

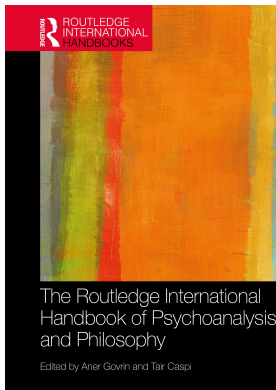
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### Narcissism in Religion

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# NARCISSISM IN RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

*Tamas Pataki*

### Introduction

In his seminal work *Primitive Culture* (1873/2016), E. B. Tylor proposed a minimal definition of religion: the essence of religion, he said, is belief in spiritual beings. This doctrine Tylor named ‘animism’, and he maintained that it formed the core of the earliest religions and of all later ones. It has two parts:

First concerning souls, second other spirits upward to the rank of powerful deities. Spiritual beings control events in the material world, man’s life here and hereafter and have intercourse with men, receive pleasure and displeasure from their actions, and receive sooner or later active reverence and propitiation.

(I. 426–427)

Many contemporary cognitive scientists and philosophers agree in seeing the essence of religion as belief, or at least as a disposition to believe, in spirits (e.g. Guthrie 1993, 2007; Barrett 2007; Whitehouse 2007; Bering 2011). But whereas they see this disposition as the product of various evolved cognitive modules, Tylor viewed the doctrine of spirits as involving a kind of hypothesis, an intellectual construction, that explained phenomena such as animacy, dreams, agency and causation, and several other mysteries of interest to our early ancestors. The nature of spirits (and souls) remains, of course, problematic.<sup>2</sup> Tylor’s ethnographic data suggested that they were generally conceived by his ‘savage philosophers’ as ‘thin unsubstantial human images, vapours, films or shadows’, entities endowed with a ‘misty and evanescent materiality’ (I. 456). In many respects, spirits and souls are different from sticks and stones and human beings: they can be disembodied, travel swiftly from one place to another, or be at several places at the same time; they are often wiser and more powerful than humans, though occasionally more stupid: Agouti of the Kalapalo people of central Brazil is ‘a sneak and a spy’, and Jaguar is ‘a violent bully who is easily deceived’ (Bellah 2011, 136ff). They are, however, *always* anthropomorphic or person-like in key respects and possess human limitations; they may, for example, require a window or aperture to enter or leave a dwelling. The gods and spirits are highly diverse ontologically speaking; two illustrations must do for many. The *kwoth* of the Nuer people cannot be perceived by the senses and are indeterminate except in relation

to their effects. What a *kwoth* is like in itself the Nuer claim not to know: ‘we are simple people, how can simple people know about such matters?’ they say (Horton 1997, 24). On the other hand, some spirits are almost of the same order as human beings. The Kalabari of the Niger Delta recognize three categories of religious beings, the Deads (i.e. ancestor spirits), Village Gods and Water-People.

the first two are seen as existing ‘in spirit’ only, while the last, like human beings, have both bodies and spirits: unlike Deads and Village Gods, they can be seen, heard, touched, and smelt by anyone who happens to cross their path in the rivers. They are not like the wind: they can be talked of inhabiting definite localities as the Deads and the Village Gods cannot. Many other gods of primitive peoples could be cited as resembling the Kalabari Water-People in their thorough-going materiality.

(Horton 1997, 25)

Over the years the lucubrations of philosophers and theologians have introduced many more *recherché* conceptions of soul and spirit, gods and other non-natural beings, but it seems to me that the vast majority of religious people today still hold anthropomorphic conceptions of spiritual beings not very different from those of our ancestors and uncontaminated tribal religions. I will return to this issue presently.

Tylor was aware that his Intellectualist conception of religion as essentially an explanatory schema like science left out the emotional factors that so often – though by no means always – accompany religiosity: ‘The intellectual rather than the emotional side of religion has here been kept in view’, he writes. ‘Even in the life of the rudest savage, religious belief is associated with intense emotion, with awful reverence, with agonizing terror, with rapt ecstasy when sense and thought utterly transcend the common level of daily life’ (II. 359). Freud (1913) made an important advance along the lines of the Intellectualist hypothesis. The doctrine of spirits, he agreed with Tylor, was indeed a kind of hypothesis, a solution to a set of problems, but the problems were not only intellectual, as Tylor supposed, but emotional in character: how to explain the terror and ambivalence caused by the spirits of the recently departed. This work, unfortunately, had little lasting resonance among anthropologists.

The oversight was indirectly repaired by the anthropologist Robin Horton. Horton noted that the ‘great value of Tylor’s definition is that it leads us to compare interaction with religious objects and interaction with human beings’ (1997, 26). Spirits and gods are like souls, anthropomorphic at least to that degree, and so it is inescapable that interactions with them should be modelled on human-to-human relations. To explain, predict and control the actions and intentions of gods and spirits, humans are compelled to use the same interpretative and practical devices that they use among themselves. In the effort to understand and predict supernatural behaviour beliefs, desires and intentions are attributed to the spirits; in the effort to control the spirits humans plead, pray, bargain, sacrifice, offer obedience and so forth, just as they do among themselves. This aspect or pole of religion Horton came to refer to as *explanation, prediction, control* (EPC, I shall say). But he identifies another aspect of religion, partly overlapping this transparently manipulative aspect, which is concerned with the emotional and intrinsic values of forming relationships with higher, wiser, more powerful beings. Horton refers to this as the *communion* (C) aspect of religion. On this view every human-to-god relationship can be placed on an EPC/C dimension of variability, and to the extent that one is emphasized, the other tends to be reduced (1997, 41). The Nupe people, for example, have ‘religious systems characterized by an extreme emphasis on manipulating the gods as tools for the achievement of health, wealth and issue’ (1997, 42). Interest

in communion is scarcely present. Other societies, like our own, at least since about the 17th century when the scientific revolution began to erode the EPC credentials of religion among the educated, tend to emphasize sheer communion without (overtly) seeking other benefits. From these two aspects taken together it follows that 'religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society . . . with the exclusion of pets' (1997, 32). It can be noted that this view, arrived at from extensive ethnographic study, is entirely consonant with the kind of view that might be expected to spring from the various branches of psychoanalytic object relations theory, attachment theory and other lines of psychological investigation exploring religion through the lens of interpersonal relationships.

Horton did not attend to the C aspect of religion with the intensity he directed at EPC. However, he concludes that psychoanalytic investigation of communion is likely to be the most promising path to follow (1997, 369–372). In a book (Pataki 2007) published before I had encountered Horton's (or much other anthropological) work, I defined religions as attempts to extend unconscious interpersonal or object relations into a supernatural dimension. The definition seems consonant with Horton's conclusions. But whereas Horton, given his field-anthropological focus, elaborates on the overt similarities between human-to-human and human-to-god relationships, I focused (all too briefly) on the unconscious significance of these relationships. The reason is simple and material to what follows. Gods and spirits are not the kinds of entity one encounters in the normal run of things, not for most people anyway. However, it is clear that they *can* be objects of attachment and of intense emotion. This is a remarkable feature of humankind. We become emotionally attached to non-corporeal objects: angels, gods, fictional characters, ideologies and other abstract conceptions. But how is this incontestable circumstance possible? The matter doesn't strike most theorists as seriously problematic; for them it is 'just so' (e.g., Granqvist 2020, 39–46). My underlying thought, one that would perhaps be widely shared by psychodynamic thinkers and skeptics, was that in the human-to-god relationship there must be at deeper levels projections of the images or imagos of (corporeal) parental objects and of aspects of the self to which we are still attached – which are still unconsciously cathected. We can then go on to discuss two levels of engagement with religious objects. On one level, there is engagement with them *as objects defined by their culturally attributed characteristics*; on another level, as *representatives of internal objects or aspects of the self*. If that thought is true, then we should expect that attachment to religious objects, as well as providing social and religious identity, moral guidance and so forth, would also subserve many unconscious defensive functions – including the narcissistic defenses that appear so conspicuous in Abrahamic religions and, as we shall see, animate much of the intolerance and violence with which they are associated.

That is the broad context of what follows, but I need to make one last contextualizing remark. R. G. Collingwood said somewhere that the true study of psychology is history; and there are important seeds of truth in this remark. If we are to understand human psychology then surely we need to know what people in the past have believed, desired, achieved and endeavoured; as we need to know what cultures radically different from ours believe, desire, achieve and endeavour. If we are to understand religiosity, then we must appraise the full arc of it. Much of the contemporary philosophy and psychology of religion is confined to the study of contemporary monotheism. Given the empirical, not to say experimental, focus of the psychologists, and the religious commitments of many of the philosophers, this is understandable. But the result is distorted accounts of religiosity in general. By pegging out a vantage on a much larger field of religious expression, historically and culturally, I hope to avoid some of their limitations.

## Anthropomorphism

Because I take it as a firm premise that the human-to-god relationship is modelled on the human-to-human relationship, I must insist (in the face of de-anthropomorphizing trends in some traditions; see below) on the essentially anthropomorphic character of gods and spirits. According to the Akkadian *Atrahasis*, before humankind there were only gods. Hence the gods had to do all the work of digging canals and building dikes. This led to a strike of the younger gods against their seniors, especially against Enlil the acting chief. Fortunately, the cunning god Enki found a solution to the troubles. Together with the mother Goddess, he created men to do all the toil the gods had been obliged to do: henceforth, ‘they shall bear the burden’. But soon men became clamorous and disturbed the gods who decided to destroy them by sending a flood. Enki, however, ever resourceful and solicitous of men, directs the good man Atrahasis to build an ark. . . .

It is wrong to believe that this is poetic elaboration on a more abstract divine reality to which the ancients subscribed. In the forerunners to contemporary theistic traditions an almost iconic anthropomorphism prevailed. The Olympian deities ‘are human almost to the last detail’, says Burkert (2004, 183) and ‘Ahura Mazda is a god in heaven, no doubt, but clearly conceived as a person in acting and reacting’ (2004, 123). ‘Mesopotamian religion was always strongly anthropomorphic’, says Beaulieu (2007, 165). The expert conclusions could be multiplied. It is the same in traditional and tribal religions around the globe. Of African religions, Olupona writes:

Stories across the continent depict the deities as anthropomorphic beings or impersonal spirits who share numerous characteristics with their human devotees. Gods and spirits are made in the image of humans. They speak, are heard, endure punishment, and attain rewards just like human beings.

(2014, 20–21)

As we would expect the social and hierarchical arrangements of the gods of polytheistic pantheons are modelled on human arrangements: ‘Divine constellations reflect the fundamental order and elementary structure of human society – husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and son, . . . lover and beloved, lord and slave, hero and enemy and so on’ (Assmann 2007, 19–20). Despite the redactions of many generations the old anthropomorphic God remains visible in the Old Testament. In the book of Job, God calls an assembly of his children, where Satan famously challenges Him. In Genesis 3:8, Adam and Eve hear the ‘Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day’, and later He (El) wrestles with Jacob. It appears that as late as the eighth century BCE, and probably much later, the goddess Asherah was worshipped as Yahweh’s wife (Collins 2007, 182). Little changes in the Christian era or with the advent of Islam. As well as believing in a supreme anthropomorphic deity – albeit incorporeal, unchanging, omnipotent – primitive Christians also believed in a vast array of other spiritual anthropomorphic beings. Origen believed that the pagan gods were real, though he thought they were demons or fallen angels. Even the pagan Porphyry offered sacrifice to angels ‘as a token of good will and gratitude’, and presumably as a cheap hedge (Dodds 1965, 117–118).

I must add here that I do not for a moment wish to invidiously contrast these tales of anthropomorphic beings with a supposedly superior understanding of divinity today. On the contrary, I believe that the shift from the straightforward anthropomorphism of animism and polytheism with their predominantly EPC mode of relating – unimpressive as that may be – to a more

abstract monotheism with its predominantly C form of relating is a regression, a slide towards more delusional modes of thought and feeling. In an extraordinary passage, David Hume asks:

Where is the difficulty in conceiving that the powers or principles, whatever they were, which formed this visible world, men and animals, produced also a species of intelligent creatures, of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest? That these creatures may be capricious, revengeful, passionate, voluptuous is easily conceived. . . . And in short, the whole mythological system is so natural, that, in the vast variety of planets and worlds, contained in the universe, it seems more than probable, that, somewhere or other, it is really carried into execution.

*(Hume 1757/1998, 151)*

The conception of such beings is arguably more defensible than the philosophically refined conceptions of Abrahamic deities.

To be sure, at least since Xenophanes philosophers, theologians and mystics have evolved conceptions of deity that purpose to avoid the inherent difficulties in the anthropomorphic notions. These conceptions belong in the dark province of philosophers of religion. Some reflective people may indeed entertain one or other of the abstruse conceptions, but there is little to suggest that it's more than a very few. The religiously sophisticated may discard the crude anthropomorphic notions of the 'simple' believer (Aquinas' term). But the vast majority who take a religious tradition seriously, perform its rituals, pray and seek communion with the deity, do not share the learned conceptions. Simple believers may not have expectations that prayers will be answered, sacrifices rewarded or sins punished, but they do expect to be heard, understood and considered by the deity. It is essential to any theistic religion that their god has intellection, emotion and agency and be capable of reciprocation. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in almost every significant historical expression of religion the gods, whatever other unfathomable characteristics they may have, manifest distinctly human traits.<sup>3</sup> That is the condition upon which the possibility of religiosity as communion rests. It is notable that the welfare states of advanced economies which, as we might say, provide a secure base and safe haven do not become objects of attachment and love (Granqvist 2020, chap. 11).

### **Monotheism as Progress Towards Personal Communion**

The contemporary consensus among historians and archaeologists is that the biblical account of the origin of Israelite monotheism is insupportable (Dever 2006; Collins 2007). In all probability, the early Israelites crystallized from an indigenous Canaanite or West Semitic population, probably in the course of the 12th to 10th centuries BCE, and ancient Israelite religion is 'in the main an outgrowth of and part of Syro-Canaanite religion' (Wright 2007, 178). The details of its evolution are vague. In any case, by the end of the seventh century BCE Yahweh had acquired a following in elite circles in the southern Judean kingdom. At this point several dramatic political, historical and psychological developments rapidly converge. King Josiah's politically motivated suppression of Canaanite deities and his efforts to centralize the cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem were significant steps towards forging monotheism. The Babylonian exile following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple exposed Judean intellectuals to the abstract conceptions of Persian religion and, very probably, to Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature. They were also confronted with the political and psychological trauma of the destruction of their nascent state, the subordination of their god and the humiliation of defeat and deracination. Whether it was the effectiveness of Josiah's brutal advocacy; or the collision between Israelite monolatry and

the religious conceptions of older, more powerful polities; or, perhaps, the logic of humiliation and narcissistic rage;<sup>4</sup> or very likely the sum of these; it was on the return of some of the exiled elite to Jerusalem that a definitive monotheism was declared. Second Isaiah proclaims: ‘There is no God but I’. The existence of other gods is denied, their worship is declared an abomination, and all religions but one are declared false and wicked. Israelite religion gave birth to a unique conception of a god that was revolutionary, complex and, in my view, baleful.

The advent of monotheism immensely complicated religious sensibility. Two of these complications are of particular significance. Monotheism opened the possibility of a more intimate and intense communion with the god. As Freud observed, ‘Now that god was a single person, man’s relation to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child’s relation to his father’ (1927, 19). Second, with the prospect of intimacy with an omnipotent god a new range of narcissistic relations was introduced. The relationship to a mostly caring, parent-like god becomes a major means of regulating distress and self-esteem. Before looking at these developments in more detail it is fascinating to observe their prefiguration in Egypt and Mesopotamia. A verse of the late third millennium BCE *Instruction for Merikare* (Assmann 2007, 22) goes:

Humans are well cared for,  
the livestock of god:  
he made heaven and earth for their sake,  
he pushed the waters back  
and created the air so that their nostrils might live.  
His images are they, having come forth from his body.  
For their sake he rises to heaven;  
it is for them that he has made plants and animals,  
birds and fish,  
so that they might have food.  
If he killed his enemies and went against his children  
this was only because they thought of rebellion.

For their sake he causes there to be light.  
To see them he travels [the heavens] . . .  
When they weep he hears . . .  
God knows every name.

Notice the contrast with *Atrahasis* where humans are created to serve the gods, to lift *their* burden. These verses, anticipating biblical cosmogenesis and anthropocentrism, present the novel idea that Creation is *for* humankind and fashioned for *its* needs – and, still more remarkably, because the gods *care*. The further idea of an unmediated *personal* and salvific relationship makes its appearance in Egypt during the second millennium BCE and even earlier at various times in Mesopotamia. Now each human being may have a personal god among the lesser gods who intercedes for them with greater gods. An Egyptian hymn from around the 1330s BCE illustrates the relationship (Bellah 2011, 245).

You are Amun, lord of the silent,  
who comes at the call of the poor.  
I called you when I was in sorrow,  
and you came to save me.  
You gave breath to the one who was imprisoned,

and you saved me when I was in bonds.  
You are Amun-Re, lord of Thebes,  
you save the one in the netherworld.  
You are the one who is gracious to the one who calls on him,  
you are the one who comes from afar.

In Israel, in prophets such as Amos and Hosea, the human-to-god relationship undergoes a further transformation. It becomes libidized or sexualized. God is not only a benign and loving lord, a shepherd to his flock, a deliverance from afar (the parent who comes to rescue the child). The familiar tropes are complemented with that of a betrayed, jealous and resentful God.

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called him,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals  
and burning incense to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I lead them with cords of compassion,  
with bands of love . . .  
and I bent down to them and fed them.

(Hosea 11 from Bellah 2011, 302)

We have arrived at an entirely new concept of a god intimately concerned with individual human needs and expecting in return, not cult, but love. The gods of polytheism occasionally intervened in human affairs but their solicitude for mortals was not unbounded. Reciprocally, although devout respect and fear featured, there was little in these religions which could be called 'love of god'. The author of the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia* wrote: 'It would be eccentric for anyone to claim that he loved Zeus'. Yahweh intervenes not occasionally but unceasingly. The other gods had domestic lives and cosmic responsibilities; human affairs were a distraction from these. Yahweh seems entirely invested in humankind and in their reciprocated love and loyalty. As the god becomes less anthropomorphic, shedding iconic form and human limitations, religion becomes more *anthropocentric*, a triumph of human narcissism. The human moves to the centre of the cosmos, the centre of God's attention and unwavering if severe love, just as God is idealized and abstracted beyond comprehension and the reach of envy.<sup>5</sup>

Monotheism decisively shifted the model of religion as principally providing EPC to its second pole, the model of communion. The residues of animism and polytheism such as attempts to influence the gods through prayer, sacrifice, magic (ritual) and so forth are not relinquished. But with biblical monotheism, the idea of communion with a single, personal, loving being graduates to the centre of religion. It is a costly graduation with two momentous consequences.

First, divine functions which had previously been distributed amongst the family of deities are invested in one all-powerful object of intense emotional attachment upon whom *everything* depends. No Enki can rescue humankind from the anger of Enlil. There is now nowhere to turn but God, and so to love 'the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' is the first principle of the new tradition. Where such personal attachment is profound failure to live up to divine demands is to risk abandonment. But dependence so



complete engenders hatred and despondency, and since hatred of God must be repressed, it will tend to be either turned upon the self or projected. A pervasive sense of guilt and self-loathing was rare among pagans but becomes common in late Antiquity (Dodds 1965, 28; Brown 2018, chap. 4). Religious persecution unknown before monotheism becomes common as rain. Religious despair and persecution are for the first time engraved into humankind's imaginary.

Second, idolatry, as paganism is now derided, is not only error; it is infidelity and immorality. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2007, 2010) has familiarized the notion of the *Mosaic distinction*. Revolutionary monotheism (as opposed to evolutionary monotheism, the final stage of polytheism) is 'based on the distinction between true and false gods, between one true god and the rest of forbidden, false, or non-existent gods' (Assmann 2007, 28). Polytheistic religions are concerned mainly with public actions such as the correct performance of rituals. Monotheism is concerned with orthodoxy, correct belief and sincerity of commitment. Monotheisms have in common an emphatic and exclusionary claim to revealed truth. The claim is not based on the evidence of the gods' activity in the world, as are the earlier religions, but on revelation. Natural evidence is disparaged as seduction 'luring people away from eternal truths into the traps and pitfalls of the false gods, that is, the world' (Assmann 2010, 29). From these claims to incontrovertible truth, the monotheisms draw their antagonistic energy.

For these religions and for these religions alone, the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy, and whatever other terms have been coined to designate what they denounce, persecute and proscribe as manifestations of untruth (Assmann 2010, 4).

Religious intolerance, hatred and violence enter a world that had been innocent of them: the hatred of the Elect directed at pagans, heretics, apostates and sexual non-conformists who threaten the Elect's certainties, and the retaliatory hatred of those who are excluded and maligned. To polytheists, monotheism's claim to exclusive truth and privilege was simply atheism, a contemptuous denial of *their* gods. These mutual hatreds have rippled through contending sects within the Abrahamic religions and between them, from antiquity to the present.<sup>6</sup> But hatred is not reserved only for the stranger or pagan but also for the Canaanite within. The mosaic distinction 'cuts right through the community and even through the individual heart, which now becomes the theatre of inner conflicts and religious dynamics. The concept of idolatry becomes psychologized and turned into a new concept of sin' (Assmann 2007, 30). A new avenue for self-hatred is also bequeathed to humankind.

### Communion and Attachment

I have been sketching elements of the psycho-historical evolution of a concept of a god that made intense communion (or dependence or attachment) with the god possible. I have mostly used 'communion' to designate the relationship that evolved between human and god – in some parts of the globe and at least potentially – in preference to 'attachment' or 'dependence' because the word suggests a relationship that is intimate, open, sincere, but also conducive to merger or identification. The idea that the characteristics of the human-to-god relationship are based on human-to-human relationships is scarcely new. It is implicit in early Greek thinkers such as Euhemerus, and a version is elaborated by Feuerbach. Freud injected into this frame his novel developmental view: the relationship is shaped by and perpetuates that between young child and father.

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers

the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, to whom he nevertheless entrusts his own protection. . . . The defence against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult's reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge – a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion.

(1927, 20)

Much of the subsequent psychoanalytically oriented work on religion, of attachment theory (Kirkpatrick 1999, 2005; Granqvist 2020), and other psychological approaches (such as terror management, coping theory) can be seen as elaborations of, or departures from, the ideas in this passage, with the role of the father replaced by mother or primary caregiver. On my reading, there is an ambiguity in the passage that points to a significant divergence between the psychoanalytic and other approaches. It is unclear in Freud whether it is unconscious infantile wishes for parental protection preserved in the unconscious, or the adult's quite realistic fears in a hostile world, that are being allayed in the relationship to God. The passage suggests an emphasis on allaying adult needs for protection, although these happen to have the same overall character as the child's. However, as I indicated in the introduction, the drift of psychoanalytic thought seems to be that supernatural figures unconsciously *represent* parental objects, and therefore relating to them symbolically or substitutively satisfies unconscious infantile wishes at the same time as adult dependent needs. Here the difference between psychoanalytic and attachment approaches becomes manifest. As Granqvist says: 'Unlike Freud . . . attachment scholars do not tend to view attachment behaviour in adults as manifestations of regression or unhealthy dependency' (2020, 88). Whether that dependency should be characterized as unhealthy is moot; but more to the point, attachment theorists don't see the earlier relationship as still alive in the later one, most psychoanalytic theorists do, I believe.

Attachment theorists recognize the many similarities between the infant's attachment behaviour and the religious adult's behaviour in relation to the noncorporeal attachment figure of God (e.g. Kirkpatrick 1999; Granqvist 2020). They are similar because the same motivational system, a primary attachment behavioural system, is active in both. The evidence for such a system is strong (Panksepp and Biven 2012; Granqvist 2020). It operates to secure proximity to a stronger, wiser attachment figure that functions as a safe haven and secure base when safety or emotional dysregulation are threatened. Some theorists also see it as subserving 'mentalization', the capacity to understand others in terms of intentional states (Fonagy, Gergely and Target 2004; Hill 2010). There is an array of attachment outcomes along a secure/insecure spectrum. We need not go into details. In the case of religious objects extensive studies confirm that the vicissitudes of attachment history influence the person's representations – 'internal working models' (IWMs) – of God and other supernatural figures.<sup>7</sup> Broadly, people with secure attachment and with positive IWMs of themselves and others will tend to view God positively as a secure base and safe haven. People with insecure attachment, who are preoccupied/ambivalent or avoidant, are likely to have corresponding views of God as ambivalent or harsh. In his major work, Granqvist notes that these findings are borne out by cross-cultural studies: 'In cultures where parenting is typically harsh and rejecting, people tend to have corresponding representations of God or gods as wrathful and punitive. In contrast, in cultures where parenting is typically warm and accepting, people tend to have a corresponding representation of God or gods as loving and accepting' (2020, 139–140). But importantly, divine figures may become a surrogate for unsatisfactory attachment figures. Relations to God experienced as caring may compensate for insecure attachment and provide the kind of secure attachment relationship one never had with one's parents or other primary attachment figures. At the centre of this picture,

then, are causal arrows from {benign or malign parenting} to {secure or insecure attachment} to {corresponding IWMs of parents and others} to {corresponding or compensatory IWMs of God}. Although the literature contains some additional vague references to the way in which adult 'religious standards' are configured on the basis of the standards of the attachment figures of childhood, there appears little discussion of the direct role of religious ideology, of the specific character and conceptions of a religion, in the formation of the child's and adult's IWMs of deity and their religious dispositions (but cf. Hill 2010). Consequently, the fundamental difficulty with the attachment theoretical study of religion is that although it captures some schematic elements of religious phenomenology it fails to capture many of its definitive features or content; a fact obliquely acknowledged, at least by Granqvist (2020, 267). I will now note some particular difficulties with the approach, with a view to exploring the richer defensive aspects, more specifically the narcissistic aspects, of religion.

As we have seen, for most of the historical record, not to say of prehistory, and in most regions of the world, religion did not have a prominent C or attachment aspect. Religious observance before and apart from monotheism is mostly at the pole of EPC. Love is often said to be central to most religious belief systems but this is simply not so. Rather it would seem, as Freud (1933, 165) obliquely observed, that only when a people lose confidence in their ability to influence the spirits do they abandon manipulation, the use of magic and imprecation,<sup>8</sup> and seek communion. Horton notes that many religions scarcely have a communion aspect at all but are marked by 'cool pragmatism' (Horton 1997, 373ff. for examples), a fact obviously inconvenient to the application of the attachment model. 'All vigorously flourishing religious traditions' Horton says, 'include a strong emphasis on explanation, prediction, and control of worldly events' because EPC is the basic sustainer of a religion's life, it creates a sense of the reality of its religious objects. Communion with a noncorporeal object involves a loss of a handle on reality, as rudimentary as that handle may be. The quest for communion is degenerative from the quest to control the material world and spirits.<sup>9</sup> The fact that historically EPC has been the dominant mode of religious expression is not only inconvenient to attachment research but raises the question what it is about humanity that has made – and arguably still makes – EPC, and not attachment, the default position.<sup>10</sup>

Again, to my knowledge the attachment studies direct limited attention to the influence of the *specifics* of religious doctrine on the religious development of the child. We know that the mind of the preschooler and early schoolchild is extremely receptive to religious and spiritual ideas and parents and teachers regard this period as particularly opportune for cultivating their brand of religious ideology and practice. The interaction between parent and child certainly shapes the child's IWMs of gods in significant ways, and the parent's religious beliefs (including their IWMs of God) may enter into that interaction. But the details of the religious ideology and practices to which the child is exposed, and the way these are *interpreted* by the child – interpretation that may depart markedly from the parent's beliefs – are also significant. Such details are treated as extrinsic to the main lines of attachment research.

Finally, religious profession and affiliation spreads over a broad spectrum. On one side of a mild centre are people whose adoption or profession of a religion has little psychological resonance. It may be a part of the 'social scene'; it may be habit. On the other side of the centre there may be very deep resonance indeed. Here are people referred to as fundamentalists, fanatics or religiose. They are the clamorous representatives of a larger group who are driven to religion by needs not well described as emerging from the correspondence or compensation pathways of the attachment crucible. The attachment orientated research, although focused on monotheism, scarcely touches on what in my view is most distinctive about it. At base, in the essential structure of its ideology and emotional impress, monotheism *is* fanatical.

Given the opportunity it quickly reverts to its principal tendencies: intolerance of difference, persecution, violence and hatred of mind when thought challenges its illusions. It has been so since antiquity and is evident today wherever religion has political influence: in Russia, Eastern Europe, Israel, many Muslim nations and the United States. Of course, many people, even those who know the historical record and acknowledge these tendencies, see them as incidental, as perversions of ‘true religion’. My contention, foreshadowed above, is that these are *intrinsic* features of monotheism. That is not a proposition fully demonstrable here (Pataki 2010), but we can begin to see how it might be true by now examining further aspects of the role of narcissism in religion.

### Narcissism and Identification

I want to briefly discuss a number of processes that in a loose sense could be called narcissistic defences because they are so intimately concerned with the economy of self-esteem and the reflexive modification of the self or self-image. Then I will relate these processes to religious development. My rather dogmatic account requires much in-filling, but its very sketchiness may perhaps render it uncontroversial from a range of psychodynamic perspectives. We do not need to be too specific about timing. It will be agreed that children of all ages wish to live in the circle of an omnibenevolent world and have available from early days the means of regulating their internal states and environment. Several are of particular significance in the maintenance of well-being and the development of the narcissistic economy. First there is the capacity to withdraw attention from, or to split off, bad or painful aspects of self and primary objects (mother) and to project (externalise) aspects of self into objects. A second involves introjecting (internalising) the good aspects of primary objects. The child can subsequently identify with objects introjectively (the object is in me, and I am like the object) or projectively (I am in the object, and it is like me).<sup>11</sup> These acts favourably alter the distribution of pleasure and pain in the child’s world. The vehicle of some of these regulative mental acts is omnipotent (wish-fulfilling) phantasy: when some state of affairs is phantasised, it seems at the time to be real (Pataki 2014, 2019). The young child’s mental life is under the sway of what Freud called ‘the omnipotence of thought’ and this experience of (quasi-)omnipotence combines with a number of incidental affirmations of it. The heightened experience of mastery when the child is beginning to walk and talk, and the new, exhilarating love affair with the world, augments it. Parents usually are still satisfying the infant’s needs on demand and may be felt to be extensions of his will. The conjunction of these circumstances elates the infant and reinforces his sense of omnipotence and grandeur.<sup>12</sup> With the development of a mature ego or self – we do not need to be specific here – maintenance of the omnibenevolent world soon requires regard to the complex relations one has with oneself.

Two other factors tangential to the endeavour to maintain an omnibenevolent world, and a sense of omnipotent control over it, are of significance to the economy of narcissism. Early on, a child may insist on mother’s presence and will do everything in his attachment repertoire to secure it. Disruption of the optimal ranges of attachment proximity and intimacy may create intolerable anxiety. Later, the child must *know* mother’s whereabouts. This need to know may be deformed into a need to know everything which, under the impress of omnipotence and, later, the incorporation of the idealised omnipotent parent, may be transformed into the illusion of omniscience. The child may in phantasy become omniscient, or suffer desperately from the need to be so. It is remarkable that the attributes – omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence – so necessary in the regulation of infantile narcissism and well-being, are precisely the key perfections attributed to God.

The second factor involved in the regulation of the narcissistic economy is the capacity for idealisation. Figures needed for protection and security are often idealised by having their 'bad' aspects stripped away, or split off, so as to not vitiate their goodness and obstruct the desired relation to them. Sometimes, as W.R.D. Fairbairn (1952) emphasised, the child in splitting the object takes its badness upon himself. This leads to guilt and shame and self-abasement. With these idealised images of himself and objects the child can in various degrees identify. Freud referred to the setting up of an 'ego-ideal' that is 'a substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal' – a kind of rescue operation for narcissism. But the child may also achieve idealisation of himself by identifying with his idealised parental objects. If he is like (or better) than his idealised objects, he too will be admirable and invincible; and, if not loved for his goodness and beauty, he will have the power at least to compel or extort love. Being able to idealise himself, the child now possesses another means to further idealise objects by projecting his own idealised conception of himself into them. The processes I have described are more or less normal developments. But in some circumstances identification with the idealised objects and idealised self-representations can lead to the creation of unconscious grandiose conceptions of the self that dominate the entire personality. One particularly malign outcome occurs when the self and object have been idealised for their aggression or destructiveness and the grandiose self that forms from the fusion of ideal self and idealised object is malignant and destructive (detailed discussion of these processes from different though converging perspectives may be found in Kohut 1968; Kernberg 1975; Klein 1975; Rosenfeld 1987).

It is difficult to sustain childhood narcissism. Parents become progressively uncompliant, and the child's expanded understanding soon discloses his real weakness and dependency. His maturing moral sense and love of others begin to render naked egotism unbearable. Various strategies are now available to keep a grip on his self-esteem and omnipotent control. He may consciously surrender much of his own narcissism but reinforce the idealisation of his objects and form a kind of hero-worshipping incorporative bond that delivers the narcissistic rewards of living in the orbit or radiance of the great and adored one. Or he can project his own idealised self-images into the parental figure, and then by re-identification restore what was earlier surrendered; unconsciously it then seems that he is the idealised incorporated figure or the one that he projectively lives in. These unconscious phantasies undergird and will decisively influence the adult's conscious beliefs, behaviour and sense of self.

I come at last to the interplay between the narcissistic economy and religious development, focusing in particular on the role of religious ideology. Religious instruction usually commences when the child is still under the sway of infantile narcissism, the capacity for distinguishing the real from the phantastic is not well established, and he is disposed to believe his parents unquestioningly. If ideas about supernatural figures are introduced to the child, he is likely to recapitulate in relation to them the strategies used earlier to regulate his self-esteem and sense of security. Religious teaching about God's omnipotence, omniscience and goodness are particularly fitted to re-invigorate narcissistic desires and to gratify them, for these are the very properties the child is striving more or less desperately to sustain or retrieve. So, for example, he may attempt to establish a relationship in phantasy with the ideal supernatural figures (as with a pop star or sporting hero) and bask in their radiance. Or the child may consciously surrender his self-love and then restore it in some measure by unconscious identification with God. In that way his self-love can be extended in loving God and in God's love for him.<sup>13</sup>

The sense of one's great goodness, importance and power is not easily surrendered. If it is forcefully extinguished with threats or punishment, or if parents are remote, the image of the self, fashioned on the images of parents and the child's own angry projections, may be angry and punitive, and the corresponding image of God is likely to be wrathful and vengeful. Children

raised in a cold or crushing atmosphere – it is often part of religious upbringing to crush the child's 'willfulness' – are more likely to depend on supernatural substitutes to contain their narcissism, on the compensation model. Their self-esteem is likely to be precarious and sustainable only through unremitting efforts – prayer, sacrifice, self-abasement – to achieve emotional proximity to a remote God. If the child splits his self-conception, projects the good into the image of God and identifies with the bad, or if he has split the parental conception and projected the good into God and identified with the bad counterparts, then he is left with an unmoderated all-bad conception of himself. If, as is often the case, there arises a dominant identification with this bad self-image and the attachment to, and identification with, the idealised figure of God fails, then the expense of maintaining an image of an all-good, almighty God is to see oneself as sinful, weak and suppliant. Because of the close association between images of God and idealised parental and self images many people who have abandoned religion, may in later life return to it if, as in times of crisis, the lure of the omnipotent parental objects or of the ideal self become once again irresistible. Even when religious ideas are introduced later in life they may regressively reactivate the longing for the lost idealised objects. The point can be underscored: the object of longing is not just the parent who provides a secure base and safe haven, or the abstracted version of these; the longing is for the idealised parent and the lost ideal self.

These strategies can be repeated in relation to the religious group. The group may be idealised and identified with so that the greatness conferred on the group can be claimed for oneself. Identifying with a group – racial, religious, a football club – whose virtues are sublimed is a common way of elevating and sustaining self-esteem. The logic is simple: if the group is special, the members are special. This strategy also has the advantage of being able to diminish envy by appropriating the group's achievements. It also enhances one's power and scope for exercising it in the groups' superior ability to 'throw its weight around', an expression of narcissistic assertion. Consequently, religious group identity is prone to be an instrument of aggression that had to be suppressed in childhood. Becoming a member of the Elect is in itself a gratifying exclusionary process: being Elect means being one of the Few, not the Many. Consigning non-believers to hell is also gratifying, though not of the best elements in human nature. Proselytizing is a doubly rewarding act. Consciously, there is the pleasing knowledge of bestowing grace upon another; unconsciously, there is the narcissistic pleasure of stripping converts of their former identity and obliterating differences by aggressively incorporating them into the group. Compelling others to think and act as you do not only confirms faith and eliminates challenges to it, but it also nourishes grandiose self-conceptions by testifying to one's power. It affirms the special relationship or identification with an omnipotent God.

Finally, the unconscious need for omniscience that arises from the omnipotent denial of separation or abandonment forms a fateful combination with the revealed religion that knows no uncertainty or fallibility. Science and the humanities cannot provide certainties. Herein lays the great resource of the Holy Book. For people who may not know much, and don't care to know more, the Holy Book idealised provides all they need to know on all matters of importance. The word of God can be carried in the van to war, placed near head or heart or waved around in public demonstration of faith. Assiduously studying the word of God is unconsciously incorporating the mind of God: to thoroughly incorporate the mind of God is to be God. At a rally against COVID-19 restrictions, an American woman screamed, 'I don't need your science, I got my God', unknowingly echoing Tertullian 1800 years earlier: 'We have no need of curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor of research after the Gospel. When we believe, we desire to believe nothing more. For we believe this first, that there is nothing else that we should believe.' Reason threatens to subvert such grand presumption. So the eye is plucked out.

These then are some of the ways in which narcissism is intricately woven with religion in its broadly communal aspect. As noted, I have not attempted to discuss the important role of narcissism in relation to the EPC pole of religion, a matter for another occasion.

### Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Agnes Petocz and Tair Caspi for their very helpful comments. The paper is greatly improved because of them.
- 2 That issue must be left largely indeterminate here; the various concepts of soul and spirit are vague, and modern concepts of the *material* and the *natural* don't always easily apply. I will generally use the phrase 'gods or spirits', or sometimes use the terms interchangeably where the sense is clear, to refer to the non-natural focal objects of religion. Roughly, gods are spirits who are worshipped. Some spirits, such as those of ancestors or dead kings, may be revered as objects of cult; others, such as the malicious spirits in the service of a hostile adjacent tribe, or the gods of Greece and Rome degraded into demons by the early Christians, may be greatly feared.
- 3 Xenophanes complained that men make the gods 'have clothing, voice and body just like them.' 'If cows and horses had hands', he said, 'they would draw their gods in the shape of cows and horses.' We do not know what Xenophanes thought the gods were like. I am of course glossing over vast tracts of mystical, apophatic, allegorizing and metaphysical de-anthropomorphizing over two millennia, but I deny that these efforts have altered the thought of the ordinary believer, nor of many of the learned. Moreover, if the psychoanalytic argument I develop below is sound, then it may be expected that even the most abstract conceptions of God are experienced unconsciously in a concrete manner, along the lines of parental introjects, and hence as at least partly anthropomorphic.
- 4 Robert Wright (2010) discusses the intense humiliation and resentment towards the oppressive regional powers expressed by the prophets of the time. 'In the end . . . the logic behind monotheism was pretty simple given the natural mindset of Israel's exilic intellectuals. Yahweh's honour, and Israel's pride, could be salvaged only by intellectual extremes. If the Babylonian conquest didn't signify Yahweh's disgrace, if Yahweh wasn't a weakling among the gods, then he must have orchestrated Israel's calamity – and orchestrating a calamity of that magnitude came close to implying the orchestration of history itself, which would leave little room if any for autonomy on the part of other gods' (180–81). 'Monotheism was amongst other things the ultimate revenge': the oppressors who tormented Israel are deprived of their gods and they must acknowledge Israel's superiority on both a political and the theological plane (178).
- 5 In a private communication, Agnes Petocz has noted how the need to disguise God by abstraction becomes more urgent as religious need regresses to its *fons et origo* in the human need and helplessness of the child.
- 6 Gibbon (1776–1778/1993) is still the most vivid historian of the internecine massacres of antiquity. We require no illustration from the present.
- 7 Several writers of psychodynamic bent have arrived at similar conclusions in different theoretical frameworks (e.g., Meissner 1984; Faber 2004; Ostow 2007). Ostow argues that the covenantal relation to God 'provides both horizontal [to the group] and vertical [to God] attachment to a divine entity. I would guess' he continues, 'that this dual attachment provides the major motivation of religious affiliation' (84).
- 8 When, that is, in Freud's view, the omnipotence of thought subsides. The broad group of shamanistic religions may be viewed as an intermediate stage where the capacity for communion with the spirits, still directed more or less to manipulative ends, is invested in a single religious specialist (see Lewis 2003).
- 9 It appears to peak in times of social distress when ordinary human relations are disrupted. The search for communion seems to have arisen in Egypt and Mesopotamia during times of social dislocation. In Greece, eras of political and social discord gave rise to mystical movements in the sixth century BC (Pythagoras, Orphism); the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War (Plato); the first century BC (Posidonius, neo-Pythagorism); and the third century AD (Plotinus; Dodds 1965, *passim*). The misery of the third century provided the conditions for the rise of Christianity, when the urban centres of migration could no longer provide the security of family, lineage, clan and locality. People in a lonely and impersonal place were ready to accept 'a peculiarly intense parental relationship with a spiritual being – a relationship that had no real parallel in the locally based cults in their earlier lives' (Horton 1997, 374–375; see Brown 2018, 62ff).

- 10 The answer to this question would require a long excursion into our tendency to magical and omnipotent thought; certainly a matter intricately with narcissism, but not an aspect of narcissism I can address here.
- 11 Incorporative and identificatory processes in religious phenomenology in the ancient world and tribal religions are described *passim* in Dodds (1965), Lewis (2003), and Bellah (2011).
- 12 The *locus classicus* is Ferenczi (1913). The role of omnipotence in child development is influentially explored in D. W. Winnicott (1965, 1974).
- 13 Freud makes only passing remarks on narcissistic aspects of the relation to God. He notes that circumcised peoples feel exalted by it (1939, 29). This is explained in the Jewish context as a mark of specialness or chosenness or at least equivalence with the Egyptians who practised it. He says that Moses inspired in the Jewish people the notion that they were God's chosen: 'they believe that they stand especially close to Him' (1939, 106). Mosaic religion increased Jewish self-esteem because (1) it allowed the people to take a share in the grandeur of the new idea of God, (2) it asserted that this people had been chosen by this great God and were destined to receive evidences of his special favour, and (3) it forced upon the people an advance in intellectuality (1939, 123). This last factor is explained as the consequence of a renunciation of instinct followed by superego approval. In relation to the first factor, Freud says that 'the pride in God's greatness fuses with the pride in being chosen by him' (1939, 112).

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