

# Keeping the Baby But Throwing Out the Bathwater of Religion: Religiogenic Self and Object Representations

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## **Belief in God**

Throughout history philosophers have debated the question of whether God (and other “spiritual” phenomena) exists. The debate is generally a literalist one: does God actually exist or not? There are essentially two, mutually exclusive, positions. On one side are those who argue that God is an entity, a being, that exists independent of our experience of him/her/it, and that it is important to find God – that is, to seek out, understand, and align with, God’s will. On the other side are those who argue that God is nothing more than a childish illusion, and so not something to be taken seriously.

As clinicians, we are interested in our patients’ subjective experience. When they talk to us about their struggles with people who are hostile, or who are dishonest, manipulative or incompetent, etc, we generally don’t set out to determine if their perceptions of any given individual are correct. Instead, we focus on their inner experience – that is, on the meaning and impact of their beliefs - and make the understanding of that meaning the focus of our concern. For example, if a patient of mine talks to me about how messy his children are, I don’t inquire about the details of their messes in order to determine if they really are messy children. Instead, we explore why this affects him the way it does. Does it make him feel out of control? Does it make him feel disrespected, or feel like his children are against him? In other words, what does it **mean** to him?

I want to suggest that we ought to treat belief in God in a similar way. That is, instead of focusing on the external reality, debating about the veracity of various details about the “actual” nature of this external reality, we ought to make the believer’s subjective experience of God the object of study.

## **Psychoanalytic Lens / Listening with the Third Ear**

Psychoanalytically-oriented thinkers generally recognize that important things can be learned from and about someone by, in Theodor Reik’s words, “listening with the third ear” - in other words, by understanding that there are other levels of meaning being expressed than the literal meaning intended by the speaker. An example of this would be the translating of the speaker’s externalizations into the internal object relations that underlie them. One can focus on the veracity of the speaker’s statements about the nature of some aspect of the external world, or take these statements as meaningful reflections or expressions of the individual’s subjective experience of themselves in relation to others.

This approach can be applied to questions about God, as well. To begin with, the experience of God can be understood as a relational experience. In particular, it is a relationship with an internal, object representation that has the power to provide the individual with the liberating – even rapturous - feeling of well being that is associated with the experience of being loved by an all-powerful parental figure. But it is also a relationship that has the power to trigger the angst that accompanies the experience of having fallen out of grace (i.e., having lost favor with that powerful being).

### **Cognitive Science, Agency and Gods**

Belief in the external reality of God/gods is so ubiquitous and has been so enduring throughout human history that it might be tempting to conclude that this is simply proof that God really exists. But another explanation might be that the propensity to have such beliefs is part of our psychological makeup, and that we are actually born with the propensity to believe in God/gods.

This belief, like so many other evolutionary developments, can be seen as an evolutionary accident. Evolution is not interested in the veracity of our beliefs or thought processes. What it does “care” about is the impact they have on the proliferation of the underlying genes. But there is a coattail effect for a belief that is a derivative of a belief that is adaptive – even if the former belief is not, in and of itself, adaptive. So, even if belief in God is “adaptively extraneous”, and does not itself increase the likelihood of contributing an underlying gene to the gene pool, if a mental process that underlies that belief does have that genetic effect, than belief in God will also be perpetuated. A growing number of cognitive scientists (e.g., psychologists Justin Barrett and Paul Bloom, and anthropologist Pascal Boyer) are saying exactly that.

A number of these writers have argued that we are essentially “wired” with two systems for relating to the world: 1) a system for operating in the physical world, and, 2) a system for operating in the social world, a world in which we relate to others as psychological creatures and not just as material “things.” The ability to function socially - to empathize, to predict the behavior of others, to cooperate with others, and to be liked and valued by others - bestowed obvious survival advantages to those evolutionary ancestors of ours that possessed these capacities. In this way, evolution has shaped us to possess that most human of abilities – the ability to see others as having (or being?) minds. That is, we are inclined to perceive other human beings (and animals and even, at times, plants, tornados, and machines) as having agency. We see others as having intentions, beliefs, goals, plans and desires.

According to Bloom, the coexistence of these two systems leads to two mistakes that are important foundations of nearly all religions. First of all, we come to see things in the material world as separate from things in the mental world. We don't identify with our bodies: we feel as though (nonreflective belief) we live **in** them. And it is a short jump from such a separation of things mental from things

physical, to the belief that a mind, or soul, can exist without a body. As Bloom has pointed out, most serious scientists don't take Descartes' dualism seriously, and yet we all find that such a separation of the mind and the body **just feels right**. In short, we appear to be wired to be dualists. This way of experiencing ourselves and others leads to such beliefs as the afterlife, disembodied spirits, and of course, God. Not being part of the material world, these "beings" are, of course not subject to the laws of the natural world.

Second, we also come to over-attribute agency, seeing purpose, intention, and design even when it is not there (If you've ever played the old video game, *Pac Man*, consider your perceptions of, and feelings about, those colorful little characters who chase you all over the screen "trying" to eat you.). We are hypersensitive to signs of agency and see it everywhere, including the origin of the world. We are natural-born creationists, and while some of us believe in Darwin's theory of evolution (and it is a minority – even in the highly educated United States), it is an unnatural belief that requires the development of a theory that must override our natural tendency to perceive design and intention.

### **Faith as an Attitude (vs. faith as a belief system)**

Faith is generally thought of in terms of the tenacity of one's belief system – especially one's belief in God. "Do you have faith?" really means, "Do you believe in God?", and in particular, "Do you believe in the God that I believe in?" But faith can also be seen as an attitude toward the world, an attitude that Erik Eriksen would call, "basic trust." It involves a number of characteristics that often result from belief in a loving God, but the important thing here is not the specific belief itself, but the resulting felt experience – that is, the sense of well-being that results from the belief that one is connected to a loving and powerful God.

### **From External Referents to Inner World: Three Ego States**

Ego Fatigue: Feeling alone in a largely neutral and uncaring, but often hostile, world, we spend most of our hours controlled by the need to anticipate and plan for the future, hoard narcissistic supplies and guard against danger. We think strategically and we experience things (including people) as means to other ends. Dominated by chronically activated security operations, we suffer from "ego-fatigue" and yearn to return to a younger, non-defensive way of being – to recapture lost innocence, to experience awe, wonder and a sense of the sacred, and to feel the sense of being part of something larger than one's own skin-encapsulated "me."

Three Ego States: Consider the following three stage model of ego development:

- 1) Primary Ego State: defenseless, vulnerable, out of control, helpless
- 2) Secondary Ego State – defensive, rigid, guarded, defending against pain, seeking narcissistic supplies/security (we feel fragile so we hold on tight – "security operations")
- 3) Transcendent Ego State - non-defensive, feeling loved (and lovable) we are able to let go of our normal defenses, we feel love

(instead desperately seeking to be loved); free of the need to be on guard, we are able to have a sense of awe and wonder about life and to feel gratitude as well as a sense of the sacred/the divine.  
(trusting that if you let go of your ego/self, you'll be okay anyway)

The diagram below summarizes some of the characteristics associated with each of these three ego states.

**DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF SPIRITUALITY:  
STAGES OF EGO INTEGRATION**

<b>PRIMARY EGO STATE</b>	<b>SECONDARY EGO STATE</b>	<b>TRANSCENDENT EGO STATE</b>
		
Defenseless	Defensive	Non-defensive
Primitive Ego; Fragmented, Fragile Ego	Rigid Ego	Mature, Flexible Ego; Dissolution/Transcendence of Ego
Lack of Control	Controlling	Receptive; Sense of Being a Passive Vehicle
Innocent, Vulnerable	Cynical, On Guard	Open, Loving, Trusting, Attitude of Faith
Lack of Self-Object Distinction	Self Experienced as Separate from the World	Loss of S-O Distinction, Sense of Being Part of Something Larger
Impulse Oriented	Ego-Oriented; Materialistic	Spiritually-Oriented
Here-and-Now Orientation	There-and-Then Orientation; Slave to Time Schedules	Here-and-Now Orientation; Timelessness
Sense of Awe, Wonder, Mystery, Magic	World as Predictable, Knowable, Controllable, Ordinary	Sense of Awe, Wonder < Mystery, Magic

There are a couple of important things to note about this model: First of all, Transcendent Ego States have a lot in common with Primary Ego States. This is not to equate the two, but to point out that they do share some important characteristics that can make the prospect of letting go of the security operations associated with the Secondary Ego State (the sine quo non of entering into a Transcendent Ego State) **feel as if** it is a regression to a Primary Ego State. And second, because of these similarities, individuals in a Secondary Ego State are dominated by the need to defend against regressing back to a Primary Ego State. It is the fear of regressing back to the defenselessness of, and the resulting vulnerability to the dangers associated with, the Primary Ego State that makes it so difficult for the individuals in a Secondary Ego State to let go of the security operations that keep them in a defensive mode and prevent them from experiencing a Transcendent Ego State.

Spirituality: Spirituality is best understood in terms of the object representations that can be found “inside”, and the ego states that accompany them, rather than simply the finding of something (e.g., God) independent of the individual - “out there” as it were. In short, it refers to the transcendence of one’s normal ego functioning and is characterized by the following:

1. An Attitude of Faith
2. Openness/Receptivity to Experience
3. Awe and Wonder
4. A Sense of the Sacred or the Divine
5. Feeling Connected to the World
6. Feeling Centered, Connected to Self
7. Dissolution of Ego (Transcendence)
8. Youngness (Regression in Service of the Ego?)
9. Feeling Loved/Loveable
10. Attitude of Love

Imagine a world in which people are focused on self-transformation – that is, maximizing the “spiritual” quality of their lives. (as described above, “spiritual” refers to experiences of ego transcendence, rather than adherence to a specific belief system or religious tradition). Imagine the narcissistic need to make others’ conform to our belief systems being replaced by the respect for the possibility of many paths to more fully human, self-actualized lives. And imagine the paradox of individuals cooperating to support the ultimately solitary quest to live a life that is characterized by love, a sense of awe and wonder, and a felt sense of the divine.

I do not believe that we will ever have this utopia. But the pursuit of such a world is in itself worthwhile. And I believe that the way to move in this direction is by shifting the focus from the contents of the psyche to the structure of the psyche – from arguments about the validity of our various religious beliefs, to a concern with our inner world of object relations.