prayers and the priestly function of the person who represents the divinity or whoever renders it present. Notwithstanding, the study of these objective representations presents us only with a sign or a symbol of the divinity, and not with the God the individual believer experiences and takes for real--the God he feels

The God of the symbols and signs I call the concept of God; the expression image of God I use to refer to the God of the inner experience of the believer.

This distinction is important from the developmental point of view: it is the believer's inner experience of his God that gives rise to signs and symbols and gives individual meaning to signs and symbols already existing. For the psychiatrist and the psychologist both, the concept and the image of God are important, but it is that directly experienced God that constitutes, strictly speaking, the most interesting object of his study. Scholars of the other disciplines are in the

same situation; that is, each discipline seizes on a special aspect of divinity: the theologian, on the God of the Scriptures or of sacred books in general; the sociologist on the God manifested in the cult and practices of the community, and so on. Nevertheless, it is important for all students of religion, not only for psychiatrists like myself, to distinguish between the concept and the image of God. The reason is that we simply do not know to what extent in particular instances, they mean the same thing. Indeed, it seems to me that although concept and image may converge in some respects, they may also diverge significantly in others. It would be misleading to assume for example, that the god of the symbol, the sign or the ritual is the same as the internally experienced God of the person, who displays the symbol or performs the ritual. A simple example may help to clarify this concept. In the Catholic ritual of penance the ritual conveys the forgiving, just and loving God of the New Testament who has already redeemed the sinner in his Son. A given Catholic may, however, be so terrified by his inner image of God that he may perceive the entire ritual as an indispensable submission to and humiliation in front of the Almighty in order to avoid his terrifying wrath. The ritual conveys a concept of God that stresses forgiveness, justice and love. The inner experience of that particular Catholic penitent is inescapable persecution and submission to terror.

The concept of God conveyed in the ritual is sharply opposed by the image of God of the man participating in the ritual.

The psychiatrist cannot, therefore, assume that the God of the Christian faith and the God of a particular Christian believer converge to the point of being one and the same. They may, in fact, diverge to the point of becoming incompatible with one another. Indeed, in the field of pastoral care, the consequences of applying the distinction between the concept and the image of God may be far reaching.



Sources of the Formation of the Image and the Concept of God.

We want now to pay some attention to the image of God felt as a person or in anthropological being. What are the sources of that image? What are the inner experiences available to the believer which are selected to form the image of God? What is the selective process that produces in an individual his image of God and so on.

The most acceptable hypothesis would be, I think, that the image of God is formed with materials coming from early interpersonal experiences, particularly the immediate members of the family. Moreover, the feelings by that also echo feelings of early personal relations. This use of early

personal experience to form the image of God is--  
psychologically speaking--the only possible way I can think of  
arriving at the perception of God as a person.

There are some further considerations which  
recommend my hypothesis: the way human beings arrive at  
their feelings about God is unique among psychological  
processes. There are two features that make it unique: in the  
first place, as I pointed out before, God is experienced as a  
living being, most of the time a living person, This, in itself, is  
not unique, but the fact that God is the only being  
experienced as real, existing and alive that cannot undergo,  
and never did, the powerful examination of the reality testing  
capacity of the human ego; God is not learned through the  
senses as any other human being is; the human senses are  
impotent to verify the reality of God. We have here the first  
original quality of the process of feeling God alive: A felt  
being that cannot be tested in the way any other being would  
be. In second place, such a God is perceived as existing in  
the real and several attributes are given to him in spite of the  
fact that he does not enter into the two categories that form  
the human frame of reference for a living being: space and  
time. In spite of it God is felt spatially as being "inside"  
oneself, in heaven, everywhere, etc. He is also felt in a  
temporal frame of reference, e.g., the person feels and  
thinks: "He is blessing me now" or "He will punish me

tomorrow" or "Now I see what He did for me in the past."  
These considerations reveal the peculiar quality of our psychological experience with the divine. None of the testing devices the human ego has, can be used to verify what we feel about Him. Nevertheless, for the experiencing person it is as real and intense as any other testable relation with living human beings.

The point we have been trying to illustrate is that-- psychologically speaking--there is no external reality called God that gives feedback to the believer. There are plenty of indirect signs and symbols which are interpreted as coming from God. But the religious person does not feel God as a symbol or a sign, but as the living being whose signs he is interpreting. We, then, conclude, that the personification of God is purely an internal process that takes place in the psyche of the believer. It is to explain this internal process-- that I formulated the hypothesis that the material used to form the image of God and the feelings attached to it originate in previous interpersonal exchanges.

This is the time for us to come back to the central idea in our discussion: the difference between the image of the felt God described above and the concept of God.

The concept of God comes to us through whatever teachings, readings, liturgies, etc. have been presented to us. God is described to us by means of words, symbols, etc. That



is what our milieu provides for us, a ready made God that belongs to a given culture and subculture. Whatever the description this God is subject to external testing: if I disagree with the preaching I heard I as a Christian, can go to the Bible and find whether or not the God described there coincides with the God preached to me. The concept of God therefore is the result of the varied teachings we have received, integrated in a more or less cohesive intellectual understanding of what God is all about. Perhaps what I suggest is a new version of the old distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of the mystics with this difference: that for me mystics are not the very selected few, but the everyday believers, the everyday mystics. All of us know that out of the two, it is the second, the aspect that I call the image of God the one we use in our most intimate life and the part that gives meaning to the religious experience.

Just one more observation: things are never so cut and dry, because the conceptual God and the image of God do interact and interplay in the overall religious experience of an individual. But they are different and come from different sources.



## The Developmental Origin of the Image and the Concept of God.

The development of the child throws light on the way the image and the concept of God come into being and interact. The newborn child has no interpersonal experience. The infant has the experience of the mother, the father and the siblings. The child has a multitude of interpersonal experiences.

It is at age three when the child becomes consciously curious about God. The child soon discovers that God is invisible, therefore, he is left to his inner resources to fill the image of God as a living being described for him and felt by him as a person. The powerful fantasy of the child has to "create" the psychological traits of that invisible but unusually powerful being. Anthropomorphic as the child is at three he is to make God at the image of his available storage of human experiences. He imagines God and very soon his fantasy of Him will make itself felt upon the child with all its might. An image of God has been created for a new human being.

We do not know at this point what psychic processes take place inside the child or the selective procedures that bring him to use one type of interpersonal experience and reject another to form his image of God. What we know is

that, fairly early, the child has an image of God which he spontaneously uses in his questioning about Him and in his own religious behavior. This early image may, to be sure, undergo changes in later life. This does not alter the fact that the child has formed his image of God out of interpersonal experiences before he is intellectually mature (enough) to grasp the concept of God. If, when the time comes for him to receive formal religious teaching, the distance between his image of God and the concept of God he is being taught is too big to be bridged, then the child will have difficulty in accepting the God presented to him. The subjective God of his formal religion will not coincide or be close enough to be integrated and the end result may be overlapping of the two with oscillations from one to the other in later life.

### Implications of this Distinction for the Scientific Study of Religion.

I have tried to distinguish between a socially received concept of God and the inner God created out of the materials of early interpersonal relations. A researcher's failure to allow for this distinction could well invalidate his study. Take, for example, a study which classifies people according to their official religion, the implication being that all the subjects share the same God. To be sure, they do

share the same concept of God; but a researcher can draw no conclusions about the image of God they have. In the contrary, the likelihood that their images of God vary as much among themselves as would the images of persons of different affiliation. It is also entirely conceivable that persons of different confessions, and who, consequently, have a different concept of God, may have strikingly similar images of God on the assumption that like human experiences of early life generate similar images of God.

### Research Being Done

In the light of these theoretical considerations and because of the lack of clinical and statistical studies in this area, I have myself launched a program of research into the inner God human beings form. I have asked 88 subjects to draw pictures of their families as well as pictures of God and to answer two questionnaires, one related to personal relations with members of the original family and another related to similar relations with God. I had at hand a detailed personal and family history of each subject. I am now trying to trace the inner process of formation of the image of God, particularly in relationship with the available material the individual had deriving from interpersonal relations. Though I cannot speak at length about my study. I can say that I am

learning much about different types of inner Gods and that I hope to be able to correlate these findings with what is known about interpersonal relations in clinical and theoretical terms.

A few clinical vignettes will convey the flavor of the research.

A 58 year old man who was a non-believer and had never received formal religious education could not talk about God because he could not think of a non-existing being. When asked to draw his image of God, he readily drew an elderly angel-like being floating above, among the clouds, "watching over us."

A 27 year old man was quite disappointed with God drew a woman and felt quite embarrassed when he realized what he had done. He hastily drew a beard on her: his concept of God had him convinced that God is a man.

A 53 year old woman, who was quite religious, drew her picture of God with great attention. At the end she started crying because she realized that she had drawn her father, without being aware that she had done it.

A 50 year old man who felt quite left out in his childhood, drew God as his mirror image. He, actually, drew a mirror and his face on it, and, in front of the mirror he drew himself looking into the mirror.

These clinical examples should suggest the materials my study is producing and the questions they raise. The

benefit of such study is to show with all the objectivity of projective pictorial techniques that the personally felt God, that is, the image of God, is a real force in a person's psychodynamics and that God may be a very different being for each believer, even of the same "conceptual" God.

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