A Benevolent God Image as a Psychotherapeutic and Theological Resource

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of positive God images in regards to the mental well being of people. Discussing psychoanalytical theories I will argue that the individual God image is created by socio-cultural influences and can be both, a negative or positive resource. Psychological and psychoanalytical research can help identify the sources, desires, needs and wishes related to people’s faith as well as the images of God they design and develop. However, positive God images must be supported by biblical exegesis. Focusing on the exegetical work of theologian and psychoanalyst Eugen Drewermann, this paper attempts to present a theological concept that understands both sin and salvation within the scope of mental well being. As a resource for psychotherapy and pastoral care, positive God images can be shaped by therapist, pastor and patient. Some approaches will be explored in the paper.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .......................................................................................................................... 1

**Chapter One: Theology and Psychological Inquiry** .................................................................. 6

**Chapter Two: The Many Faces of God - Psychoanalytical Theories on the Origins of the God Image** .............................................................................................................................. 13

**Sigmund Freud and Religion** .................................................................................................. 14
  - Totem and Taboo – The Collective Trauma behind Religion ................................................. 15
  - The Future of an Illusion – Religion to Ease Anxiety and Helplessness .......................... 19
  - Moses the Man and Monotheistic Religion – Religion, Ethics and Drive Renunciation .... 23
  - A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis ............................................................... 25

**Ana-Maria Rizzuto, Object-Relations Theory, and the Living God** ....................................... 28
  - The Influences of Sigmund Freud ....................................................................................... 29
  - Object Representation ......................................................................................................... 32
  - God as a Personal Object .................................................................................................... 34

**Lee A. Kirkpatrick – The God Image and Attachment Theory** ............................................... 37
  - The Attachment System ..................................................................................................... 37
  - God as an Attachment Figure ............................................................................................ 41
  - Individual Differences in Attachment ............................................................................... 45

**Conclusions** .............................................................................................................................. 46

**Chapter Three: Biblical Exegesis and Depth Psychology** ...................................................... 48

**Psychology or Theology?** ....................................................................................................... 52

**The Structure and Development of the Neurosis before God** ............................................. 54
  - A Cycle of Fear and Guilt .................................................................................................... 55
  - The Law of Increasing Unfreedom ....................................................................................... 60
  - The Impossibility of Self-Recovery .................................................................................... 62

**Sin and Neurosis** ....................................................................................................................... 65

**Chapter Four: The Benevolent God Image as a Healing Resource** .................................... 72

**Grace and a Benevolent God Image** ..................................................................................... 73

**The Need for New God Images** ............................................................................................. 76

**God Image and Mental Health: Research Results** ............................................................... 83

**The God Image in Therapy and Pastoral Care** ................................................................. 86
  - Cognitive Interventions ........................................................................................................ 87
  - Analytic Space – Sacred Space ............................................................................................ 91
  - The Right to Be: An Existential Approach ........................................................................ 95

**Conclusions** .............................................................................................................................. 99

**Bibliography** ............................................................................................................................. 104
Introduction

In his book *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* Rabbi Jonathan Sacks champions the idea that enmity between science and religion is quite unnecessary, since science and religion talk on totally different planes about humanity, the world, and existence. He states that “Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. They speak different languages and use different powers of the brain.”\(^1\) Science delivers explanations, whereas religion offers interpretations.\(^2\) Sacks illustrates this point by presenting two narratives of the creation of universe and earth. The first one assumes that a huge explosion some 13.7 billion years ago marked the birth of the universe, out of which a planet came to existence, capable of supporting life. It follows the course as depicted by modern evolutionary theory. Life became so complex that it gave birth to self-conscious life forms such as the Homo sapiens. This narrative, while true, also contains a certain sobriety: “There is nothing beyond sheer random happenstance. Humans are no more significant, and less successful at adapting to their environment, than the ants. They came, they will go, and it will be as if they had never been. Why are we here? We just are.”\(^3\)

According to the second narrative, the universe was called into existence by a being Rabbi Sacks calls the One. He created a stable universe and a planet that could bring forth life. The One watched as life evolved on this planet called Earth. He tried to enter into a

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2. Cf. Ibid., 37.
3. Ibid., 21.
dialogue with the creatures developing on Earth, but they did not hear him. Until one man named Abraham finally listened closely enough to hear the One’s whisper. His message to the beings on earth was a powerful and encouraging one:

It said that every human being had within him or her a trace of the One who created the universe. Like the One, human beings could speak, think and communicate. They could imagine a world not present to the senses, entertain different scenarios for the future and choose between them. They could change their environment because they could change themselves. They could show that history is not destined to be an endless relay of the victory of the strong over the weak. They could construct a society built on respect for human dignity, equality and freedom, and though they failed time and again, the prophets who came after Moses never gave up the vision or the hope. Somehow they sensed that something of larger consequence was at stake.4

This second narrative understands humanity and life in general to be in relation to a creator who wanted them to exist. Despite all their shortcomings and mistakes, human beings were wanted, encouraged by the One to continuously strive for a better life and existence for all. The second narrative assumes a deep meaning in all that is: “We may be dust of the Earth, the debris of exploded stars, a concatenation of blindly self-replicating genes, but within us is the breath of God.”5

Both stories are equally valid. The difference between the two stories lies in the question ‘Why?’6 The first narrative is not concerned with this question at all, whereas the question of why is at the very heart of the second one. Why do we exist? Why should we struggle for something in life? To Sacks, the second narrative stands to the first one “as poetry to prose, music to speech, worship and wonder to analysis and experimentation. It has

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4 Ibid., 22.
5 Ibid., 23.
6 Cf. Ibid., 24.
nothing to do with science.\textsuperscript{7} There is a very compelling truth to Sacks’ assessment that science and religion are neither mutually exclusive nor rivals. They explain the same phenomena from different points of views, starting with different premises and asking distinct questions. But Sacks’ strongly dichotomous differentiation invites us to see science and religion as so far apart that they do not even have to enter into a dialogue. What science does is of no or little significance to religion, and how religion ascribes meaning to things can be ignored by science without hesitations. In this paper, I am not so much concerned with the potential influence religion can have on science. Rather, I want to investigate in what way certain scientific disciplines, insights, and methods can be useful to religion, mainly practical Christian theology. Therefore, I would like to revise Rabbi Sacks assumption for my own purposes: While religion and science operate on different planes, the insights of the latter can be of great significance for, or helpful to, the former. The scientific discipline I envision to be theology’s primary partner is psychology, and depth psychology in particular. I will try to demonstrate the theological significance of understanding the psychological mechanisms and motivations behind the development of faith in particular and human behaviour and nature in general. This knowledge enables theology to approach the existential issues and conflicts depicted in biblical scriptures more cohesively. The results produced by this kind of exegesis might open up new ways of redefining theological concepts such as human nature, sin, and the God image. Psychological insights combined with more sensitive approaches to some of the essential theological terms could prove useful particularly in the fields of psychotherapy and pastoral counselling.

This paper is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter, called \textit{The Many Faces of God: Psychoanalytical Theories on the Origins of the God Image} focuses on

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 24.
psychological and psychoanalytical insights regarding the God image. It will take people’s beliefs and their God images apart, analysing them from the perspective of psychology and psychoanalysis. Why do people believe? What factors, even unconscious ones, foster the development and growth of faith? How are God images shaped? We will limit our discussion to the research and findings of three prominent proponents of psychology: Sigmund Freud, Ana-María Rizzuto, and Lee Kirkpatrick. In *Biblical Exegesis and Depth Psychology*, the second chapter of this thesis, we follow Eugen Drewermann and his psychoanalytical exegesis of the primeval history as depicted in Gen 1-11. He is using psychoanalysis as a grammar or hermeneutical key to uncover aspects of the human condition in the biblical story of the fall. In a unique way he manages to use both psychoanalytical and theological language to depict stages of mental development right up to the collective neurosis which he calls the “neurosis before God,” or sin. With Drewermann, we develop an idea of the *conditio humana* that understands humanity to be sick, suffering from existential anxiety because it is separated from the reason of being and meaning, God. Trapped in this neurosis, human beings find themselves in a desperate and ultimately futile struggle to make meaning of their existence. The cure to ease existential fear is a benevolent God image that radically affirms and accepts the individual being and thus liberates her from her compulsive attempts to make herself meaningful or valuable. With Drewermann we encounter a theological description of human existence that lays the foundations for a theology that proclaims positive God images as a healing resource in pastoral care. This conclusion will lead us to the third and last chapter, *The Benevolent God Image as a Healing Resource*. Here, the focus will firmly rest on the application of the theological and psychological insights throughout the paper. The content of this last part draws significantly on the experiences of authors in
the field of pastoral care and psychotherapy and tries to present a few methods and approaches that help fostering a benevolent God image in clients.

Having established the basic structure and content of the paper, a few comments seem necessary. Throughout this paper I will refer to the three parts of the psychic apparatus commonly known as Id, Ego, and Superego as ‘It’, ‘I’, and ‘Above-I’. Not only do I consider those translations to be more in line with the termini used by Sigmund Freud in the German original, I also think they describe more accurately than the abstract Latin terms what Freud had in mind. Furthermore I decided to use feminine and masculine personal pronouns when referring to God. I think it is time to abandon a predominantly male, but not necessarily a personal God-image. I would like to quote Elizabeth A. Johnson at this point, whose voice we will hear elsewhere in this thesis:

Since language not only expresses the world but helps to shape and create it, learning to speak a language where the female is subsumed grammatically under the male gives girl children from the beginning the experience of a world where the male is the norm from which her own self deviates … In sexist civil and religious society, women’s basic human experience of uniqueness become an experience of otherness, of being alien and not fitting in, of being out of place and of little consequence.  

By referring to God as both male and female, I will do my part, no matter how small, to overcome the alienation of women in God talk and theology.

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Chapter One

Theology and Psychological Inquiry

Why should precisely depth psychology become theology’s cherished partner? Why, for that matter, should theology need the assistance of other sciences at all?

In the introduction to the first volume of his Systematic Theology Paul Tillich describes his theology quite frankly as an apologetic theology, which he defines as an “answering theology.” It answers the questions implied in the ‘situation’ in the power of the eternal message and with the means provided by the situation whose questions it answers.”

The kerygma, the Christian message, must be understood and interpreted in the here and now, by using the means we have at our disposal. Contrary to the claims of fundamentalists and some neo-orthodox theologies, the divine message as presented in scripture does not directly speak into our current situations, it does not address modern humanity. It was spoken then and there, addressing humanity in its current situation. Biblical messages approach us over a deep chasm, time and context separate us from Biblical wisdom and truth. In a sense, the Biblical messages must be updated and transported into today’s context, answer modern humanity’s struggles and challenges. The following passage by Tillich gives us much insight in regards to this issue:

It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaningfulness, and despair in

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all realms of life. This experience is expressed in the arts and in literature, conceptualized in existential philosophy, actualized in political cleavages of all kinds, and analyzed in the psychology of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{10}

The problems of contemporary societies and the questions dealt with in religions and theology are deeply existential questions. As such, they are not merely reflected and analyzed in the theological realm, but they infuse every aspect of human existence and each and every academic discipline and area of activity. That is what Rabbi Sacks did not see: Perhaps natural science does not ask the question of why in any philosophical manner – but other scientific disciplines certainly do. Human sciences do share the aspect of meaning making with religions. Thus, there is no reasonable objection to a cooperation between theology and all those disciplines that address and deal with existential issues. We might wonder again: Of all the Human sciences, why does psychology prove to be one of the most suitable ones for a collaboration with theology?

Several reasons come to mind. In the introduction to their four volumes strong series \textit{Psychology and the Bible}, editors and contributors J. Harold Ellens and Wayne G. Rollins propose that theology and psychology should be – despite historical differences and animosities – partners, even “soul mates.”\textsuperscript{11} The degree of kinship might be debatable, however, they certainly have a point when they assume a theme based relation: “For psychology and biblical studies, the bond is in the rediscovery of a shared history of commitment to the \textit{cura animarum}: to the study, care, and cure of the human soul or psyche; to the healing of persons, every one of which is a living human document.”\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps the most significant change in the theological camp, which indicated a new theological interest

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 1.
in psychological analysis, occurred in the 1970s, when the sovereignty of the historical-critical exegesis was slowly undermined by new ways of interpretation. D. Andrew Kille writes on the dominating method of exegesis:

“Historical-critical approaches, which had their origin in the Enlightenment, presumed it was possible to bring an objective eye to the interpretation of texts. Personal attachments or community interpretations of texts were considered irrelevant, or at best secondary, to the “true” meaning – the meaning intended by the historical author.”

Kille rightly points out that the historical-critical method confronts contemporary readers and specifically pastors with a serious issue: If the true and intended meaning of a biblical text lies in the past, what significance does the text have today? Is it even possible to bridge this historical gap? If theology, academic as well as practical, wants to offer more than mere history lessons, solutions had to be found. The demand for new exegetical approaches saw the rise of methods which included “social-scientific, rhetorical, ideological, canonical, contextual, feminist, structural, deconstructionist, and psychological criticism.”

Kille’s sentiment, that theology must somehow transport meaning and significance of biblical texts into a contemporary context is shared by the German theologian, psychoanalyst and former priest Eugen Drewermann. After studying Catholic theology in Paderborn, he was ordained as a priest 1966, subsequently working as chaplain. His experiences as chaplain in a sanatorium he describes as eye-opening:

Es war für mich unmittelbar nach der Priesterweihe auf meiner ersten Stelle in einem Kurort ein sehr starkes Erlebnis, daß ich auf zahlreiche Fragen, mit denen Menschen zu mir kamen, nicht die geringste Antwort zu geben wußte. Leute

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14 Ellens & Rollins, *Psychology and the Bible*, vol. 1, 2.
trugen mir die Schwierigkeiten ihrer Ehe vor, andere waren überrascht, wie sie in der Kur nach wenigen Tagen Aufenthalts von unklaren Ängsten heimgesucht wurden. Sie litten bis ins Körperliche hinein an verdrängten Gefühlen. Theologiestudenten kamen, die sich für homosexuell hielten. Alle erwarten von mir, daß ich als Priester, als Seelsorger auf diese Konflikte irgendeine hilfreiche Begleitung zu geben wüßte. Und das vermochte ich nicht.15

His studies, his entire academic career did not prepare Drewermann for the confrontation with the conflicts people have in day to day life. He realised that something was missing, that theology as an academic discipline was lacking important insights particularly in regards to pastoral care. What troubled him most was a predominate Christian understanding of human nature which neglected or even ignored the existence of the unconscious and anxieties in order to promote the supremacy of ‘good will’ and rational thinking. In short: there was not only something missing in theological thinking about humanity, rather a whole dimension of human nature went unseen or even ignored by and large. Thus, Drewermann’s proposal is evident: “Die heutige historisch-kritische Auslegungsmethode der Bibel durch tiefenpsychologische Exegese zu erweitern.”16 As a consequence, he began training to become a neo-Freudian psychoanalyst in 1968. Drewermann is not an enemy of the historical-critical exegesis and method. Instead, he wants to expand common exegesis by a psychoanalytical approach. He does so because in his understanding many Biblical texts invite us to read them not as historical or social documents, but rather as existential or even anthropological narratives. Especially in myths, just as in common lore, legends, and fairy

15 “Directly after ordination, in my first position in a sanatorium I was overwhelmed by the fact that I did not have any answers to many questions I was asked by people. Some were telling me about difficulties in their marriages, others were surprised how undefined anxieties were bothering them after only a few days in the sanatorium. They were suffering physically from suppressed emotions. Theology students approached me who considered themselves to be gay. As priest and chaplain I was expected by everyone to come up with some helpful comments. And I was simply unable to do so.” Eugen Drewermann, Wort des Heils, Wort der Heilung: Von der befreienden Kraft des Glaubens. Gespräche und Interviews, Bd. 3, ed. Bernd Marz (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1988.), 34f.
16 “to expand today’s historical-critical method of biblical exegesis by the dimension of depth psychology.” Ibid., 55.
tales, we meet anthropological constants, elements shared by different cultures and reappearing independently throughout the history of humanity. These anthropological elements can be studied most efficiently by using *psychoanalytical methods*:

... dass die j Mythen in der Tat das sind, als was J sie betrachtet: Erzählungen vom Wesen des Menschen oder, umgekehrt, Erzählungen, die so sehr zum Menschen gehören, daß sie in ähnlicher Weise an allen Orten und zu allen Zeiten der Menschheitsgeschichte erzählt wurden. Erzählungen dieser Art müssen in der Natur des Menschen selbst verankert sein, und es gilt daher, im weiteren Verlauf psa [psychoanalytisch] zu erforschen, welch ein psychischer Gehalt sich in den einzelnen Mythen verbirgt.¹⁷

Drewermann intentionally opts for a symbolical and psychological interpretation of the creation myth. The classical functional approach to interpretations is, to him, insufficient, even suspect, since society and context in which the myth might have been functional is beyond the reach of scientific research. What we know historically about the society in which the creation myth was of significance is, at best, fragmentary. Not only is it impossible to trace back the social meaning of the myth, furthermore was it never the author’s intention to deliver a solely functional narrative. What the Yahwist set out to describe was the *conditio humana* as it was perceived by the editors of the biblical creation myth. And when we speak of the human condition, we certainly are in the realm of theology – but equally as certain are we entering the field of psychoanalysis. Drewermann is not alone in his understanding of biblical texts as basically anthropological documents. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, author Joseph Campbell highlights how depth psychology has proven to be a useful tool to uncover the common anthropological truths behind myths,

¹⁷ “... the J myths are indeed just exactly as J sees them: they are narratives about the human nature or, conversely, narratives that belong to humanity so expressively that they appear in similar form at any places and at any times throughout the history of humanity. Narratives of this kind must be rooted in the nature of the human being, therefore it is necessary to psychoanalytically examine what psychic content is hidden within the individual myth.” Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen*, Vol. 2, xliiv.
legends, and religions. In the introduction, Campbell states his intent “to uncover some of
the truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology.”\(^\text{18}\) Both, myth and
religion, employ a symbolic language to speak of human existence and purpose, of his fears
and her dreams as well as hopes. “But first”, he continues, “we must learn the grammar of
the symbols, and as a key to this mystery I know of no better modern tool than
psychoanalysis.”\(^\text{19}\) The point is: Religious texts such as the Bible tell us more about human
nature than they reveal about God. Of course those texts speak of God, but they refer to her
by using the only reference system we possess, namely the realm of human language, reason,
and experience. God operates and speaks on the level of the human unconscious. Eugen
Drewermann, a theologian whose work we will focus on in this paper, writes:

> Wohl aber kann Gott der menschlichen Seele nur in den Formen erscheinen, die
in ihr selbst angelegt sind, so wie er nur in den Formen gedacht werden kann, die
im menschlichen Verstand gegeben sind. Die Psychologie kann lediglich
feststellen, daß es bestimmte Formen des Fühlens und Vorstellens, bestimmte
“Archetypen” im Sinne A. Bastians und C.G. Jungs, gibt; sie kann naturgemäß
nicht darüber entscheiden, ob diesen subjektiven Formen etwas Objektives
entspricht.\(^\text{20}\)

To Drewermann, God is quite real, the contents of the Christian faith are more than just
images. Psychological analysis can only uncover aspects of humanity, even of
phylogenetical or archetypal nature within biblical scriptures. What psychology cannot do is
render a judgment in regards to the ontological existence of a divine being.

\(^{18}\) Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell (Novato,
Calif.:New World Library, 2008), xii.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., xii.

\(^{20}\) “However, God can appear to the human soul only in those forms that are inherent to it, just as God can only
be conceived in forms given to the human reason. Psychology can determine certain ways of feeling and
imagination, certain ‘archetypes’ in the sense of A. Bastian and C.G. Jung, but psychology naturally cannot
decide whether those subjective forms of experience relate to something objective.” Eugen Drewermann,
Schöningh, 1981), XXVI.
The question whether God is or not is of little relevance to this paper. For now we simply assume that people do believe in some kind of God and that they ascribe much significance to him. God is important to many people, she gives shape and meaning to their existence, therefore the God images believers hold dear deserve our attention. In this paper, I will argue that the God image, while it can evoke much anxiety and fear, is also able to become a healing resource, spending comfort, hope, and confidence. Psychology, its insights and methods, will guide us on our way to develop a theology that promotes benevolent God images which in turn empower believers to live an existence in confidence and responsibility.
Chapter Two

The Many Faces of God: Psychoanalytical Theories on the Origins of the God Image

But if cattle and horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do, horses like horses and cattle like cattle also would depict the gods' shapes and make their bodies of such a sort as the form they themselves have.

– Xenophanes

It makes sense to distinguish between God images and God concepts early on, for the two are not identical. To many, the former is related to emotions, whereas the latter is more grounded in the realm of thinking and intellectual activity. God concepts are more abstract and offer intellectual definitions of the term God.\(^\text{21}\) Glendon Moriarty and Louis Hoffman claim that the God image “is the complex, subjective emotional experience of God. It is shaped by a person’s family history and causes their experience of God to resemble their relationship with their parents.”\(^\text{22}\) God images are as unique and diverse as people are, an important notion. And yet there might be common or shared factors that define the evolution of these individual God images. To discover those universal psychological mechanisms shared by all humans is the goal of this first chapter.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., 2.
“The irony is,” writes Marsha Aileen Hewitt in her book *Freud on Religion*, “that Freud does not write about religion as such.” If not about religion as such, what does Freud address in his writings that earned him the reputation of being a fierce critic of religion? Freud is not interested in metaphysics, he approaches religion as an anthropological and cultural phenomenon from the perspective of his meta-psychology. What Freud attempted to do was give psychological and anthropological explanations to the question *Why do humans believe what they believe in?* The origins of God or gods do not lie somewhere outside the human realm, but rather deep within the human unconscious. Freud is not interested in debating the ontological existence of a transcendent deity. Much like Karl Marx or Ludwig Feuerbach, Freud believed that “gods are the non-conscious or unconscious products of culturally mediated human minds.” The word cultural sheds light on another assumption of Freud: Religion is by no means just an individual phenomenon, but the product of a social and cultural history and context. “Individuals are social and relational beings for Freud,” an observation that leads Hewitt to conclude that Freud’s thoughts on religion are firmly rooted in critical social theory. The individual is a product of the society she grows up in. If we want to understand the individual – his or her issues, desires, and beliefs – we must take a close look at the society he or she lives in.

In the following, I will outline the basic ideas and concepts as presented in Freud’s prominent writings on religion, such as *Totem and Taboo, The Future of an Illusion, Moses*

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24 Ibid., 15.
25 Ibid., 18.
the Man and Monotheistic Religion, and A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis.

For brevity, I will not address Freud’s criticism of religion. We are merely interested in the factors he identifies as crucial to the origins and development of human religious thought.

Totem and Taboo – The Collective Trauma behind Religion

In Totem and Taboo Freud offers his own anthropological primeval history. It deals with traumatic events that occurred at the early stages of humanity’s maturation process, when people were organized in what Charles Darwin labelled as the primal horde. Hewitt summarizes: “The social anthropological premise underlying Freud’s ingenious but controversial argument is that religion, morality and subsequent social and cultural institutions up to the present derive from an originary trauma of a ‘forgotten’ murder, the psychic consequences of which humanity grapple with in each successive generation.”

The primal horde was governed by a brutal, jealous father who kept all the females for himself, driving away his sons as they grow older. One day, however, the cast out sons united to do what they were unable to do each on their own: they “killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde.”

Devouring their father was not only an act of identification with him, but also an attempt to incorporate some of his strength. After all, the sons’ feelings towards their father had always been ambivalent, they simultaneously feared and admired him. The significance of this prototype for any following totem meal (including

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26 Ibid., 48.
28 Ibid., 141
the Eucharist!) was not only the “commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed” but furthermore the beginning of a whole new age that introduced social organization as well as morals and religion. Guilt, a substantial aspect of all religion, was first experienced after this criminal act: “After murdering him, their affection for him, which they had had to deny in order to kill him, reappeared as guilt and remorse.” Ironically, the memory of the dead father became stronger and more powerful than the real father ever was. The murder of the father, originally an act of liberation, was tainted by remorse and guilt, which consequently led to new social restrictions:

They revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex.

The Oedipus complex, passed on to every new generation, is the psychogenetic stage of the patricide. As a stage of human phylogenetic evolution, the murder marks the beginning of religion and society. Since they abhorred their father’s brutality and ruthlessness, the sons made arrangements that no one should ever become like their father – a first social contract. “To the religiously-based prohibition against killing the totem was now added the socially-based prohibition of fratricide,” concludes Freud. The early human society had to learn to renounce some of its desires and wishes in order to ensure a minimum of individual safety as

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29 Ibid., 142.
31 Freud, Totem and Taboo, 143.
32 Ibid., 146.
well as social collaboration. Marsha Hewitt states: “Culture and social order are rendered possible only on the basis of endlessly repeated renunciations of desire.”

The origins of religion are found in the fact that the sons somehow had to come to terms with their guilt and remorse over their traumatic and murderous deed. James Jones identifies internalization as their coping mechanism: “The solution was to identify with the father and internalize his image. Thus patriarchal theism was born.” The internalized image of the primal father is the prototype for any divine being. The drama that took place in the primal horde is replayed in every individual’s development during the stage of the Oedipus complex, when sons “renounce their attachment to their mother and internalize an image of their father.” While primitive humanity projected the internalized images of the father unto totem animals, monotheistic religions began to project those ideas unto a transcendent being. In religion, cult, and ritual, humanity basically regresses to an earlier stage. “Regression”, write Laplanche and Pontalis, “implies the existence of a genetic succession and denotes the subject’s reversion to past phases of his development.” Furthermore, regression is “generally conceived of as a reversion to earlier forms in the development of thought, of object-relationships or of the structure of behaviour.” In religious acts we return to the stages of the murder of the father and we enter into an object-relationship with God that contains all the ambivalences that can be found in the one between the sons and the primal father as well as the individual child and the biological father. Thus, the source that feeds individual God images is, according to Freud, the real father:

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33 Hewitt, *Freud on Religion*, 49.
35 Ibid., 36.
37 Ibid., 386.
The psychoanalysis of individual human beings … teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at the bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father.\(^{38}\)

If we reject Freud’s myth as pure speculation, we fail to see his true intentions. Marsha Hewitt points out that Freud was well aware of the limited sources supporting his theory and that he did not attempt to present objective historical truth. The whole myth around the primal horde is “the narrative vehicle whose purpose is to illuminate the psychic truth that lies at the heart of religion and culture and the minds that produce them.”\(^{39}\) Freud comes up with a creative and helpful phylogenetic history of humanity that enables him to better understand strange and challenging encounters with his patients.\(^{40}\) As Hewitt points out aptly, Freud tries to highlight that something must have happened – in the life of his patients as well as the biography of humanity as a species. Additionally, Herbert Marcuse assesses the symbolic value of Freud’s theory in his book *Eros and Civilization*, stating that Freud’s “phylogenetic hypothesis reveals that mature civilization is still conditioned by archaic mental immaturity.”\(^{41}\) The myth gives a speculative answer to the very real return of repressed memories and instincts in the era of modern society. The human capability to create religious systems is rooted deep in the archaic stages of the species’ development. This seems to be one of the core ideas of Freud’s myth. However, for Freud the desire to create gods is the result of traumatic events. By projecting unresolved issues unto a divine father figure, the initial conflict is not solved but merely transformed into a neurotic praxis.

\(^{38}\) Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 147.

\(^{39}\) Hewitt, *Freud on Religion*, 50.

\(^{40}\) Cf. Ibid., 50.

Looking at what is commonly regarded as Freud’s most popular and at the same time strongly critical writing on religion, it must be noted once more that Freud does not so much write about religion by itself, but of religion as a part of a much wider net of cultural activities. *The Future of an Illusion* makes no exception, religion as a topic does not appear until the third chapter! Before that, Freud is concerned with the tensions that arise between collective human culture on the one side and the individual desires and drives, which threaten the stability and survival of these very cultural achievements, on the other. At length Freud elaborates that culture brought humanity many comforts and blessed it with technological progress, but it must be “defended against the individual.”42 In order to keep a functioning society, individuals must renounce certain personal desires – simply put, not everyone can do what his instincts dictate, otherwise safe co-existence would be threatened. However, those libidinal desires can not be eradicated, every human being is born with them.43 The will to renounce one’s drives voluntarily must be fostered culturally, even internalized as the Above-I. By renouncing certain instinctual pleasures, individuals actually feel *unpleasure*. If, however, the renunciation itself can become a source of pleasure, this imbalance is compensated. Marsha Hewitt writes: “Moral codes, religion, artistic and technological achievements constitute cultural wealth, affording people some measure of narcissistic gratification that is regarded as worth protecting from internal as well as external threats.” Taking part in a striving and prosperous society or culture, playing by its rules,

43 Cf. Ibid., 115.
being a good citizen, obeying legal and moral laws – all those dictates that run counter
dividual drives can become a source of pleasure.

Without culture, every person would do as she pleases, every instinctual impulse
would be satisfied, regardless of the consequences it might have for other human beings.
This natural existence or life would be not only full of pure pleasures, but also highly
dangerous and probably rather short. Culture, in short, protects humanity against nature.44
Nature is cruel, it threatens human existence constantly. Natural catastrophes, diseases, frail
bodies, the unpredictability of one’s own fate, even mortality challenge humanity on a daily
basis. Religion – as a cultural invention – has the function of keeping the fear of those
natural powers in check. In its natural state, humanity is helpless, it is overwhelmed by the
powers that surround it. This helplessness, which is the core of religion and

has its model in infancy, it is simply a continuation of an earlier situation, in fact;
one had experienced this kind of helplessness back then, as a small child facing
parents whom one had reason to fear (particularly the male parent), but of whose
protection one was also confident in the face of the dangers one was aware of at
the time. So the obvious thing was to compare the two situations.45

The same helplessness one experienced as an infant and child is triggered by the brutal and
uncontrollable environment provided by nature. The human being begins to ascribe
anthropomorphic and paternal characteristic to nature; the first gods are created.46 Gods,
initially created to explain and appease the functioning and threats of natural phenomena,
become increasingly related to the moral sphere, as nature can be explained by scientific
means (this moral function of religion will be looked at closer when we discuss Moses the
Man and Monotheistic Religion). In their early stages, however, gods had the “triple function

46 Cf. Ibid., 123.
of warding off the terrors of nature, reconciling humans to the cruelty of fate, notably as revealed in death, and compensating them for the sufferings and privations imposed upon them by living together in a culture group.” Religion, thus, is triggered by the universal human experience of infant helplessness, and its function is to ease anxieties. Religion becomes a narrative that makes existence bearable. But what sources inform and shape the individual’s images of the gods or God? The answer lies in one’s biological parents – once more God is basically an exalted father. Initially it is the mother who becomes the first love-object and “fear shield.” Soon, however, the mother is replaced by the stronger father who is feared and admired, the child’s feelings toward him are ambivalent. The desire to project those feelings unto a transcendent God is infantile regression, a relic from individual and collective childhood that has never been fully outgrown:

If as a person grows older he realizes that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never manage without protection against alien superior powers, he invests those powers with the traits of the father-figure, creating for himself gods of whom he is afraid, whom he seeks to win over, and to whom he nevertheless assigns his protection.

Both the phylogenetic human trauma of having murdered the primal father, which is relived individually with the biological father, is hidden underneath the myths and stories told by religions. This is impressively demonstrated by the following quote:

The displacement of human will on to God is wholly legitimate; men knew that they had violently removed their father, and in reaction to the crime they resolved henceforth to respect his will. Religious teaching is telling us the historical truth, albeit with an element of distortion and disguise; our rational account is a denial of it.

47 Ibid., 123.
48 Ibid., 130.
49 Ibid., 130.
50 Ibid., 151.
For Freud, religion is not just mere imagination, it refers to a psychic reality. The concrete manifestations, symbols, and contents of religion, however, are not real. If we accept Freud’s ideas on religion, religion truly becomes a neurosis, a conflict never fully processed that is based on a traumatic event. It is also true that, under the best possible circumstances, the neurosis can be overcome. Freud did not hide his opinion in this regard:

Religion, in this reading, is the universal human obsessional neurosis; like the child’s, it stemmed from the Oedipus complex, the relationship to the father. Accordingly, a turning away from religion must be expected to occur with the fateful inexorability of a growth process, and we (in this view) are in the throes of that phase of evolution right now.

While the idea of succumbing to a collective neurosis when opting to believe sounds hardly charming, Freud actually saw some benefit in that. As participant in a mass neurosis, the individual is spared the fate of developing a personal one. If religion could ever be overcome, then it would be the result of a prolonged process. One cannot get rid of religion from one day to the other and Freud had no intentions to elevate atheism to the sole standard. As Hewitt notes, “Freud is too well aware that efforts to ‘do away with religion’ would be ‘senseless’, ‘hopeless’ and ‘cruel.’ He also understood that religious beliefs are impervious to either ‘argument’ or ‘prohibition.”

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51 Ibid., 153.
Moses the Man and Monotheistic Religion – Religion, Ethics and Drive Renunciation

The idea of religion as a cultural achievement that established a certain ethical foundation for society reverberates in Moses the Man and Monotheistic Religion, Freud’s last piece of work published in 1938, one year before his death. In it Freud elaborates the hypothesis that the Jewish Monotheism, as introduced primarily by the man Moses, was not so much a Jewish, but an Egyptian invention. Furthermore, Moses is assumed to have been Egyptian himself, a high official at the court of Pharaoh Akhenaten. Akhenaten indeed did introduce a short lived monotheism to Egypt, and Freud imagines that Moses, a glowing follower of Akhenaten’s monotheism, fled from Egypt, taking the Hebrew people with himself as “his” people. Having followed Moses into the desert, the drama of the primal horde repeated itself: “At some point during their long wanderings in the desert, these substitute Egyptians found the severity of the moral commands and the harsh renunciation of instinct Moses forced upon them unbearable, with the result that they rebelled and murdered him.”53 Upon the murder of their leader, the Hebrews encountered another tribe of people in the area of Midian, whose God Yahweh they adopted. “Freud thought”, writes Marsha Hewitt, “that the memory of the murdered Egyptian Moses and the religion he gave them had somehow remained preserved within their collective unconscious.” The Egyptian heritage was merged with the new found religion of Yahweh and the result was early Jewish religion.

53 Hewitt, Freud on Religion, 68.
While the question of historical accuracy is not of much importance for our purposes, much can be revealed by looking at the functions and achievements Freud ascribes to religion in *Moses and Monotheism*. Here, religion serves mainly the purpose of drive renunciation. Drives originating in the ‘It’ are an ambivalent phenomenon, they are often in conflict with the ‘I’. If the satisfaction of a certain desire originating in the ‘It’ poses a substantial threat to the ‘I’, it will abstain from gratification. This renunciation of a drive creates unpleasure and contributes to further tensions. However, if the “inhibiting forces in the external world become internalized” in form of the ‘Above-I’, foregoing of satisfaction in the name of this new authority can actually evoke pleasure in the ‘I.’ The ‘Above-I’ is a mental agency that represents the seat of morality and conscience. In it, the values, rules, and prohibitions of formerly external authorities (parents and society) become internalized and act autonomously from the inside. As mainly unconscious, the ‘Above-I’ is beyond the control of the ‘I,’ it induces feelings of guilt or remorse quite independently. If the ‘I’ actively represses the urges originating in the ‘it,’ a certain form of pleasure can be the result: “The ‘I’ feels elated, it takes pride in renouncing the drive as in an estimable achievement.” Once more this characteristic of the human being can be traced back to early childhood, when the child experienced love and recognition from its parents due to the renunciation of a drive. In other words: The ‘I’ takes pride in pleasing, first the parents, later the ‘Above-I.’ The grown person simply exchanges the original parental authority for a new one: a great leader or a powerful father or mother deity. Moses, who introduced monotheism to his elected people, the Hebrews, represented such an authority. And the process of drive renunciation was continued under the cloak of religion, when Moses introduced the first

55 Ibid., 279.
56 Cf. Ibid., 280.
commandments and bans: “The religion that began with the ban on making an image of god increasingly developed over the centuries into a religion of drive renunciation.”\textsuperscript{57} The ban to create physical images and representations of God marked an important shift from sensuality to spirituality. God became invisible, she now belonged to the realm of ideas. The religious focus on ethics means nothing else but an emphasis on drive renunciation. Freud is very clear on that: “Ethics … means restriction of drives.”\textsuperscript{58} To Freud, this is one of the great achievements of religion, and Jewish monotheism in particular: the successful introduction of drive-regulating ethics in the name of a powerful deity.

\textit{A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis}

In 1923, Freud investigated the peculiar case of painter Christoph Haizmann, who claimed to have suffered from a demonic possession. To Freud it was obvious that the possession was nothing else but a neurosis, stating: “The demonological theory of those dark times has won in the end against all the somatic views of the period of ‘exact’ science. The states of possession correspond to our neuroses … demons are bad and reprehensible wishes, derivates of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed.”\textsuperscript{59} When Haizmann had found himself in a time of great distress, unsure whether he could ever make a living as a painter, he supposedly made a Faustian pact with the devil, handing over his body and soul to the devil, who offered him survival and material success. Freud sets out to

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 281.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 281.
investigate the motivations behind the pact with the devil,\textsuperscript{60} assuming that we are dealing with the case history of a man suffering from melancholic depression: “He [Haizmann] had become low-spirited, was unable or unwilling to work properly and was worried about making a livelihood; that is to say, he was suffering from melancholic depression, with an inhibition in his work and (justified) fears about his future.”\textsuperscript{61} This state of melancholia coincided with the death of Haizmann’s father, shortly after that the devil appeared, offering support in every way.\textsuperscript{62} Thus, Sigmund Freud concludes that the true motivation behind the pact with the devil was liberation from feelings of depression. However, Freud makes another intriguing observation, stating that the devil served as a form of father-substitute to Christoph Haizmann.\textsuperscript{63} Although Freud did not develop an attachment theory of his own, Marsha Hewitt identifies certain “attachment dynamics,” stating that “in the absence of reliable primary attachment figure in childhood, individuals will go so far as to conjure or hallucinate their own, which is how Freud interprets the father-gods of religious beliefs.”\textsuperscript{64} If this were the case, it seems confusing at first sight that Haizmann should chose the devil as a father-substitute. But Freud points out that the devil, who usually represents the exact antithesis to the God-father, is much closer in nature to him than generally admitted.\textsuperscript{65} Let us not forget that the child’s feelings toward the biological father as well as the exalted God-father are ambivalent. God and father are loved and feared, “God and the Devil were originally identical – were a single figure which was later split into two figures with opposite attributes. In the earliest ages of religion God himself still possessed all the terrifying

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{62} Cf. Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{63} Cf. Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{64} Hewitt, \textit{Freud on Religion}, 29.
\textsuperscript{65} Cf. Freud, \textit{The Ego and the Id}, 85.
features which were afterwards combined to form a counterpart of him.”

Just like God, the devil is forged after the image of the real father, the features and characteristics ascribed to him are identical with those feared and respected in the father. Already riddled with existential anxiety, Haizmann turned to the devil to find the safety and security he had lost with the death of his father. Although the ambivalent feelings he had towards his father as well as the devil did eventually render this attempt a failure. Hewitt summarizes: “Given what Freud infers is an unresolved ambivalence towards the father in Haizmann’s case because of his pact with the Devil, the son’s capacity for mourning and ultimate acceptance of his father’s death is impaired by a depression that conceals an underlying hatred.”

For lack of evidence, Freud is forced to speculate, but he imagines the son’s relationship with the father as one full of tension:

It is possible that his father had opposed his wish to become a painter. If that was so, his inability to practise his art after his father’s death would on the one hand be an expression of the familiar phenomenon of ‘deferred obedience’; and, on other hand, by making him incapable of earning a livelihood, it would be bound to increase his longing for his father as a protector from the cares of life.

It is quite possible that Haizmann hated and simultaneously loved or needed his father. Thus he had to imagine a substitute which nevertheless was not capable of making him feeling entirely comfortable. The substitute showed the same flaws as the original. At the end, Haizmann found some relief by entering a Holy Order where “both his internal struggle and his material need came to an end.” Freud indicates that there must have been tremendous feelings of helplessness and existential anxiety undergirding Haizmann’s life: “He wanted all along simply to make his life secure. He tried first to achieve this with the help of the Devil

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66 Ibid., 86.
69 Ibid., 104.
at the cost of his salvation; and when this failed and had to be given up, he tried to achieve it with the help of the clergy at the cost of his freedom and most of the possibilities of enjoyment in life.”

Because of his unresolved conflicts with his father, Haizmann seemed unable to lead an autonomous life based on responsibility, he yearned for guidance and safety. He preferred to submit himself to an authority greater than himself, first his father and the devil, later the fathers of the Church and God.

Ana-María Rizzuto, Object-Relations Theory, and the Living God

As a representative of object-relations theory, Ana-Maria Rizzuto stands in a long tradition led by distinguished members such as Ian Suttie, Ronald Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, and Donald Winnicott. Object-relations theory assumes that different factors, especially coming from the outside, influence the development and formation of the individual and the self. Such external factors can include other human beings as well as sets of cultural traditions, beliefs, and influences. Suttie, for example, understood the mother to be of utmost importance for both personal and cultural development: “Suttie believes that efforts to restore the love of the mother that was left behind in infancy is the ultimate source of all later social activities, including art, science, and religion.”

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70 Ibid., 104.
71 Ibid., 56.
Rizzuto, herself a professor of psychiatry and a psychoanalyst, draws primarily on Freud and Winnicott to develop and present her own approach to object-relations theory. Her interest lies with the God image and its development, primarily its ‘birth’ in early childhood. James Gollnick summarizes her insights nicely, stating: “The development of the God-image is, in her view, much more complex in that it is influenced not only by the father, as Freud thought, but also by the mother, grandparents, heroes, as well as by wished-for parents or feared parents of the person’s own imagination.”

Rizzuto’s findings are presented and discussed in her famous book *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* in which she presents the results of her clinical research, which included interviews with children and their families. Rizzuto acknowledges several major insights of Sigmund Freud in regards to religion and personal beliefs. First, there is an anthropological component that is of phylogenetic nature, shared by all of humanity. It explains why and how human beings entered into possession of a desire or the capability to come up with the concept of God or gods. Rizzuto calls this “the anthropological process in history which leads to the creation of the God representation.” The killing of this tyrannic father led to the liberation of the sons, but also to regret and remorse, and the rise of totemism. This event marked the cradle of religious beliefs of any kind, as well as the first instance of object representation. The totem, much like God later, becomes a representation of the (primeval) father. For Rizzuto, Freud is the actual inventor of object-relations theory, even though the term itself cannot be traced to

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72 Ibid., 60.
his works: “Freud has elaborated a rich and complex theory of object relations and object representations. Interestingly enough, the theory links every human being (at least, every male) to the primeval father and his representation.”74 Another important discovery by Freud assumes “the formation of the individual’s private representation of God during childhood.”75 To him, the parental images, most and foremost the father, influence the God representation developed by the son, which takes place at the “time of resolution of the oedipal conflict.”76 We have seen this most impressively in the case of Christoph Haizmann. Rizzuto will elaborate this very premise.

But there are differences between Freud and Rizzuto as well. Whereas Freud was hoping for a society in which reasonable and educated human beings could abandon the infantile wish for a divine being, Ana-Maria Rizzuto cannot concur, stating that

[As] long as men can follow their notion of causality to its very end and have their questions answered by their parents, every human child will have some precarious God representation made out of his parental representation. I also conclude that as long as the capacity to symbolize, fantasize, and create superhuman beings remains in men (and child analysts know to what extent all children do these things) God will remain, at least in the unconscious.77

The potential to create and invent God images that are of significance to the individual is given due to human imagination, which is particularly strong in children. Causality is another significant factor in the formation of a belief and God image. At the age of three, children start to perceive the world as the subject of causalities. They begin to wonder where things are coming from, why things are the way they are and not different, and how things

74 Ibid. 22.
75 Ibid., 41.
76 Ibid., 42.
77 Ibid., 52.
The child asks her parents where rain is coming from, and the parents offer an answer, explaining that rain is coming from the clouds. Now, where do clouds come from? Who tells them to rain? Any such reasoning will eventually end up with a superior being, a notion most welcome to many parents, since it satisfies the child’s investigations. The idea of a supernatural and powerful being that governs the world and the universe is perfectly acceptable for the child, since it understands its own parents to be supernatural beings. God, therefore, is only at the top of a chain of very powerful and influential beings, basically the boss of the child’s bosses. “In psychoanalytic terms the child is dealing with idealized representations of his parents, to whom he attributes great perfection and power.” Children are immensely impressed with the idea that there is a being more powerful and intelligent than the parents. Freud’s focus on an internal creation of a divine being is rejected by Rizzuto: “In Freud’s thinking, the image of God and the end of the oedipal complex create an internal world, whose closed universe of images cannot be changed except through analysis. Although that is undoubtedly true for many people, it is not universally characteristic of the God representation.” Rizzuto criticizes what she understands as Freud’s notion of religion as an internal creation that, once completed, is static and almost unalterable. In her own reasoning, both notions are incorrect. Rizzuto understands the environment and context of a child of great importance in the formation of a belief. The process is as much influenced by internal as well as external factors. “The pre-oedipal psychic situation, the beginning state of the oedipal complex, the characteristics of the parents, the predicaments of the child with each of his parents and siblings, the general

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78 Cf. Ibid., 44.
79 Ibid., 44.
80 Ibid. 45.
religious, social, and intellectual background of the household” all contribute to the development and growth of a God image. The static nature of the God image as described by Freud is Rizzuto’s greatest difference with him. The God representation is reduced, she fears, “to a representational fossil, freezing it at one exclusive level of development.” For Rizzuto, the individual God image is organic, in constant change and flow. It changes according to new contexts, influences, experiences as well as trauma and crises throughout the entire life cycle: “Those who are capable of mature religious belief renew their God representation to make it compatible with their emotional, conscious, and unconscious situation, as well as with their cognitive and object-related development.” God evolves, including all of a person’s psychic facilities, be they of cognitive, conscious, or unconscious nature.

*Object Representation*

Human existence, growth, and development are connected with the world and objects surrounding us. There is neither meaning nor self independent of the environment, no I without a thou. For Rizzuto, the self-representation or self image is inextricably linked to our object representation: “In our effort to keep a viable self-representation and sense of self we constantly struggle to make the complex memories of our objects compatible with what we think, or want to think, we are.” Our experiences with the world around us are stored as

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81 Ibid., 45
82 Ibid., 46.
83 Ibid., 46.
84 Ibid., 55.
memories, though not only the events themselves are memorized, but feelings connected with them as well. There is an ongoing dialogue taking place within the human being, between the here and now and the then and there:

One of the processes of continuous ego or self-synthesis is the summoning up of memories of encounters with objects, whether supportive and loving or disruptive and frightening. These processes serve the individual in the present, helping him to adapt and master his situation. The constant movement from present object and self-representations to past object and self-representations is one of the critical processes which – as Loewald says – make us “create a history of ourselves” and contributes to our “becoming a self.”

Object representation draws on our memories and experiences with concrete objects such as people close to us. Rizzuto offers several clinical vignettes to underscore this observation, looking at one of them must suffice here. She describes the case of a patient suffering from anorexia nervosa, feeling her mother to be omnipresent and invading her space, despite the fact that she really was separated from the mother by several thousand miles. The patient felt as if only the actual death of the mother would free her from the demands for submission. There was a clear representation of the mother figuring large in the life of this woman, making her existence almost unbearable.

The dynamics of our past relationships with significant objects such as parents, caretakers, and siblings will determine the outcome and shape of any other later relationship: “They also have the power to color all the future relations of the individual, and most specifically the relation to the analyst and its concomitant affectual experience.” However, one of the crucial questions raised by Rizzuto is: How fixed is this relation? Are we constantly seeking for and subjugated to the same object representation? Are we repeating

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85 Ibid., 57.
86 Cf. Ibid., 59.
87 Ibid., 63.
the formative childhood experiences and relationships unaltered over and over again? To Rizzuto there is more to human relationships, there exists a “capacity to grow, to create a world not reduced to the compulsion to repeat, and most specifically the ability to update the representation of changing parents and to know new objects in their own right.” Such a capacity is not explained by object representation theory.

God as a Personal Object

Rizzuto clearly states that “once formed, the representation of God is given all the psychic potentials of a living person who is nonetheless experienced only in the privacy of conscious and unconscious processes.” She locates the origin of religious capacities in childish narcissistic shame “of being found wanting to object guilt at having been found inconsiderate and disloyal to a good objet, that is, feelings of concern for the object.” Being a good person, faithful and loyal to God results in the forgiveness of sins. This alone leads to increased feelings of well-being and eases anxieties and fears. Yet the relationship with God is not just harmonious, but ambivalent. God is loved and feared, obedience goes hand in hand with desires for rebellion. As Rizzuto points out, this relationship is far from static, as the following passage clearly underscores:

We engage in constant dialectical reshaping of our self- and object representations to attain psychic balance. When some of the representations, wishes, or impinging reality create more conflict than is tolerable or modifiable through defensive maneuvers, drastic defensive movements are resorted to in the

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88 Ibid., 64.
89 Ibid., 87.
90 Ibid., 88.
emergency and symptoms may ensue. Some of these may be dramatic, like persecutory delusions, belief in direct communication with God or of having been given a mission by him, or, at lesser level of disorganization, overwhelming guilt, conversion, religious excitement, and the like.\textsuperscript{91}

God as a personal object clearly serves the purpose of regulating anxieties, fears, and tensions, enabling the individual at the same time to develop a strong sense of the self combined with a positive feeling for one’s self-esteem. The structure of the relationship is reshaped, as is the idea of God itself, should the current context demand it. This usually happens unconsciously, the mechanisms are hidden to the conscious mind, as are the roots of religious feelings in general. Beyond this personal function of the God image, it also links the individual to the larger society and its traditions. Religion, for Rizzuto, is not only a system of beliefs and convictions, but also a facilitator of social life.\textsuperscript{92}

Whether God is real or not is of minor importance to Rizzuto. Later in the book, she states that God, “psychologically speaking, is an illusory transitional object.”\textsuperscript{93} There are, however, significant differences between usual transitional objects, such as toys or blankets, and God. God is a creation, one could say a collage “created from representational materials whose source are the representations of primary objects.”\textsuperscript{94} Those primary objects are, as we have stated earlier, the very real objects and people around a child. Furthermore, the child does not abandon God in the process of maturation, as it does other transitional objects. The following quote neatly illustrates Rizzuto’s notion of God as a transitional object:

Throughout life God remains a transitional object at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others, and with life itself. This is so, not because God is God, but because, like the teddy bear, he has obtained a good half of his stuffing from the primary objects the child has “found” in his life. The other half

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{92} Cf. Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 178.
of God’s stuffing comes from the child’s capacity to “create” a God according to his needs.

In this regards, Gollnick is right when he sees a clear connection between Rizzuto and some of Heinz Kohut’s theories.\footnote{Gollnick, \textit{Religion and Spirituality}, 60.} According to Kohut, the newborn human being has a desire to be reflected by others. The other is used as a form of mirror that can, under positive circumstances, affirm and strengthen the self of the one who is looking into it. The other then becomes an object, or in Kohut’s terminology, a “selfobject.” Whether God is real or not is not really the question, what is of interest is how a God image might function as an aid to stable and healthy personalities. By no means is a selfobject limited to material realm, it can include ideas and symbols as well.\footnote{Cf. Ernest S. Wolf, \textit{Treating the Self: Elements of Clinical Self Psychology}, (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), 53.} They appear and support the individual at any stage of life and through all its developmental phases, from infancy to old age.\footnote{Cf. Ibid. 56-60.} For our reflections the mirroring aspects of the selfobject are of particular interest, where the selfobject recognizes the individual and its “need to feel affirmed, confirmed, recognized; to be feeling accepted and appreciated, especially when able to show oneself.”\footnote{Ibid., 55.}

The idea of God as a mirror, or perhaps a screen unto which the individual projects his or her fears, desires, wishes, and hopes, certainly catches one of the key thoughts of Rizzuto. Simultaneously, the screen or canvas is never empty, the child or adult also projects previous memories and experiences with other object figures unto it, be they good or bad. Furthermore, there is also a social dimension, since notions about God often are transported within a specific tradition or institution. What a society or a family believes will inevitably
influence the God image of the individual. Simply put, there is a lot going on in the ongoing process of creating and reframing the individual and personal God idea.

Lee A. Kirkpatrick – The God Image and Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was introduced by the British psychologist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. As a psychological concept, the theory was developed to explain infant social development, assuming that the primary caregivers were of crucial importance to the survival, growth, and mental development of newborns. Attachment theory is also firmly rooted in evolutionary psychology, since the attachment system in human beings and other primates constituted a significant advantage in a dangerous environment.

The Attachment System

This attachment system presents itself as “an evolved behavioural system … which was designed by natural selection to maintain proximity between infants and their attachment figures (i.e., primary caregivers), with the ultimate purpose of protection of helpless infants from environmental dangers such as predators.” Helplessness functions as the motivation to attach oneself, and protection as well as survival are the goal. While children naturally choose only a few attachment figures, they do not have to be limited to the

parents. Older siblings as well as day care personnel can assume this function.\textsuperscript{100} A healthy attachment system encourages the child to explore and experiment. Under normal circumstances, a child that is aware of the protection of its attachment figures will dare to move away from it, exploring and investigating the environment. This “exploration system”\textsuperscript{101} is only deactivated when the child gets frightened or injured, the energy suddenly flows from this system into the attachment system, activating the child’s need and desire to be close to the attachment figure.

The early experiences we make with our first attachment figures shape the way we will interact and organize all future relationships throughout our lives. Experience of safety and comfort will create a character that meets the environment with confidence, knowing that the attachment figure will continue to provide a safe haven in times of distress.\textsuperscript{102} It is pointed out by Kirkpatrick that the attachment system does not cease to influence the individual even in more mature states such as adulthood. Adult attachment can be best observed in romantic relationships, and the structures of these relationships bear strong resemblance to the dynamics of the early attachment system: “Early attachment experience provide the cognitive and emotional building blocks from which close relationships later life are constructed.”\textsuperscript{103} We constantly keep seeking attachment figures who will offer us feelings of safety and comfort. Of course these later attachment systems will not be identical with the infantile desires and needs, since adults tend to be more secure about their environment. Anxieties are more complex and differentiated in mature life, and so are our reactions to distress: “A telephone call or even an e-mail might do, at least in times of moderate distress; actual physical comforting may be required to fully deactivate the system in highly stressful

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cf. Ibid., 37.
\item Ibid., 30.
\item Cf. Ibid., 32.
\item Ibid., 39.
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\end{footnotesize}
However, the experiences made within our early attachment systems are far from being just idyllic, harmonious, and encouraging. During empirical research done by Mary Ainsworth, the so-called *Strange Situation* scenario was developed, in which children were left in a room full of toys together with a primary caregiver. This situation subsequently was disturbed, either by a stranger appearing in the room or the mother (or father) leaving the room and the child in solitude. Based on the children’s reactions, Ainsworth was able to distinguish four groups, Type B reacting secure, Type A avoidant, Type C ambivalent or resistant (also anxious), and finally Type D as acting disorganised and disoriented. The experiment demonstrated how diverse children react confronted with unknown factors and even separation. The origins of these differences, according to Kirkpatrick, can be found in maternal behaviour and the child’s experiences within the first five years. He summarizes:

Mothers of secure infants are characterized by sensitive and appropriate responding to the infants’ signals of distress and attempts to gain and maintain proximity. Mothers of avoidant infants are consistently the opposite, rebuffing their infants’ attempts to gain proximity and failing to be psychologically and/or physically available when called upon. Mothers of anxious babies are characterized by insensitivity to the infant’s signals, being inconsistently available when proximity is desired and sometimes intrusive at inappropriate times. Their mothers tend to reject the infant’s attempts to gain proximity and largely try to avoid physical contact with the infant.

This passage also highlights Kirkpatrick’s intentions to present attachment theory above all as a highly explanatory theory: “It does not merely describe how infants interact with their mothers, or adult romantic partners with one another, but purports to explain why humans are built in such a way that they behave this way.”

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104 Ibid., 29.
105 Cf. Ibid., 34ff.
106 Cf. Ibid., 36.
107 Ibid., 36.
108 Ibid., 19.
attachment system not only determines the future of any other relationship in life, but also repeats itself. Kirkpatrick points to Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw who “outlined in some detail many of the striking similarities in emotional, cognitive, and behavioural characteristics between childhood attachment and romantic love.” Here, too, it is possible to distinguish between secure lovers as well as avoidant and anxious or ambivalent ones.

After having discussed primarily the recipients of caregiving, we should turn to the caregivers or attachment figures for a moment. From an evolutionary point, the attachment system could not have come into existence without the pre-existence of a caregiving system. Caregivers, in other words, must have been designed “to nurture and care for their offspring.” The attachment system was an evolutionary answer to the care provided by the parents. The following definition by Ainsworth will help us to understand the attachment relationship as well as the characteristics defining an attachment figure:

(1) the attached person seeks proximity to the caregiver, particularly when frightened or alarmed; (2) the caregiver provides care and protection (the haven of safety function) as well as (3) a sense of security (the secure base function); (4) the threat of separation causes anxiety in the attached person; and (5) loss of the attachment figure would cause grief in the attached person.

Based on the insights so far, we can proceed and investigate in what way God could be interpreted as an attachment figure, and how the relationship between the believer and the deity resembles an attachment system.

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111 Ibid., 56.
God as an Attachment Figure

If the actual or natural attachment figure is not available, substitutions can be found that serve the same functions. According to Lee Kirkpatrick, the notion of substitute objects can be traced back to John Bowlby. God thus can be turned into something like an “exalted father figure.” However, other studies suggest that the image of God commonly unites elements of maternal as well as paternal characteristic. In *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*, Kirkpatrick is making a strong case for God (or deities in general) as an attachment figure. “The religious person,” he states, “proceeds with faith that God (or another figure) will be available to protect and comfort him or her when danger threatens; at other times, the mere knowledge of God’s presence and accessibility allows him or her to approach the problems and difficulties of daily life with confidence.” Not only is God understood as a perfectly valid attachment figure, faith is also primarily defined as a relationship with said figure. Faith is an inherently personal and relational activity, a fact Kirkpatrick backs up with various data based on literature as well as surveys among believers. It does not matter whether the deities are depicted as benevolent or malevolent, transcendent or immanent, in each case there is a connection imagined between humanity and the divine. In many ways, this theistic relationship is far more suitable than the romantic one to replace the original, infantile attachment system. Romantic relationships tend to be

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113 Ibid., 908.
114 Ibid., 908.
116 Cf. Ibid., 54.
more symmetrical than the one between child and mother, partners usually meet as equals.\textsuperscript{117} Following Ainsworth’s definition of the attachment relationship, Kirkpatrick analyzes the function of the believer’s relationship with God as well as the characteristics traditionally ascribed to God. While a general proximity to God is crucial to faith in general, God also must function as a haven of safety and a secure base. Furthermore, the idea of separation from God must cause anxiety, in severe cases even grief.

The desire for proximity seems to pose a dilemma, since God, unlike other attachment figures, usually does not appear in corporeal form.\textsuperscript{118} This demonstrates that the idea of a divine being is already an elaborated form of an attachment system, since children depend on the physical presence of the attachment figures. Nevertheless the question remains: How can we establish proximity, closeness, and a real relationship with a being that is transcendent? Innovative religions came up with the concept of an omnipresent God, assuring its believers that God is constantly watching and close by when needed.\textsuperscript{119} Furthermore, some traditions know of the incarnation of the divine being, which took human form and shape to be close to humanity. Besides such intellectual concepts, physical objects like a crucifix, a holy building as the dwelling place of the divine, or a shrine can function as a gateway to or at least a meeting point of the profane and the sacred. Such an attempt to make God manifest is called facilitating psychological proximity.\textsuperscript{120} Even believers possess means and ways to approach and contact their God by praying, which is “a direct manifestation of the perception of having a relationship with an immediate, personal

\textsuperscript{117} Kirkpatrick and Shaver, \textit{Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin:} 267.
\textsuperscript{119} Cf. Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{120} Cf. Ibid., 59.
God.” Religions therefore offer diverse and creative ways that enable the believer to enter a living relationship with a deity.

God functions as a haven of safety in times of great trouble, distress, and crisis, a fact impressively demonstrated by research of Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, who discovered that people in stressful times turn directly to God in prayer, rather than going to the church. However, God is most often approached due to stress when the amount of strain reaches an unusual high level. People do not turn to God unless the threat is grave and danger very real. And when they do, they often do it even if they have no particular history of religious behaviour. Kirkpatrick refers to the no-atheists-in-foxholes maxim, according to which even non-religious soldiers in combat begin to pray to God for safety and survival. The same observation has been made in regards to people facing serious illnesses or injuries: “Prayer appears to be effective in helping people cope psychologically with serious illness.” God then functions as someone who bestows comfort and strength upon the suffering patient. However, probably one of the most intense triggers of a religious attachment system is the experience of bereavement and death. Dealing with the loss of a beloved person or even an attachment figure such as father or mother is particularly traumatic, whereas fear of one’s own death may cause separation anxiety. Coping with death and dying are principal factors in the development of an attachment relationship with a divine being. Since these issues become more relevant in later stages of life, it does not surprise to learn that God as an attachment figure becomes more significant in those times.

121 Ibid., 60.
122 Cf. Ibid., 62.
123 Cf. Ibid., 63.
124 Ibid., 63.
125 Cf. Ibid., 65.
To Kirkpatrick’s disappointment, research has primarily focused on God as a haven of safety, which means on religious attachment under substantial stress. The idea of God as a secure base, which means God in day-to-day life, has been ignored by most. A secure base eases fear and anxiety in general, simply because the believer has trust into a stable relationship with the divine caregiver. Faith can enable a person to develop a healthy and stable self, “with strength, self-assurance, and a sense of peace to tackle the problems and challenges of everyday life.” Particularly inspirational literature and specific texts such as the psalms support the formation of emotional security.

When we look at the fear of loss of God as an attachment figure, we face similar difficulties like when investigating the issue of proximity to God. We simply cannot think of God along the same lines as we think of human attachment figures. However, this also entails benefits: “God does not die, sail off to fight wars, move away, or file for divorce. Indeed, this is a primary reason why God is ‘an ‘absolutely adequate attachment-figure’ [sic] in the first place.’ Separation from God is generally perceived as being abandoned by her. Kirkpatrick points out that some concentration camp survivors felt a deep seated feeling of having been abandoned by the God they believed in for their entire previous life. The same goes for some soldiers, who believed that God was supporting their cause and protecting them, but then apparently left them behind to die. What begins as protest easily leads to despair and eventually detachment. It therefore is not only possible to fear the loss of God, but quite literally go through the stages of grief and detachment.

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126 Cf. Ibid., 65.
127 Ibid., 66.
128 Ibid., 71.
129 Cf. Ibid., 72.
Individual differences in choosing and experiencing attachment figures can occur, which are mainly based on deviations in subjective perception of attachment security or insecurity. Lee Kirkpatrick, together with Phillip Shaver, came up with two somewhat opposing hypothesis explaining this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{130} The two competing theories are called the compensation hypothesis and the correspondence hypothesis.\textsuperscript{131}

According to the compensation hypothesis, a person starts looking for substitute attachment figures when the loss of a previous figure forces it to do so, or if unsatisfying experiences in the attachment system occur. For example, if the parents are not attentive enough, a child will begin to look for alternative, more caring and accessible figures. The God image “compensates for needs of security and availability not fulfilled in the childhood parental relationship.”\textsuperscript{132} Therefore, “insecure attachment histories”\textsuperscript{133} may contribute to the need or desire to choose God as a substitute. Ganqvist and Kirkpatrick state: “We hypothesize that regulation of distress is at the core of this surrogate use of God and religion.”\textsuperscript{134}

The correspondence theory understands religious beliefs not just as a mere substitute for bad attachment experiences. Rather, attachment and relationship experience determine the God image in general. Thus

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{130} Ganqvist and Kirkpatrick, \textit{Handbook of Attachment}, 915.
\textsuperscript{131} Cf. Ibid., 915
\textsuperscript{133} Ganqvist and Kirkpatrick, \textit{Handbook of Attachment}, 915.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 915.
\end{flushright}
Individuals who posses positive or ‘secure’ generalized working models of themselves and their attachment figures may be expected to view God and other deities in similar terms. Likewise, an ‘avoidant’ attachment may be expected to manifest itself in the religious realm as agnosticism or atheism, or in a view of God as remote and inaccessible. Finally, an ‘anxious’ or ‘ambivalent’ attachment may find expression in a deeply emotional, all-consuming, and ‘clingy’ relationship to God.\textsuperscript{135}

The idea of and relationship with God is determined by the quality of the primary attachment systems and in someway even mirrors those early relationships. Again the early attachment systems establish a pattern according to which the dynamics of each future relationship will develop. This model clearly adds a social component to the entire idea of religious attachment.

However, Ganqvist and Kirkpatrick are capable of presenting valid empirical evidences for both theories and a final judgment must be suspended for the time being.\textsuperscript{136} Christpher Grimes, on the other hand, points out that most studies are in favour of the compensation rather than the correspondence theory.\textsuperscript{137}

Conclusions

Freud, Rizzuto, Kirkpatrick – three scholars with distinct, yet connected approaches to the topic of human religiosity. What are the striking similarities that we should keep in mind? Above all, personal faith and God images are understood as highly relational activities. God, and the individual perceptions thereof, are not the result of some detached

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 916.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 917ff.
\textsuperscript{137} Cf. Grimes, God Image Handbook 22.
revelation from above. Rather, God is created internally, as the product of individual experiences, wishes, and desires. God is actually an anthropological phenomenon. All three authors propose an approach to the God image from below, starting with the human being or the entire species – not with any form of divine revelation. Some argued that the human ability to create God and gods must be hidden in our shared past as a species, others point to biology and evolution in order to explain our desire for and attachment to exalted father and mother figures. What all of the theories we discussed share is the conviction that our actual social relationships and experiences shape and define our understanding of God and the development of a God image. Most of these processes appear to take place on an unconscious level. However, if Rizzuto is right and the God image is in constant flux, the question whether or not and above all how the God image can be actively and consciously changed cannot be ignored. Freud, Kirkpatrick and Rizzuto seem to agree that God images can be oppressive, almost demonic (Haizmann) or more liberating and empowering. It seems to be desirable – theologically as well as therapeutically – to offer those suffering from harsh, judgemental, unloving, even cruel God images some way out. However, before we can turn to potential tools that might help reshape God images, it is important to elaborate on the theological necessity to so. We have now established the psychological foundations of such an enterprise, it is relevant to do the same from the perspective of theology.
Chapter Three

Biblical Exegesis and Depth Psychology

“To tell my story I have to start far in the past. If I could, I’d have to go back much farther yet, to the very earliest years of my childhood and even beyond them to my distant origins.”

– Emil Sinclair, Hermann Hesse’s “Demian”

“I'm very impressed. That suggests that what you fear most of all... is fear itself. This is very wise.”

– Professor Lupin to Harry Potter, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

In the previous chapter, we followed three distinguished representatives of psychology on their quest to uncover the human need and desire to believe in a transcendent being. Not only did they attempt to uncover the reasons and motivations behind faith, they also attempted to analyze how these oftentimes hidden or unconscious motivations shape the individual God images.

In the following, we will focus mainly on the work and interpretations of Eugen Drewermann, a trained psychoanalyst and theologian who began to realize that a historical-critical reading of the Bible simply was not sufficient when confronted with contemporary
issues. He, too, attempted to uncover the reasons behind human faith and their desire to trust and believe in God. However, being a therapist as well as a Catholic priest, Drewermann turned to the biblical scriptures, understanding them as anthropological documents that might teach us something about the human conditions and, as a consequence, about God. His research led Drewermann to the conclusion that the Yahwistic primeval history as depicted in Gen 1-11 primarily is a developmental history, illustrating the psychogenetic stages undergone by the individual human being on her way from birth to maturity. The individual development itself recapitulates phylogenetic processes shared by all of humanity.\textsuperscript{138} In this sense, the stages passed by the individual on the way to adulthood mirror and reflect the developmental history undergone by the human species. For Drewermann, the dynamics within the relationship between humanity and God are identical to those between Father/Mother and child.\textsuperscript{139} Whereas the time before latency deals with the conflicts between child and parents, the period following latency focuses on the individual and its role in society:

Wie in der psychischen Entwicklung bis zur Latenzzeit die Auseinandersetzung mit den Eltern im Vordergrund steht, so wird in der j Urgeschichte bis hin zur Sintflut die Auseinandersetzung und das Scheitern der Menschen an und vor Gott geschildert; und wie nach der Latenzzeit … die Entwicklung zum eigenen sozialen Handeln außerhalb der Familien einsetzt, so beginnt in der j Urgeschichte nach der Grossen Flut … eine weitere Entfaltung zu den Formen geschichtlicher und sozialer Gemeinschaft.\textsuperscript{140}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{138} Drewermann, \textit{Strukturen des Bösen}, vol. 2, 541.
\textsuperscript{139} Drewermann, \textit{Strukturen des Bösen}, vol. 2, 555.
\textsuperscript{140} “Just as the mental development up to latency focuses on the conflict with the parents, so does the Yahwistic primeval history tell the story of humanity’s conflict with and failure before God up to the flood. And just as the end of latency marks the beginning of individual social action outside the family, so begins a further unfolding of forms of historical and social community after the Great Flood as portrayed in the Yahwistic primeval history.” Ibid., 545f.
\end{flushleft}
If the Biblical primeval history indeed depicts this process, it literally does tell the story of humanity’s beginnings – in the language of myth, of course. The figure on page 51 roughly illustrates the similarities between the individual psychosexual development and the primeval history according to the Yahwist.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Neurosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gn 2: Paradise</td>
<td>Primeval Unity between God and humanity</td>
<td>Early oral (suckle) stage</td>
<td>0-½</td>
<td>“schizoid position”</td>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gn 3: “The Fall” due to eating the fruit, banishment</td>
<td>- Separation - Fear &amp; Anxiety - Guilt - Shame</td>
<td>Later oral (cannibalistic) stage</td>
<td>½- 1</td>
<td>“depressive position”</td>
<td>Depression; melancholia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gn 4:1-16: Cain and Abel</td>
<td>- Sacrifice - Rivalry - Murder - Defiance</td>
<td>Anal-sadistic stage</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>Ceding and keeping; ruling over object; destruction of object; ambivalent; autonomy</td>
<td>Obsessive-compulsive neurosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a. Gn 4:23.24: Lamech’s “Song of the Sword”</td>
<td>- Exhibition of aggressive manliness - Fear of being hurt - Vengeance</td>
<td>Male: Early genital (phallic) stage; Oedipus complex</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Active object love; exhibition; love and hate; competing with the father (male); change of object (female: father instead of mother); family novel</td>
<td>Hystera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b. Gn 6:1-4: Marriage between Angels and Mortals</td>
<td>Girl’s desire for unity with the Divine and birth of strong children</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gn 6-8: The Flood</td>
<td>End of the world as punishment</td>
<td>Latency stage</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>Demise of Oedipus complex; introjection of parental imagos</td>
<td>Completion of stages relevant for the aetiology of neuroses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gn 11:1-9: City-Building and Tower of Babel</td>
<td>- Association against isolation - Unity by having a common goal - Achievement and efficiency</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Ca. as of 18</td>
<td>Idealism, self-confidence, determination, social consolidation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen*, vol. 2, 547f.*
Psychology or Theology?

To Drewermann, the similarities between the primeval history and the psychogenesis of the individual are obvious. However, he rejects the notion to read the narrative solely as a portrayal of mental development. Two dominant characteristics of the biblical primeval history render such an enterprise invalid.

First of all, it is important to understand that Gen 1-11 depicts a tragedy, “eine totale menschheitliche Katastrophe, ein globales Scheitern aller Bemühungen um äußere und innere Einheit … als das konsequente Ergebnis eines langen Prozesses über zahlreiche Stationen hinweg.”\(^\text{141}\) The outcome of the primeval history is deeply pessimistic and negative, the separation from God is the root of all evil. This negative result of development is in no accord whatsoever with the interpretation of development from the perspective of psychoanalysis. To state that maturation and development are inherently tragic and wrong would be an outrageous psychoanalytical verdict. Quite to the contrary, struggling and overcoming the parental authority is, psychoanalytically spoken, vital to lead an independent and responsible life. When discussing the Oedipus complex, Hans Loewald refers to the “emancipatory murder of the parents”, stating that

by evolving our own autonomy, our own superego, and by engaging in non-incestuous object relations, we are killing our parents. We are usurping their power, their competence, their responsibility for us, and we are abnegating, rejecting them as libidinal objects. In short, we destroy them in regard to some of their qualities hitherto most vital to us. Parents resist as well as promote such

\(^{141}\) “a complete human catastrophe, a global failure of all attempts to preserve external and internal unity … as the consequent result of a long process, passing several stops along the way.” Ibid., 553.
destruction no less ambivalently than children carry it out. What will be left if things go well, is tenderness, mutual trust, and respect, the signs of equality.\textsuperscript{142}

The former dynamics of the relationship \textit{must} be attacked and dissolved in order to become an autonomous and responsible individual. Judged from this perspective, what happened in Gen 1-11 was a successful and necessary emancipatory act – one depicted by the Yahwist not in terms of responsibility, maturation, or equality but disintegration and destruction. We can see the first signs of friction between a theological reading of Gen 1-11 as the fall of humanity, and a psychoanalytical one that would interpret the events more positive as the natural process of maturation.

Drewermann highlights a second difficulty: In Gen 1-11, the conflicts characteristic for the different stages of development are altogether carried to unnatural extremes. If, according to Drewermann, a neurosis is a “Folgeerscheinung einer quantitativen Steigerung von Konflikten, die allgemein zu Menschen gehören”\textsuperscript{143}, the result would be that the entire humanity would suffer from all existing neuroses – an absurd diagnosis. If neuroses are the quantitative increase of what is normal, these neuroses cannot simultaneously be universal and ubiquitous. Any meaningful distinction between “normal” and “neurotic” would disappear. However, Gen 1-11 follows exactly this path, it depicts humanity as a whole as sick in the extreme, as hopelessly neurotic.\textsuperscript{144} These two objections render it difficult to read the Biblical primeval history as a purely psychoanalytical report. This dilemma can be escaped quite easily: Gen 1-11 does not attempt to depict the origins and development of the psychoanalytical phenomenon of neurosis. As a matter of fact, the primeval history does not

\textsuperscript{142} Hans W. Loewald, \textit{The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs} (Hagerstown, MD: University Pub. Group, 2000), 390.

\textsuperscript{143} “Consequence of a quantitative increase of conflicts that commonly belong to humanity,” Drewermann, \textit{Strukturen des Bösen}, vol. 2, 553.

\textsuperscript{144} Cf. Ibid., 554.
know of psychoanalysis. It is rather a theological narrative that depicts and illustrates the origins and development of *sin*. What can be said is, that the theological term of *sin* seemingly has a similar psychogenesis as the psychoanalytical term of *neurosis*: “Die Sünde, die J darstellt, ist ubiquitär, sie ist die das menschliche Leben grundlegend und fundamental beherrschende Macht; diese Aussage ist theologisch möglich. Unmöglich aber ist die psa Aussage, alle Menschen seien neurotisch.” Based on these observations and objections, Eugen Drewermann proposes a solution that does justice to both, the theological concept of *sin* as well as the psychoanalytical ontogenesis: “Die j Urgeschichte beschreibt die Sünde als eine Neurose vor Gott.” We are dealing with the theological category of *sin* that follows similar paths as does the psychoanalytical concept of *neurosis*.

The Structure and Development of the Neurosis before God

Sin as a neurosis before God basically follows the same pattern of development as the profane notion of neurosis does. Drewermann uses “Freudian psychoanalysis as a phenomenology of anxiety and guilt in the biblical texts.” However, before we look at the structure of *sin* as a neurosis, it must be emphasised again that Drewermann does not understand *sin* and *neurosis* to be identical. “The term ‘neurotic’”, comments Matthias Beier, “is used by Dewermann not in terms of whether a human being is ‘normal’ or not in

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145 “Sin as portrayed by the Yahwist is ubiquitous, the basic and fundamentally dominating power behind human existence; a theologically sound proposition. To state that all human beings are neurotic, however, is an impossible psychoanalytical proposition.” Ibid., 555.
146 “The Yahwistic primeval history describes *sin as a neurosis before God.*” Ibid., 556.
comparison to social norms and behaviors but whether a human being is ‘sick’ due to fear at
the ground of his existence in relation to God, as the Yahwist considers all human beings to
be.”

Drewermann names three distinct stages of neurotic development which he calls “(1) den
Kreislauf von Angst und Schuld; (2) das Gesetz der zunehmenden Unfreiheit; (3) die
Unmöglichkeit einer Selbstheilung.” For Drewermann, it is possible to discover precisely
this pattern in the Yahwistic primeval history.

A Cycle of Fear and Guilt

Fear and anxiety contribute to people’s sickness – this is one of the crucial
psychoanalytical insights. In Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (1926), Sigmund Freud
revised earlier theories on anxiety and declared fear to be an important function of the ‘I’
that serves the purpose of ensuring self-preservation: “The ego is the actual seat of anxiety
… on the other hand it very often happens that processes take place or begin to take place in
the id which cause the ego to produce anxiety.” Specific impulses, desires, and wishes
originating in the ‘It’ ask for satisfaction, although the prospect of satisfaction would put the
subject’s survival or safety at risk. The impulses coming from the ‘It’ must be repressed due
to certain external dangers. The ‘I’ reacts with anxiety to internal wishes and desires, a form

148 Ibid., 53.
149 “(1) the cycle of fear and guilt; (2) the law of increasing unfreedom; (3) the impossibility of self-recovery.”
XX, An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, Lay Analysis and Other Works (London
[etc.]: Vintage, 2001), 140.
of fear described as *signal anxiety* – a warning sent to the ‘It’ in order to repress an impulse. The fear of castration, for example, is a form of signal anxiety that should suppress Oedipal wishes: “… as soon as the ego recognizes the danger of castration it gives the signal of anxiety and inhibits through the pleasure-unpleasure agency … the impending cathetic process in the id.”

Signal anxiety is nothing short of a defence mechanism. In regards to neurosis, this means that fear cannot be a symptom or a mere side-effect of neurosis, but it is part of what *causes* a neurosis. Drewermann writes: “Wie Freud in der revidierten Form seiner Angsttheorie meinte, entsteht die Angst in der Neurose nicht (nur und erst) aus der Verdrängung, sondern sie ist selbst (als biologisches Warnsignal beim Auftreten – realer – Gefahren) der Grund der Verdrängung, die die Neurose verursacht.”

The story of the Fall in Gen 3:1-5 depicts how fear becomes the source for further misery. In it, satisfying the oral desire to eat from the tree is prohibited by God’s own commandment. The usual reaction would be to suppress the impulse – a reaction of which Adam and Eve are not yet capable, because their ‘I’ is not yet strong and developed enough (in a sense the first humans are still in an intra-uterine unity with their mother or father which is God). According to Drewermann, the infant’s oral desire *cannot* be suppressed. When challenged by the serpent, the woman’s reaction indicates the presence of signal anxiety: she repeats God’s commandment, although in an exaggerated form; the mere touching of the tree of knowledge is now considered to be a transgression punishable by death. By aggravating the commandment, the woman employs a defence mechanism: “Es ist eine psychologische Grunderkenntnis, dass ein Gebot verschärft werden muß, wenn die

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151 Ibid., 125.
152 “As Freud pointed out the revision of his own theory on anxiety, fear as part of the neurosis does not occur (only or firstly) as the result of suppression, but fear itself (as a biological warning signal indicating the appearance of – real – dangers) is the reason for the suppression that causes the neurosis.” Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen*, vol. 2, 560.
153 Cf. Ibid., 561.
Neigung sich vergrößert, es zu übertreten.”¹⁵⁴ The woman attempts to establish a taboo. A taboo is supposed to ease the fear of something one secretly desires to do.¹⁵⁵ In Eve we see the complete and utter helplessness of infants, she is torn between her instinctual desires and the fear of guilt. As soon as she transgressed the prohibition not to eat from the tree, feelings of guilt arise, and Drewermann comments: “Die Angst vor der Schuld verwandelt sich in der Bibel in die Angst vor der Strafe; diese führt wiederum dazu, die Schuld zu verleugnen und dadurch aufs neue schuldig zu werden. So entsteht ein Kreislauf von Angst und Schuld, der immer weiter von Gott wegführt.”¹⁵⁶ However, it is not only the fear of one’s own instinctual wishes and desires that cause anxiety, there also is the fear of losing a love object, namely mother and father, or God. Drewermann points out that the child does not actually fear the drive impulses, but rather the separation from its parents, which causes mortal fear:

Tatsächlich müssen die Menschen fürchten, ins Nichts zurückzufallen, wenn sie die Gemeinschaft mit Gott verlieren; und sie verlieren die Gemeinschaft mit Gott, wenn sie das Gebot übertreten, das er ihnen gegeben hat. Die Angst ist also im Grunde der Ausdruck einer gestörten Beziehung: psychologisch zwischen Kind und Eltern, theologisch zwischen Gott und Mensch.¹⁵⁷

We can see the terrible tension humanity is experiencing: On the one side there are powerful instinctual desires, on the other is the real fear to be separated from the love object, should one act on those desires. The problem is that wishes only grow stronger, the more they are suppressed. The mental dynamics of this process are precisely described in Gen 3, we can

¹⁵⁴ “It is a basic psychological rule that commandments are being tightened when the desire or possibility to transgress it grows.” Eugen Drewermann, Strukturen des Bösen, vol. 1, Die jahwistische Urgeschichte in exegetischer Sicht (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981), 59.
¹⁵⁵ Cf. Ibid., 60.
¹⁵⁶ “The fear of guilt is transformed in the Bible into the fear of punishment; which leads to a denial of guilt and thus become guilty anew. A cycle of fear and guilt is created, which leads further and further away from God.” Drewermann, Strukturen des Bösen, vol. 2, 561.
¹⁵⁷ “Indeed humans have reason to fear falling back into nothingness, should they lose unity with God; a unity which is lost if the commandment given by him is transgressed. Thus, fear is basically an expression for a disturbed relationship: psychologically between child and parents, theologically between God and human.” Ibid, 562.
detect a clear connection between desire, fear, backlog of the desire, breach, guilt, fear, shame, denial, and guilt anew.\textsuperscript{158}

This cycle continues even after banishment from Paradise. The dominating question is now: How can humans win back God? We can observe the first attempts of redemption and compensation in Gen 4, where the sacrifice becomes a means to satisfy and appease God. But what begins as a story to regain God’s favour soon results in a new catastrophe: murder. Uncertainty about whether God accepts or rejects the sacrifice leads to suspicion and competition among humans. “When humans kill each other under the spell of fear they desperately try to regain the lost experience of absolute recognition from God. In the story, murder is the result of Cain’s subjective experience that God does not recognize him.”\textsuperscript{159}

The Other becomes a deadly rival over God’s love and one can only be sure of God’s acceptance if the Other ceases to exist as a competitor. Again it is fear that leads to guilt.

The “Song of the Sword” as well as the marriage between angels and mortals reveal a whole new issue that has its roots in the rivalry between Cain and Abel: Humans overcompensate their feelings of inferiority. Fear for the threatened existence and life results in an attempt to deify existence and life itself. If one cannot be close to God, one must be divine like God.\textsuperscript{160} The motif of overcompensation is exaggerated in the construction of the tower of Babel. Fear of isolation and separation makes humans unite: “Ensprechend formieren sich die Menschen zu einem Werk, das die globale Angst bannen und im Grunde durch göttliche Weltüberlegenheit beherrschbar machen soll.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{158} Cf. Ibid., 563.
\textsuperscript{159} Beier, \textit{God-Image}, 106.
\textsuperscript{160} Drewermann, \textit{Strukturen des Bösen}, vol. 2, 567.
\textsuperscript{161} “Accordingly, humans regroup to create an achievement supposed to avert the global fear and basically render it manageable by use of divine superiority of the world.” Ibid., 568.
It is evident, once more, how radical the Yahwistic primeval history depicts human entanglement in fear and guilt. There simply seems to be now way around it, in each and every given situation humanity chooses a path that leads to further anxiety and guilt. Drewermann does not leave the fact unmentioned, that this kind of exaggeration is not compatible with fear as understood by psychoanalysis: “… daß aber die Menschen schlechthin in der beschriebenen Weise zu Opfern ihrer Angst würden, ist psa eine einfach unsinnige Behauptung. Nicht so, wenn wir den Begriff der Angst wie den der Neurose auf Gott beziehen.”

Just as in the case of neurosis, humanity as a whole cannot be described psychoanalytically as suffering from permanent fear and anxiety that corrupts each and every action. The fear described in Gen 1-11 must be understood as a theological, not solely an anthropological or psychological phenomenon. This kind of fear is only applicable when we speak of human beings as in relation with God.

The power of fear as the motivating force behind evil cannot be overemphasized in Drewermann’s thoughts. Even if we do not detect fear as the primary motivation on first sight, thorough and profound investigation will eventually discover fear at the heart of any evil:

Der Ableitungsweg zwischen der Angst im Ursprung und der einzelnen Endhandlung mag sehr verwickelt sein, aber alles Böse, das denjenigen wesentlich kennzeichnet, der es vollzieht, läßt sich letztlich immer auf den Kernfaktor der Angst zurückführen. Angst ist die entscheidende Macht, die den gesamten Lebensaufbau, die “Leitlinie”, den Selbstentwurf der Existenz durch Überforderung aller Art verzerrt.

162 “… that humans as such must become victims of their own fear is psychoanalytically an absurd conclusion. However, it is not if we relate the concept of fear, just like the concept of neurosis, to God.” Ibid., 569.

163 “The path of derivation from original fear to the individual final action may be obscure, but all evil which characterizes the evildoer can be traced back to the factor fear. Fear is the decisive force and the “guiding principle,” distorting the entire life, the idea of self, and the existence by overextensions of all kinds.” Eugen Drewermann, *Psychoanalyse und Moraltheologie*, Vol. 1, *Angst und Schuld* (Mainz: Matthias-Gründewald, 1982), 124.
However, Drewermann’s relentless focus on fear as the key motivating force behind evil, and for the most part of human existence in general, has been criticized by some scholars.\footnote{164}

The Law of Increasing Unfreedom

In their attempts to overcome or overcompensate feelings of inferiority, humans only incur further guilt. The evil they tried to eradicate is fed, enhanced, and reaches new heights of violence and destruction. Again Drewermann draws parallels to the neurotic’s behaviour, who “aufgrund der Angst vor seinen Triebimpulsen (infolge seiner Gehemmtheiten) in kindlichen Übererwartungen verhaftet bleibt, die zu einem ständigen Kreislauf von Enttäuschungen und Minderwertigkeitsgefühlen einerseits und Überkompensationen und Riesenansprüchen andererseits führen.”\footnote{165} There occur desires and expectations to become like God, even be God, or exceed God by creating giants in the world (Gn 6). The mortal and divine are mingled, giving rise to usurpation and claims for power, rule, and control. The fuel that keeps this cycle of fear, overcompensation and feelings of inferiority going is basically the fear to be nothing. Drewermann calls it “die Angst, ein Nichts zu sein” (literally: “the fear to be a Nothing”).\footnote{166} He understands that we are no longer just talking

\footnote{164}Maria Kassel agrees that fear can be a very strong force in life, but rejects the notion that fear is the sole motivation and driving force behind overall human existence and action. That all of humanity is pathologically sick and in dire need of healing is a conclusion she finds herself unable to support theologically as well as psychoanalytically: “Angst als Konstitutivum christlicher und allgemein religiöser (mythischer) Überlieferungen läßt sich mit tiefenpsychologischer Analyse nicht nachweisen.” (“Fear as the constitutive feature behind the Christian and general religious (mythical) tradition cannot by supported by a depth psychological analysis.”) Maria Kassel, “Bibel und Tiefenpsychologie: Eine Sichtung des Streits um Eugen Drewermann,” in Der Streit um Drewermann: Was Theolog(inn)en und Psycholog(inn)en kritisieren, ed. Bernadette Benedikt & Alfred Sobel, (Wiesbaden: Sobel, 1992), 44.

\footnote{165}“based on the fear of his own drive impulses (due to his inhibitions) remains in infantile high expectations, which lead to an ongoing cycle of disappointment and inferiority feelings on the one side and overcompensation and extreme claims on the other.” Ibid., 572.

\footnote{166}Ibid., 575
about the human mental apparatus and its development, but quite literally about human existence and being in general. An existential interpretation must be added to the psychoanalytic one.\textsuperscript{167} This existential-psychoanalytical interpretation of Gen 1-11 is the theme running through the entire third volume of Drewermann’s work \textit{Strukture des Bösen}. An extensive debate is not possible within the scope of this paper, only a few remarks can be made. When analysing the existential aspects, Drewermann relies on Jean-Paul Sartre and his work \textit{Being and Nothingness}. Drewermann actually borrowed the term “fearing to be a nothing” from Sartre. The fear of others and the rivalry resulting from this, as depicted in the story of Cain and Abel, can be read as a narrative about the destructive power of fearing to be nothing:

\begin{quote}
In the field of fear and lack of being, the Other radically questions the recognition \textit{[Ansehen]} and value of my being by objectifying me, by reminding me of my nothingness. The result is conflict which leads to a sadomasochistic interrelationship that tries to dissolve the tension between self and Other by either subjugating the Other as if I were God … and treating her as nothing or by idolizing the Other, by making her into a God and hoping that thereby my own lack can be closed.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

Cain’s murder is a symbol for this annihilation of the other in both ways, either by ruling over her or by worshipping her. But neither does justice to the true self of the Other. What becomes evident is, how human beings are turned into almost helpless pawns torn between compulsive desires. The desire to \textit{somehow} compensate one’s feelings of inferiority lead to the annihilation of autonomy and free will.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{167} Cf. Ibid., 577.
\textsuperscript{168} Beier, \textit{God-Image}, 106.
\end{flushleft}
If sin can be outlined as a neurosis before God, it is safe to assume that the progress as well as potential healing of the disorder follow the same or similar paths as the clinical concept of neurosis. Now, the notion of neurosis renders it impossible for the patient to recover himself. The neurotic, Drewermann states, is unable to detect and oftentimes completely unaware of the causes of her suffering. At the heart of the neurosis is a trauma, an event or experience in the patient’s life which exposed him to an overwhelming amount of stimuli. Stimuli too great for him to deal with in usual ways, the traumatic event cannot be processed. Laplanche and Pontalis define trauma as

an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation. In economic terms, the trauma is characterised by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard of the subject’s tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work the out psychically.169

The traumatic event is never fully resolved, it controls and directs the patient’s life without him realising it. The trauma forces the patient to unconsciously repeat the traumatic experiences over and over again with other people, a circumstance described as compulsive repetition (Wiederholungszwang).170 Drewermann concludes: “Unter dem Druck des Wiederholungszwanges sucht der traumatisch Fixierte die alte Situation in entsprechenden

The neurotic person truly feels cursed, for she repeatedly manoeuvres herself into similar dead ends without fully realising why. The people surrounding the neurotic person usually act as extras, even involuntary enablers of the compulsive repetition, since transference and counter-transference prevent a successful elimination of the conflict. In the therapeutic setting however, the patient’s transference precisely enables healing, if the therapist does not succumb to her own counter-transferences. In a successful therapy, it is possible “das traumatische Erlebnis zu wiederholen, durchzuarbeiten und durch eine bewußte Stellungnahme zu beantworten.”

The reliving and revision of the trauma is crucial – a mere intellectual understanding of the underlying issues is not sufficient. This basic psychoanalytical pattern can be translated into theological language:

Drewermann is sensitive enough to the nature of the Yahwistic material not to read any Christian salvation images into it, but he points out that Gen 12 hints a new beginning in which God attempts to erase mistrust and fear by creating a covenant with Abraham based

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171 “Pushed by compulsive repetition, the traumatized fixated person is looking to restore the old situation in equivalent relationships with other people.” Ibid., 578.
172 “to repeat the traumatic experience, process it and answer it by a conscious response.” Ibid., 579.
173 “As is the case with neurosis, where healing must come from the outside by someone else taking the father’s (or mother’s) place - where the disease has its origin – incurring the affects bound there, thus enabling coping, it is possible to theologically reflect the Yahwistic primeval history. Liberation from the net of sin is only possible, if God himself, from which humanity is separated due to guilt and fear, returns to the initial moment and incurs the pathological process of sin, working it through with the human being.” Ibid., 585.
on trust and faith. However, according to Drewermann the idea of killing the incarnate God as it is central to the Christian faith is understood as having an even greater cathartic effect:

Vom psa Modell der Therapie her scheint es wirklich so zu sein, wie es das Christentum behauptet, daß es eine Befreiung von der Sünde erst gibt und geben kann, wenn die Menschen all ihren untergründigen Haß von Gott auf einen anderen, der Gott vertritt, abladen können und den traumatischen Konflikt von Angst und Schuld bis zur völligen Destruktion ausagieren können.174

There clearly are significant parallels between Drewermann’s conclusions and those of Sigmund Freud. The crucifixion of the son as a substitute for the father harks back to the traumatic event of killing the father of the primal horde. However, Drewermann does not concur with Freud’s view that the murder of a father is the prototype of Christianity. His argument is an interesting one: The killing of the father, and the subsequent creation of all theistic religions is, according to Freud, to be placed within the period of the Oedipus complex. The separation anxiety, which led to and resulted in guilt and fear as portrayed in Gen 1-10, predates the Oedipus complex and any possible father murder. The neurosis underlying Christianity is not so much traumatic guilt over a murder, but falling out of unity with one’s mother/father, which leads to the desire and wish to be accepted and loved by her or him. In this sense, Christianity is a religion that is based on the trauma of birth, and Drewermann’s thought in this regards are more in line with Otto Rank than Sigmund Freud. In 1923, Rank dealt extensively with the topic of birth in his book The Trauma of Birth, which Freud, while ultimately disagreeing with Rank, mentions favourably in his own

174 “From the perspective of psychoanalytical therapy, there seems to be truth in Christianity’s claim that liberation from sin is possible only if humanity can direct its hatred of God towards another one who is representing God, until the traumatic conflict of fear and guilt is acted out until complete and utter destruction.” Ibid., 585.
writings, stating that for Rank “the process of birth is the first situation of danger, and the economic upheaval which it produces becomes the prototype of the reaction of anxiety.”

We have now reached Drewermann’s theological answer to the question why humans are inclined to believe. Whether the origins of faith are related to the birth trauma or to the Oedipus complex is a question of little importance for us here. The crucial notion is, that sin and consequently human existential anxiety are related to God and must be confronted with and through God. We could say that God is cause and cure for the neurosis before God. Her absence evokes anxiety, her loving presence can ease it. In what ways Drewermann envisions God to be a healing factor in the lives of desperate human beings remains to be answered and will be a central topic of Chapter 4.

Sin and Neurosis

Outside of Eden and separated from the initial union with their creator, humanity is lost. Human beings are not lost because they are somehow incomplete, corrupted, or inherently evil. They are lost quite literally, they do not know where to go, how to exist, and what to do. And above all they do not know why – why they are, why they should exist, for what purpose they live and what meaning their lives possess. These questions never came up in unity with God, existence was right and good simply because God had created it that way. Humanity was welcome to exist because God wanted it. Outside of Eden, humanity is no longer certain of this. It has forgotten that God had created them, long before they could

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175 Freud et al., Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, 150f.
prove themselves worthy in any way. Yet outside of union with God, humans attempt over and over again to gain a sign of her approval. They hope and wish for divine affirmation of their plans and outlines for their existences. Yearning for approval and affirmation, fearing that others could be better or stronger, being torn apart by feelings of inferiority and worthlessness, and helplessly attempting to overcompensate all those shortcomings characterize human existence in the world outside of Eden. For Drewermann, this human helplessness and anxiety is at the heart of sin – not arrogance or malice, those are only the fruits that grow on the fertile field of fear. Sin, thus, is not a moral, but an existential problem. The moral issues arise much later, as some form of side effect of anxiety. Or, as Beier puts it: “Moral evil is a secondary, often nonintended symptom of an existential attitude that precedes all questions of ethics. Hence evil can only be prevented and overcome if due attention is given to existential attitudes.”176

In all of this we can clearly see the traces of desperation. The human being stuck in sin, exhausted from existential anxiety, is desperate and adheres frantically to whatever it is that might bestow some meaning to existence. Drewermann assumes that most turn to external factors such as professional success, money, adoration, status, or participation in and identification with a larger group.177 He also adds: “Wenn etwas von all diesen Gütern für jemanden eine absolute Bedeutung erlangt, muß er verzweifelt sein, wenn er es verliert.”178 The problem with all those external factors used to ascribe meaning and value to existence is, that they are merely substitutes. The desperation caused by existential fear reaches deeper and is more profound, the mere belief that one’s existence could be justified

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176 Beier, God-Image, 32.
177 Cf. Eugen Drewermann, Angst und Schuld, 130.
178 “If a specific good represents absolute meaning for someone, he must be truly desperate should he lose it.” Ibid., 130.
by external factors or achievements demonstrates that the real fear is within the individual, because it affirms what the desperate being already assumes to be true: that being and existing alone is not good enough. This is the reason why Drewermann can conclude that desperation can only be understood in relation to the self, “daß niemals jemand an etwas Äußerem verzweifelt, das er nicht selber ist, sondern immer an sich selber; anders ausgedrückt, daß die Verzweiflung im Grunde immer ein Mißverhältnis zu sich selber ist.”

In reality, the desperate person is in a conflict with herself. Human beings are desperate, because they are free to define and invent themselves – a statement that seems confusing on first sight. Are not freedom and the possibility to give one’s existence meaning and significance, to outline one’s own life, valued, cherished, and much proclaimed goods of modern society? Indeed they are, but this does not mean that humanity is not meeting them with a certain ambiguity. Goods such as freedom and the right for self-determination also pose great challenges to individuals. To be the architect of one’s existence, to chose, develop, and build is not only a joyful but above all a strenuous task. Given this context, the following statement by Drewermann does not come as a surprise to us: “Es liegt in der Tat eine ungeheure Sehnsucht im Menschen, sich als Individuum aufzugeben und in der Unfreiheit der Masse zu verschwinden, eben weil keine Angst dem Menschen innerlicher und tiefer ist als die Angst der Freiheit vor sich selbst.” Freedom inevitably causes fear and anxiety within the autonomous agent. She finds herself at the heart of an area of tension Drewermann depicts like this:

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179 “that no one ever despairs of something external which is not he himself, but always of the self. In other words, desperation basically means to be out of proportion to oneself.” Ibid., 132.

180 “Indeed, there lies a monstrous longing within the human being, a yearning to forgo oneself as an individual and to vanish in the unfreedom of the masses, precisely because no fear is more internal and roots deeper in the human being than the fear of freedom of oneself.” Ibid., 134.
The individual in the centre of this diagram can escape anxiety caused by freedom simply be finding refuge in one of the poles alone. Rather than finding a synthesis between all poles and accept tension as part of existence, one option is exaggerated and exalted. The person devoted to the necessary will argue that whatever is necessary cannot be wrong. Another one might never settle for anything, keeping all options and possibilities open, for as long as nothing is decided she cannot really be wrong. Those opting for infiniteness are defined by a never to be fulfilled longing and wishing, while finiteness is the exact opposite, facts become all powerful and freedom is sacrificed.\textsuperscript{181} By ascribing themselves to one of the extremes, human beings gain a short relief from anxiety:

So wie in einer Neurose durch die Verdrängung bestimmter ängstigender Erlebnisse der Krankheitsgewinn erzielt wird, daß die aktuelle Angst im Erleben beseitigt wird, so besteht der Gewinn eines verziefelten Daseins darin, bestimmte Lebensbereiche auszublenden, sie für unmöglich zu erklären und also weniger Angst zu erleben.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{181} Cf. Ibid., 134f.
\textsuperscript{182} “Just as a neurosis produces a morbid gain by suppressing anxiety causing memories, namely the removal of actual fear in the present experience, so gains a desperate existence by ruling specific aspect of life out as unfeasible and, as a consequence, fear is minimized.” Ibid., 135.
The existential anxiety follows the same pattern as does anxiety caused by a trauma, therefore it resembles the structure of a neurosis. For Drewermann, it is perfectly valid to speak of an existential neurosis in the cases discussed above. The diagram would then be enhanced and look like this:

![Diagram of neuroses]

*Source: Drewermann, Angst und Schuld, 136.*

It is not possible to discuss the four neuroses in detail within the scope of this paper (a concise discussion of those diseases can be found in Beier’s *Violent God-Image* pages 114-119). Furthermore, the exact forms are of less significance for our purposes, it is only important to understand Drewermann’s logic of connecting existential fear and desperation (sin) with forms of neuroses (disease). Theologically spoken, sin as the fear of not being wanted or accepted by God leads to desperate and destructive acts of overcompensation that undermine the self as well as any form of community. I will illustrate this by the example of infiniteness/ depression. If all human acts, deeds, and hopes are projected unto an infinite background they are blown out of proportion. No matter what a person does, he will never feel as if it is sufficient or good enough. Any act could potentially be perfected into infinity. Such an understanding of one’s own existence and life must cause great disappointment and
feelings of guilt, which are basic features of the neurosis of depression. “The depressive person”, writes Matthias Beier, “feels she has to be as perfect as only God could be in order to be allowed to live as a human being.”183 Furthermore, the ego of the depressed person is surrendered, he submits himself fully to “the Other.” The personal wishes and desires have vanished, what is important is the affirmation by others.184 Taking all of this into consideration, we can see how a depressive person’s religiosity can become highly problematic insofar it supports and encourages his behaviour:

> Viele Forderungen des Christentums nach totaler Hingabe und Nächstenliebe scheinen nämlich in einer bestimmten Auslegung geradezu den Zweck zu haben, Menschen depressiv zu machen, indem sie einseitig das Sichverströmen heilig sprechen und die Aufgabe der Selbstverwirklichung förmlich mit unchristlichem Egoismus gleichsetzen. Zudem sind manche Formen des Religiösen offensichtlich nicht davor gefeit, aus dem Verhältnis zu Gott ein Verfahren der Weltflucht und der leeren Sehnsucht nach einer ganz anderen Welt zu machen.185

Religion, and the God image it communicates in particular, oftentimes counteracts healing efforts and enables the flourishing of neurotic behaviour. Beier is quite right when he says that Drewermann “tries to unfold the existential structures of fear that lead to the rise of an ambivalent and violent God-image and to the reactive delusional human feelings of ‘being like God’ and/or of elevating others to the level of ‘gods’.”186

> To reduce those existential neuroses to a mere individual and personal phenomenon would be quite wrong. As we have learned earlier, Drewermann’s exegesis of Gen 1-11

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183 Beier, God-Image, 115.
184 Cf. Ibid., 116.
185 “Certain Christian interpretations request complete devotion and love of neighbour, which can only result in depressed human beings. Giving up oneself is glorified, whereas the task of self-actualisation is put on a level with unchristian egotism. Furthermore some forms of religiosity are not immune to turn the relationship with God into a practice of escapism and empty longing for a wholly different world.” Drewermann, Angst und Schuld, 154.
186 Beier, God-Image, 32.
assumed that all of humanity are suffering in one way or another from a neurosis before God – sin is universal and ubiquitous. And if this neurosis manifests itself as a form of existential neurosis, all of us must be affected. It dawns on us, that within Drewermann’s teachings of sin as a neurosis we encounter a substantial amount of social and religious critique. I think Beier captures it best when stating the following:

Such “missing oneself,” such spiritual neurosis, however, need not take the form of clinical neurosis in the psychoanalytic sense of the word … but can find expression instead in socially highly rewarded and “normal” behaviors such as doing one’s duty, being obedient, living a life of self-sacrifice, supporting war, destroying the environment – all possibly done in the name of “God.” This is of utmost importance for an understanding of the challenge Drewermann’s theology poses to any state of Church system which claims to legitimize its power and authority with reference to God.187

What we consider to be normal and valuable, worth striving for according to common standards, might just be a form of neurotic behaviour – perhaps not in the conventional psychoanalytic understanding, but when seen as sin, the neurosis before God.

187 Ibid., 54f.
Chapter Four

The Benevolent God Image as a Healing Resource

“We cannot cleanse the word ‘God’ and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.”

– Martin Buber, Eclipse of God

Rabbi Sacks claimed that “Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.”\textsuperscript{188} We certainly did see how and to what extent psychological and psychoanalytical examinations can take religious feelings and needs apart. We have witnessed how Freud, Rizzuto, and Kirkpatrick set out to explain the phenomenon of human religion, why we believe, and what aspects or experiences of human existence influence the concrete contents of our faiths. Eugen Drewermann used psychoanalysis to take the primeval history apart, to see what the individual parts meant in regards to human nature, psychologically as well as theologically. Drewermann already demonstrated that Rabbi Sacks dichotomous distinction cannot be entirely true: Religions might use science or scientific results for its own purposes. In the previous chapters, we have taken the God image and the religious tenet of sin apart in order to see how they function, where they come

\textsuperscript{188} Sacks, The Great Partnership, 77.
from, and to what extent they define or influence human life. In the following, we will do what Rabbi Sacks asked us to do, namely put things back together. We will not abandon science to accomplish this task, rather continue the dialogue that has proven to be so useful. Psychology can help us rebuild healthy, empowering, and life affirming God images based on specific religious traditions. I will continue where the last chapter ended and take a closer look at Drewermann’s solution to the problem of sin as existential anxiety. Then I want to offer a few other theological voices on the entire issue of re-forming and re-shaping the God image, before looking at scientific data that demonstrates how specific God images do have an effect on mental health. In a last part, I would like to discuss a couple of clinical approaches in which the authors propose ideas that might help reshaping and rebuilding benevolent God images, and subsequently healthier self representations and relationships together with their clients.

Grace and a Benevolent God Image

To his own diagnosis that humanity is suffering from neuroses based on existential fear and desperation, Eugen Drewermann offers a simple yet logical solution. Those who fear and despair need reassurance, safety, and comfort: “Es gilt, einen Raum der Geborgenheit, des Schutzes und der vorbehaltlosen Annahme zu eröffnen.”\(^{189}\) Up until now, God was perceived as an oppressive force, she was seen as hostile to life, condemning, and prohibiting. In the name of state or church sanctioned order, God functioned as a tool that

\(^{189}\) “It is necessary to create a space of safety, protection and unconditional acceptance.” Drewermann, *Angst und Schuld*, 163.
alienated human beings from themselves.\textsuperscript{190} The affirmation offered in both, psychotherapy and pastoral care, entitles the patient to live a life of his own, to shape and conduct it in healthy and autonomous ways. In this sense, therapy and pastoral care indeed become “das Instrument einer Gnade.”\textsuperscript{191} The desire to make patients feel more comfortable and secure is shared by therapists as well as chaplains.\textsuperscript{192} Matthias Beier identifies this mutuality as the bridge between theology and psychoanalysis: “The experience of unconditional acceptance is where the aims of Jesus and the aims of psychoanalysis converge and where psychoanalysis can experientially be more than a model for redemption.”\textsuperscript{193}

The following statement captures Drewermann’s understanding of disease and cure accurately: “Die Religion sollte und dürfte in nichts anderem bestehen, als den Menschen gegen seine Angst zum Ursprungsort seines Vertrauens hinzuführen.”\textsuperscript{194} This place of origin of trust is a benevolent God, a God who accepts unconditionally. God is not far away, judging, and ruling, but rather close by, sharing suffering and enjoyment.

Based on Micah 7:18-20, psychologist and theologian J. Harold Ellens develops a powerful theology of grace that attempts to capture the theological, psychological, and existential significance of divine forgiveness. Micah’s metaphor of casting humanity’s sins into the depth of the sea does not merely reflect forgiveness, but even oblivion. Sins are forgiven and forgotten, before we are born. From her first breath the human being is already liberated and empowered to live out her existence without being crumbled or inhibited by fear, guilt, and anxiety. Ellens says:

\textsuperscript{190} Cf. Drewermann, \textit{Angst und Schuld}, 164.
\textsuperscript{191} “The instrument of a grace.” Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{192} Cf. Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{193} Beier, \textit{Violent God-Image}, 247.
\textsuperscript{194} “Religion ought and should do nothing else but guiding people against their fears back to the birth place of trust.” Ibid., 174.
Micah’s message is theologically simple and psychologically profound: the center of the good news, psychologically and theologically, is grace … This is a very special and precise kind of grace. It is unconditional, radical, and universal … All other conditional messages, which require us to shape up, repent, change our behavior, or prove ourselves to God in some other way to receive his goodwill, are always bad news. They only address the superficialities of our symptomology or dysfunction. They do not get at our problem, that is, that we cannot shape up until we are freed by God’s radical and unconditional acceptance of us, as we are. Only if his grace sets us free from what we are, congenitally anxiety-laden humans driven thereby into pathology, can we be empowered to become what we have the potential of being.195

Grace lies at the beginning of any process, not at the end. It is not a reward or achievement, but a fundamental optimism and trust that empowers the individual being to live existence with the greatest confidence. Not only is this kind of complete and universal grace a theological topic running through all of the biblical scriptures – “the entire main stream of Old Testament theology is this same message of radical grace”196 – furthermore it is an aspect of God’s character and personality and should inform the God images we develop: “God’s grace is rooted in God’s character. Our relief and freedom do not depend on our characters or behavior but on God’s faithful, fatherly acceptance of us unconditionally.”197 Ellens’ thoughts echo precisely what Drewermann pointed out as well. The entitlement to be, to exist as one is, cannot be earned by diligence, discipline, work, or any other activity. The right to be is given, freely, from the moment of birth. “Die Berechtigung des eigenen Daseins ruht vielmehr vor Gott in sich selbst. Man muß sie weder machen noch erbuhlen. Man hat sie in Gott – und das läßt den Menschen leben.”198 God’s radical grace is far more than an intellectual theological concept that can be preached, it has tremendous practical

196 Ibid., 149.
197 Ibid., 152.
198 “In fact, the justification of one’s existence rests in itself before God. One neither is obliged to create it, nor to fight for it. It is given in God – and this circumstance allows humans to live.” Drewermann, Angst und Schuld, 148.
consequences as a therapeutic psychological concept that has “life-shaping implications and applications for the healing professions.” This Christian anthropology, namely to accept a person independently of his achievements or failures, her social class, ethnic or religious background, must infuse any therapeutic effort. Therapy “requires the incarnation in the therapist of the unconditional acceptance of the patient, where the patient is at the moment in his or her pathology.” Thus the divine feature or paradigm of radical acceptance transcends the intellectual sphere and can become an experience for the patient. Through the therapist the patient can catch a glimpse of God’s own grace.

The Need for New God Images

In this section, I will introduce a few theologians who argued strongly in favour of establishing new God images that help overcoming the shortcomings of traditional ideas of God. I would like to begin by offering a very short peek at the psychological interpretation of the Fall through the eyes of J. Harold Ellens. Ellens’ psychological exegesis shares much with Drewermann’s approach, but ultimately goes into a very different direction. We have learned that Drewermann reads Gen 1-11 as the diagnosis of a disease, namely sin, the neurosis before God. To his mind, humanity as a whole is pathologically sick, and the Yahwist used a language akin to the one psychoanalysts use to describe psychological development and maturation. However, what psychoanalysis describes as necessary and healthy processes of maturation is rendered completely negative from the theological

199 Ellens, Radical Grace. 158.
200 Ibid., 164.
perspective employed by the Yahwist. The maturation of humanity is a movement further away from God, away from the solid ground of a healthy human existence. Apart from God, humanity is trapped in anxiety and overcompensation.

Ellens’ conclusions are far less tragic than Drewermann’s. To him, the story of the Fall is primarily of etiological nature, an attempt to explain the problem of human suffering and evil in general. The question at the heart of the primeval history is, “how an omnipotent and omniscient transcendent God can be linked to and responsible for an apparently flawed creation.”

Psychologically, the authors of Genesis realised that human beings were in some state of severe alienation. Much like Drewermann, Ellens links the Fall to aspects of human psychogenesis and maturation, stating that “Genesis 3 is a symbolic description of the primal dynamics of human maturation and of the inevitably complex and potentially tragic process of trying to establish a discreet and affirmable self.”

Existence in Eden is humanity’s childhood, which was outgrown in order to become responsible and mature entities. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this process of gaining independence from caretakers is psychologically inherently healthy. Harold Ellens is not oblivious of the fact that the Yahwist depicts this process as a tragedy:

The fall story represents one option for implementing the necessary and inevitable differentiation process. The Hebrews thought of it as a destructive option. The implication is that Adam might have exercised an equally growth-inducing act of will and ego strength by choosing, for independent and personal reasons, to affirm God’s will and values system.

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202 Cf. Ibid., 31.
203 Ibid., 32.
The process of maturation in and of itself is not the issue, according to Ellens, but rather the execution and the concrete decisions made by Adam are the underlying problem. A different path would potentially have led to independence on friendlier terms with the “father”, but the Bible does not offer us any hint of such peaceful alternatives. Adam’s childlike naïveté and lack of wisdom as well as knowledge had to lead to a path of alienation and pain.

Now, it is interesting to follow Ellens’ further argumentation. He insists that in the story of the Fall “Adam and Eve fell up, not down; you might say that they fell out of the crib and got up and walked away, slightly injured but managing, by the grace of God.” Evolution could only happen through revolution – and this is not a curse, but a blessing. Why, then, is the Biblical narrative so one-sided and negative, blaming humanity for its apparent disobedience and rebellion against God? Where Drewermann located a human disease called sin, Ellen is prepared to go a different way. He believes that God as depicted in Genesis is distorted and twisted, a “monster God.” The authors and editors of the biblical primeval history were faced with two options when attempting to explain the difficulties and hardships of human existences: “They had the option of accusing God for having created it that way, as they did in their older narrative in Genesis 6, or of letting God off the hook by accusing themselves.” Obviously, they opted for the latter. The narrative created a specific image of God and, consequently, a very specific image of humanity as well. It is of importance to see that Ellens is not trying to crush the Old Testament image of God in the stereotypical and anti-Semitic fashion that usually portrays and rejects the Hebrew God as a jealous monster and offers a mild and forgiving image of God as revealed

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204 Ibid., 38.
205 Ellens, Radical Grace. 6.
206 Ibid., 6.
in Jesus Christ. By no means, Ellens is as critical of Christian God images as he is of the Jewish ones. His basic assumption is:

Sick gods make for sick people. To put it slightly differently, sick gods make people sick. As children and disciples model their parents and mentors, so individual humans and communities of humans create themselves in the image of their gods. Sick gods provide sick models, which produce sick persons and sick communities. To insure personal and communal well-being requires that one’s god is well; or at least, the converse is so. If one’s god is sick, one cannot achieve well-being, individually or communally.  

If the God image in Genesis presents us with a cruel, punishing, and angry God, humanity must be depicted in a similar fashion, as incurable evildoers without remorse and regret, entangled in structures of sin. Where Drewermann diagnosed humanity as neurotic, Ellens does the exact same – just in regards to God. God, as predominantly portrayed in scriptures, has “suffered from chronic paranoid schizophrenia or severe borderline personality disorder, with frequent erratic, unprovoked episodes of active psychosis.” The God that produced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is provably insane. Ellens points out that there are a myriad of stories in the Old Testament where God is vindictive and angry, ordering genocides or executions. Though the New Testament does not fare much better:

What about the fact that his furor was so intense toward you and me, innocent as we are, that he either had to exterminate us or slaughter his unique son, Jesus of Nazareth? If these reports are true, this God is one sick puppy, and dangerous. He solves all his ultimate impasses with ultimate violence. Don’t you think that is sick?

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207 Ibid., 1f.
208 Ibid., 1.
209 Ibid., 2.
The narrative of a cruel God is undeniably one of the dominating streams within biblical scriptures. However, Ellens points out that both Old and New Testament always knew of a quite different God image as well, and that this benevolent image can be documented throughout the whole of scripture (Micah 7:18-20; Rom 8:38-39). Underneath the loud and noisy image of a warrior and ruler God, there is an idea of God as “the purveyor of unconditional grace ... a key gradient of good mental health.”

J. Harold Ellens does not read the fall as the diagnosis of a human disease, as Drewermann does. He goes into the opposite direction and attempts to make a diagnosis of the God image that is presented in it. For Drewermann humanity really is sick and in need of a healing and benevolent God image. For Ellens, our God images are sick and they infect humanity with their diseases, they must be replaced with benevolent God images that heal humanity. Interestingly, the outcome in both cases is the same, the chain of argumentation, however, could not be more different.

Along similar lines argues Elizabeth A. Johnson from the perspective of feminist liberation theology. The way we speak of God and the shapes God takes in our imaginations greatly influence our personal well being as well as social construct. In She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse, Johnson states that “the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. Such speaking, in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis.” Her critique obviously is geared towards a religious language that knows and uses almost exclusively male attributes to refer to God, ignoring or discarding female metaphors as not

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210 Ibid., 4.
211 Johnson, She Who Is, 4.
suitable to speak of a deity. Whereas traditional male characteristics and features are elevated as being representative of the true imago dei, female attributes are regarded as insufficient, subordinated, and weak. There is a hermeneutical correlation at work that has severe sociological and psychological effects: If God is perceived as male and strong, righteous judge and reasonable ruler, fierce warrior and glorious lord, then all those divine attributes (which indeed only reflect the opinion of the ruling male elite that shaped God language in the first place) are valuable and significant on earth as well. Our God images guide us in establishing our self as well as our societies – this is one of the functions of the God image.212 “Patriarchal God symbolism,” Elizabeth Johnson writes, “functions to legitimate and reinforce patriarchal social structures in family, society, and church. Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, the husband exercises headship over his wife.”213 However, the function of the God image does not stop there, it goes far beyond the social system and colours individual maturation, perception, and identity. Johnson highlights: “The God-symbol is not only a visual phantasy but a focus of a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, views, and associations, very deep and tenacious.”214 The consequences of all this seem quite obvious. Concepts and imaginations are very powerful, they are far more than lofty intellectual constructs. The world of ideas, particularly in religions, are the foundation of how the world is perceived and structured, and the entire process of individuation and psychological growth takes place against the backdrop of God concepts with very concrete and specific features that are regarded as worthy of imitation.

212 Cf. Ibid., 36.
213 Ibid., 36.
214 Ibid., 37.
and praise. Thus, Johnson’s conclusions that “structural change and linguistic change go hand-in-hand”\textsuperscript{215} makes perfect sense.

Much of the insights of Johnson, Drewermann, and Ellens can be incorporated into our reflections about the God image and mental health. They all share the notion that how we think of and talk about God does in one way or another affect our individual identities and the societies we life in. We might object: But what does any of this teach or tell us about God \textit{himself}? Drewermann, Johnson, and Ellens keep telling us things about human needs and conditions, about how we shape society and life – but where is the self-revealing God? Even more: Do these authors invite us to create God images as it pleases us, according to our own needs and desires? Indeed, they do. But they do not ask us to do so out of thin air. Biblical – and for that matter all religious writings – are revelation, but they reveal far more about human beings than about any God or gods. Freud and Joseph Campbell, whose voices we heard earlier, both assumed that the truth hidden in religious writings is an anthropological one. And, to my mind, theologians such as Drewermann, Johnson, or Ellens support this notion. However, the more we learn about the human nature, the \textit{conditio humana}, the more is revealed precisely about God. If God is indeed the loving and caring mother, creator of all that is, how could our anxieties and fears, our failures and wishes not directly affect her and reveal her true nature as the One who addresses and eases all those difficulties characteristic to human nature? Precisely because the Bible tells us much about human beings and their needs, it teaches us more about God than we could imagine. To use Lee Kirkpatrick’s terminology, the Bible documents the human attachment system, depicting how we crave the protection and affection of our divine parent. Nowhere is this expressed more poignantly than in the psalms. We also learned that the safety seeking attachment

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 40.
system could only come into existence due to a pre-existing caregiving system deeply rooted within the caregivers. The two systems are related by a clear reciprocity. The same reciprocity is present in biblical scripture when it speaks of what humanity is in dire need of. Thus, when we uncover the human nature that is at the heart of scripture, we simultaneously uncover what shapes and forms God might take in order to comfort, protect, and guide us.

God Image and Mental Health: Research Results

Two studies deserve our attention, one dealing with inpatient treatment, the other focusing on outpatient therapy. Both studies discovered a significant correlation between patients’ changes in the God image and their self-perception as well as self-esteem.

In 1997 Tisdale, Key, and Edwards published their study Impact of Treatment on God Image and Personal Adjustment, and Correlations of God Image to Personal Adjustment and Object Relations Development in which inpatient treatment “was found to have a significant positive impact on personal adjustment and God image.” Psychological and spiritual changes were monitored and measured in 99 patients, at admission and discharge as well as six and twelve months respectively after discharge. The period of inpatient hospitalization proved to be particularly significant, showing “improvement indicating more positive views of themselves, and of God as close and loving, and present and accepting.” These results remained relatively stable in the period following

217 Ibid., 232.
hospitalization, in which “follow-up care enabled these patients to maintain the gains made during the inpatient phase.” Using four different inventories (Bell Object Relations Reality Testing Inventory, Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, Lawrence God Image Inventory, Religious Experience Questionnaire), Tisdale et al. were able to demonstrate how a “positive God image was associated with high personal adjustment and mature object relations development.”

A study conducted by Sharon E. Cheston et al. in 2003 yielded similar results. Using the Adjective Checklist, Brief Symptom Inventory, the Derogatis Psychiatric Rating Scale, and Counselor Treatment Ratings on 98 patients in outpatient psychotherapy, they discovered that “over time God was seen as more emotionally stable and robust”, while there “was also a significant increase in ratings of Agreeableness; treatment clients came to experience a more loving and caring God.” While the researches were able to demonstrate a relatedness between psychological symptoms and images of God, the question of causality remains open wide. They raise the question: “Does one’s psychological status have a direct effect on spiritual well-being, or does one’s perception of God have a direct impact on psychological well-being?” Research does not allow any assumptions that go beyond an observable interrelation between the two. However, Cheston et al. suggest that the God image might well be worked into the therapeutic process “because of its potential for predicting psychological well-being over time.”

An interesting study by Julie Juola Exline and Ann Marie Yali opens with the major hypothesis that “regardless of a person’s religiosity or the degree of comfort found in

218 Ibid., 235.
219 Ibid., 233.
221 Ibid., 104.
222 Ibid., 105.
religion, religious strain would be associated with psychological distress – more specifically, depression and suicidality.” Particularly if disagreement arises between a person’s individual beliefs and those taught by a larger religious institution, tension may increase. Also, perceiving God as distant or punitive can reduce the comfort sought in religion and give way to feelings of distress. According to their theory, the image of God and mental health are closely related, since “less benign views of God should be associated with negative emotions” and vice versa. To test their hypothesis, Exline and Yali conducted two studies, one among undergraduate students, another among patients in psychotherapeutic treatment. The results affirmed the initial hypothesis that religious strain, depression and suicidality are interrelated, the question of causality however could not be answered. A feeling of alienation from God was associated with depression, and the researchers offer two potential explanation. The bottom-up approach assumes that a pre-existing negative perception of and attitude towards the world, one’s environment, and life lead to a similar negative image of God. The difficulties in real life are simply projected unto the idea of God. The top-down model assumes that “those who believe that God is malicious or distant may be more likely to view the world as dangerous or unfair, and these perceptions could lead to greater psychological symptoms.” Exline and Yali also raise some excellent questions for further research, and the further course of this paper. Particularly insightful is the following passage:

A challenge for future research will be to identify factors that cause people to feel alienated from God and to determine how these can best be overcome. One potential factor to examine is belief in God’s grace. Grace beliefs have been

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224 Cf. Ibid., 1482.
225 Ibid., 1483.
226 Ibid., 1490.
linked with good mental health in prior research, and they may even reduce some of the negative impact of religious guilt.²²⁷

Clinical research seems to support what the aforementioned theologians proposed: that new ways of thinking and speaking of God open up pathways to healthier God images. However, clinical research also supports what psychological theorists like Freud, Rizzuto, and Kirkpatrick pointed out: that our God images are fed by real life experiences and patterns. In this sense, Exline and Yali highlight the possibility that “negative images of one’s own parents … translate into an insecure attachment with God.” ²²⁸

The God image in Therapy and Pastoral Care

Up until now, our approach to the God image has been cognitive rather than emotional. Particularly the theological aspects emphasize a shaping of the God image based on tradition, scripture, and teachings – highly intellectual affairs. Any specific religious or denominational group owns and appraises its referential witnesses that shape how they perceive and speak of a deity. Earlier, we discovered that biblical scriptures speak of God in very ambivalent terms. At times he is depicted as a jealous, warmongering, punitive father God, then she resembles a caring, forgiving, and empowering mother God. The point is, any believer must assume responsibility and choose. Much has been said about pick and choose religions, but fact is we all do choose in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously. Not a single religious person can claim to possess a holistic God image that is in line with all

²²⁷ Ibid., 1491.
²²⁸ Ibid., 1490.
of scripture. At the very least, every person tends to emphasize or disregard aspects of God as depicted in the scriptures. Since we all do it, we might as well do it consciously and responsibly, being engaged in an ongoing process of debating, reshaping, and restructuring our particular God images in creative and useful ways. In the following, I will argue that consciously reshaping our God images can be a resource in psychotherapy and pastoral care.

From what I have seen so far, it is fair to assume that our pathways of thinking can be rewritten – at least to a certain extent. Thinking of God as punitive and unforgiving can become a habit, causing fear, guilt, shame, and feelings of worthlessness. Unconsciously, the punitive God image can hover over people – not unlike the Above-I – slowly but surely crushing them. Perhaps we must expect that this aspect of God is so deeply ingrained in someone’s personality that it will never fully disappear. But I would argue that it is worth our fullest efforts to establish counter images of God that might ease some anxiety and pain.

*Cognitive Interventions*

At the very beginning of this paper, we looked at the differences between God concepts and God images, concluding that the former is more cognitive based on teachings and intellectual efforts, whereas the latter is far more unconscious and affective. In the following I will argue that the God image can be influenced throughout life by new God concepts. In other words, how we *think* of God affects how we *feel* about her.
Cognitive interventions are employed within so called cognitive therapy and focuses on the role thinking plays in the development of mental health or disorder. Stephen Parker and Glen Moriarty say:

The basic assumption underlying cognitive therapy is that thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect behaviour. Cognitive therapy changes the way that people feel about themselves and God by changing the way they thing about themselves and God. These interventions are played out in a spiritual context and alter the way a person emotionally experiences God.229

A religious person usually perceives God emotionally through automatic thoughts, which operate unconsciously and are triggered by particular situations. A person, for example, who wants to be constantly perfect in God’s eyes will automatically feel his disappointment or anger in situations of failure. If this person does not live up to the assumed expectations of others and God, he will hear God’s accusing voice. Automatic thoughts are not cognitive but affective reactions, they appear uncontrolled and unwanted. Cognitive therapy encourages the patient to uncover the hidden structures of automatic thoughts by using automatic thought records. Basically a form of diary, those records consist of three columns: Situation, Degree of Emotion, and Irrational God Image Automatic Thought. At a later stage two more columns, Real God Response and Outcome, are added. Based on the case of Sandra Smith, a married woman suffering from feelings of worthlessness which she attempted to overcompensate by pursuing perfection at work, Parker and Moriarty offer the figure on page 89.

The source to build and craft a more benevolent and empowering Real God Response are scripture and tradition. The crucial insight of this method is that patients are not

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helplessly exposed to their cruel and punitive God images. They are encouraged not only to assume responsibility but also a certain amount of control over their God image, or as Parker and Moriarty put it, own their thoughts: “Instead of seeing thoughts as foreign intrusions from a punitive deity, they learn that the thoughts are self-imposed and can be self-controlled.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Feelings</th>
<th>Automatic Thought(s)</th>
<th>Real God Response</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual event leading to feeling God’s Disappointment</td>
<td>Specify sad, anxious, angry etc.</td>
<td>- Write irrational God image automatic thought(s) that preceded emotion(s)</td>
<td>- Write real God response to irrational God image automatic thought(s).</td>
<td>- Re-rate belief in irrational God image automatic thought(s), 0 to 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rate 0 to 100%</td>
<td>- Rate belief in irrational God image thought(s), 0 to 100%</td>
<td>- Rate belief in real God response, 0 to 100%</td>
<td>- Specify and rate subsequent feelings, 0 to 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t put much time into that presentation. As a result, they weren’t interested and they didn’t understand me. I was sitting at work and had an angry thought when I was thinking about my pastor and all that he requests of me.</td>
<td>Worthless: 95%</td>
<td>God Image Response: “You always cut corners. You can’t even take the time to put together a decent powerpoint. I am ashamed of you.” 85%</td>
<td>“Sandra, I do not judge you based on your performance. I love you and am proud to be your Father. You are finite and cannot always give 100%.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shameful: 98%</td>
<td>God Image Response: “What’s the matter with you? I’ve made you a leader. You should be grateful. Instead, all you do is have negative thoughts.” 88%</td>
<td>“Sandra, anger is a normal emotion. It is not sinful. You do not have to be ashamed or hide things from me. I love you.”</td>
<td>Belief in God Image Irrational Response: 40%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Degree of Feeling Worthless: 50%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belief in God Image Irrational Response: 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Degree of Feeling Shameful: 55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Parker & Moriarty, What Do We Imagine God to Be?, 260.

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230 Ibid., 261.
Another helpful approach in the therapeutic setting are *schema techniques*. The therapist is looking for recurring clusters of topics and themes in a patient's automatic thoughts. According to Parker and Moriarty, those themes usually are rather vague and defined by single keywords such as ‘stupid’, ‘worthless’, or ‘ugly.’ Furthermore, they follow a if-then pattern: “If I cannot deliver a perfect presentation, then I’m worthless and stupid.” Being driven by demanding themes, people perceive God as constantly evaluating and judging. Since the demands are so radical and general that no single person could ever fulfil them, feelings of failing and disappointing God are inevitable. A way to break away from crushing schemas is seeing them as contracts with God: “One way to change a harmful God image schema is to use the metaphor of ‘contract.’ In this exercise clients identify and then renegotiate their personal ‘contracts’ with God.” The original contract has its roots in early childhood and is shaped by experiences with caregivers and parents which are internalized unconsciously. Later in life, the contractual expectations are simply transferred to God. The important step in therapy is to transform and adapt the contract to a more mature faith and realistic understanding of the individual capacities and possibilities.

Our next approach, based on a paper by Rizzuto, proposes that therapy should create a sacred space in which the client or patient can feel safe and welcome. It will also become evident, that the experience of a welcoming and secure space is, just like the God image, related to earlier memories of safety and comfort.

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231 Cf. Ibid., 261.
232 Ibid., 262.
After Parker and Moriarty’s rather cognitive approach, it seems valuable to focus on more affective elements in therapy that might enable healing. In her Paper *Sacred Space, Analytic Space, the Self, and God*, Ana-María Rizzuto attempts do “document the importance of having an actual sacred space in which one can be oneself in religious life and a psychoanalytic space during treatment to progressively experience oneself.” Her insights are based on clinical material, the case of Ms. G. Ms. G., an attractive and successful woman in her mid-twenties was troubled by loneliness and terror, finding herself incapable of getting fully involved and engaged with other people. Coming from an aristocratic family, both her parents set an example as being ambitious, successful, and superior to others. At the same time, they were committed Christians and active in their community. “G. became the couple’s project to create the perfect child and citizen who would eventually carry on the charge of demonstrating to the world their noble ancestry and superiority. She was to be a model child, competent in every respect, capable of anything demanded of her.” Her father proved to be physically and verbally abusive; G. ultimately became submissive to any form of authority while being constantly “overwhelmed by her personal commitments and her excessive work, accompanied by a constant fear that her efforts and accomplishment were not enough.”

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234 Ibid., 176.
235 Ibid., 176.
While it is not possible to discuss the case of Ms. G. at length, a few aspects deserve our attention. G. had been under constant pressure to perform and be perfect. Her parents had been relentless in their demands. However, Rizzuto managed to identify a few memories in G.’s childhood that offered her some comfort, sacred spaces or relationships that allowed temporary escape from her parents’ demands and wishes. First, there were her maternal grandparents who “had always been very kind and tender with her.”\textsuperscript{236} When being with her grandparents, G. was relieved from having to perform, she felt accepted for who she was. The grandparents’ house was a safe haven, a place of peace and comfort. Second, there was God, who was superior to her parents. It filled G. with joy to see her parents kneeling in church, because she knew that God was above them: “She had been able to form at least one representation of God that extended beyond her parents.”\textsuperscript{237} It does not surprise, thus, that the church became her third refuge where “she cried and cried for long periods of time, feeling that God could tolerate her tears.”\textsuperscript{238} Contrary to her parents, God did not demand of her to perform. G. drew on those experiences and associated them with the therapeutic setting. Rizzuto writes: “Her experiences with her grandparents and their quiet and welcoming house, the church as the quiet house of God, and my quiet office, in my house, as places where there was room for her to be, not just to ‘do’ and perform.”\textsuperscript{239} G.’s God image fortunately was shaped more according to the experiences with her grandparents than her actual parents. There is no doubt for Rizzuto that this “calming and kind God had noticeable human predecessors in her maternal grandparents who had treated her as herself.”\textsuperscript{240} G.’s image of God had assumed the features of her loving and caring grandparents, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 181.
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\item Ibid., 182.
\item Ibid., 184.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
simultaneously G. began to project those “divine” qualities into her therapy and onto her therapist, and Rizzuto states that “her talking to God had much in common with her talking to me.”\textsuperscript{241} The therapist, her grandparents, and God all shared this one feature: they accepted G. unconditionally and without asking anything in return. Rizzuto, however, became aware of how delicate this situation was and how careful she had to be as a therapist. God could not make G. feel less alone, but G. clearly expected Rizzuto to accomplish this task, to help her to not be so alone.\textsuperscript{242} The therapeutic task was now to address and overcome G.’s permanent feelings of loneliness:

I had on my couch this very competent woman whose psychic foundation, her primary level of being, had not been rooted into an emotionally receptive ground. I had to figure out a way of reaching that level by finding an analytic way of working that would permit her to feel for the first time in her life that she was not alone, that she could establish a meaningful emotional contact with me and with people.\textsuperscript{243}

Throughout her entire life, G. had been deeply afraid of making herself known to others, fearing it would destroy her. Rizzuto states: “we came to articulate her dominant unconscious fantasy. G. was convinced that if any real affective contact was made between herself and another person, God and myself included, she would be crushed and destroyed.”\textsuperscript{244} In her past, G. had had almost no secure spaces in which she could be just herself. Particularly with her parents she had not made any experiences of being loved just for being or existing. It was crucial for G. to relive in therapy those psychic processes that had led to her pathology. Rizzuto writes about the final phase of treatment: “She experienced \textit{herself} in my presence in a manner that would have been impossible with her parents. Their

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{242} Cf. Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 186.
parental love had been so deeply colored by the father’s and mother’s narcissistic needs as to make her a trophy for each of them.”

Having experienced the right to be in therapy, G. was capable of accessing herself and consequently establish meaningful relationships. “Now, G. herself, God (the existing God), and myself could be in touch with her.”

The case of G. illustrates powerfully what has been one of the guiding principles in Rizzuto’s Birth of the Living God: self representation and object representation are inseparably linked. The same is true for the God image, it changes according to our own memories and current affective states. Since we all have both positive as well as negative memories and experiences, our God image can be quite ambivalent. Rizzuto depicts this in the case of G.: “When the frequently sadistic paternal relationship prevailed in the transference, G. declared she did not believe in God and feared punishment … Sometime G. believed in God, sometime, she did not. When the grandparents, as a loving couple, dominated the analytic moment, her belief returned and the transference had a tender and benign feeling.”

What helped G. was understanding and experiencing that she was wanted and accepted, quite unconditionally: “The experience of being physically and psychically in a sacred space can only occur when the individual’s personal needs and self-understanding converge with the conception of a divinity that can accept them.”

This ‘aura’ or atmosphere of acceptance can occur between therapist and client. For Rizzuto, both the sacred space of religious feelings as well as the analytic space of therapy are affective spaces. The analyst’s words can only reach a patient if they are credible and can be believed.

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245 Ibid., 187.
246 Ibid., 187.
247 Ibid., 185.
248 Ibid., 187.
The therapists sympathy and acceptance must be felt and experienced in order to be healing. In this sense, both religion and therapy contain a crucial existential element: “Faith and psychoanalysis belong to the area of being, not to the territory of doing, as sometimes both, religion and treatment, may erroneously lead us to believe.”

Into a similar direction heads Matthias Beier in his essay On Being Wanted to Exist: A Spiritual Dimension in Pastoral Counseling and Psychoanalysis, where he incorporates thoughts and theories of Freud, Winnicott, but also from Martin Buber’s significant piece I and thou, and, above all, Eugen Drewermann.

The Right to Be: An Existential Approach

Beier’s basic premise is, that patients who seek the help of a counselor or psychoanalyst are, among other things, looking for a positive affirmation of their existence. Beier stresses, just like Rizzuto, that any patient has a need to feel “that the counselor or analyst truly wants the patient to exist as a person in her or his own right.” Neither patient nor analyst are mere objects, both are subject and object at the same time and need to be regarded as such. It is the analyst in particular who must be subject and object for the patient, for only a subject can bestow another person with the feeling of being wanted: “No object can want. Only a subject can want.” Just to be an object – or selfobject – oftentimes is insufficient, the object must become a subject in order to infuse a person with the kind of

249 Ibid., 188.
251 Ibid., 705.
affirmation, love, and approval that is needed. Now, if it is God of whom a patient is desiring affirmation and love, we must inevitably encounter certain difficulties as long as we speak of mere images or concepts, since they will never turn into useful subjects. Beier therefore speaks of “images of God which point indeed to the reality of God.”\textsuperscript{252} However, he is well aware that the notion of a divine reality transcends conventional psychoanalytical concepts of objects. Drawing on philosophy and existential psychology, Beier introduces us to a different concept, namely the “spirit” or the “self”.\textsuperscript{253} This human spirit “reflects on whether its unique existence as a whole is ultimately valuable and meaningful. Questions of ultimate value and meaning are always present when a patient deals with whether she or he wants to live or die or whether he or she feels wanted to exist or not.”\textsuperscript{254} The spirit reflecting existential issues is prone to generalizing random statements or occurrences and can therefore put in question the entire existence of a human being. As important as these existential questions raised by the human spirit might be, they can also gain a demonic life of their own if they are blown out of proportion. After all, there is a chance to answer personal existential questions not only life-affirming but also condemning, judging, and ultimately destructive. Borrowing from S\o{}ren Kierkegaard and Eugen Drewermann, Matthias Beier names four existential despairs resulting from pondering those grave issues: despair of infinity, finitude, possibility, and necessity.\textsuperscript{255} At this point Beier links his own reasoning with Drewermann’s, when he understands the four despairs resulting in the four diseases mentioned earlier, namely obsessive-compulsive neurosis, hysteria, depression, and schizoid personality. These disorders are consequences of relentless and negative existential

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 706.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 707.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 707.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 707.
questioning. In his essay, Beier restricts himself to a depiction of the case of depression, in which the spirit usually infinitizes the value and significance of contextual critical statements or judgements to the result that the depressive person feels herself challenged in her very existence by this god-like internal voice. When doubt is cast on the value and worth of a person, the regular reaction is overcompensation; meaninglessness and insignificance are met with the desire to please everybody’s demands and desires, to satisfy the ever demanding internal God. It is crucial to Beier’s and Drewermann’s understanding that the patient eventually puts himself in the position of God, he must become God-like in order to meet all requests and expectations. Out of fear to be regarded a failure, the depressive person must reach a divine infallibility: “Er muss, wie Gott, allverantwortlich, allwissend, allgegenwärtig und allmächtig sein.” Not being affirmed in one’s right to exist and to be has the exact same effect as the anxiety and fear depicted by Drewermann. In both cases, existential doubt will unconsciously fret the human being until overcompensation leads to a sickening mental overload.

The affirmation of unconditional love and acceptance as a healing path is labelled by Beier simply as grace: “When the pastoral counselor takes the attitude of wanting the person of the patient to exist, the counselor expresses what theology calls grace, God’s unconditional acceptance of every human being independent of their doing.” The fundamental trust into one’s right to exist and the inherent goodness of one’s life express a subtle form of faith. Such faith is elaborated and fostered in the therapeutic work, between patient and therapist and “whenever a true meeting between I-Thou takes place, the counselor or analyst may hold that God is addressed in that both parties experience the

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256 “Much like God, he must be all-responsible, all-knowing, omnipresent, and all-powerful.” Drewermann, Angst und Schuld, 151.
257 Matthias Beier, Pastoral Psychology, 709.
infinite through their real and whole encounter, the ultimate creative ground of which is that reality which faith calls God.”258 God, therefore, is something that is experienced when recognition and insight of being accepted are fully realized within the therapeutic setting.

258 Ibid., 709.
Conclusions

At the very beginning of this thesis stood the notion, that psychology might be useful for theology – not only in regards to the practical field of pastoral care, but perhaps to the entire enterprise of biblical exegesis and God talk. We began by studying the human being and his faith from the perspective of psychology, and we continued by doing the same from the perspective of theology, including biblical scriptures. By employing both, psychoanalytical and theological reflections we discovered a need for life-affirming, empowering, and benevolent God images. This need, supported by the works of Drewermann, Beier, Ellens, Johnson and so many others, was backed up by substantial psychological research. The ongoing task will be to implement and elaborate benevolent God images in sermons and teachings as well as pastoral care and therapy. Wherever people despair because of their faith, the task will be to offer them ways towards a God image that embraces, loves, and forgives – unconditionally.

Some might claim that the God image I have been promoting through this paper is a toothless idol, a transitional object indeed, not much different from a blanket or a teddy bear, having the sole function of comforting and reassuring. They may say that the God I am proclaiming is a feel good deity, an elaborated pacifier that does neither challenge nor question the human ways, incapable of encouraging growth in character and morality. My answer to all those objections is that any kind of growth, maturation, or development needs a solid foundation. No one builds a house on sand. Any child needs to feel safe, accepted, wanted, and embraced in order to develop a strong self capable of facing the challenges
posed by existence. The relationship between the human child and the divine mother is no difference. There is no growth without acceptance and love first. The irony is, as many of the vignettes in this paper demonstrated, that growth and development is precisely inhibited and stalled when believers suffer from oppressive, judging, insatiable God images. Growth in autonomy and responsibility comes from encouragement, not under threat of punishment. Once a stable and accepting relationship with God is established, there is room for struggles, debates, and challenges. But first, certain God images deserve to vanish and die.

I would like to recall a notion in Drewermann’s theology that was discussed in one of the preceding chapters. In it, Drewermann compared the human being under the spell of sin to a neurotic person, who needs the help from a therapist to relive the traumatic event and thereby overcoming it. It was also mentioned that Drewermann identifies the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the son of God as such a cathartic moment. Perhaps we could dare a careful comparison between what happens during crucifixion and in therapy which addresses cruel and oppressive God images. Letting go of previous unhealthy God images is perhaps a form of killing or destroying a certain idea of God. As Loewald put it, the metaphorical killing of the parents is an emancipatory act that can allow a new relationship at a later stage. Maybe it is mentally healthy to tear down certain God images in order to rebuild a mature, even more equal relationship with God father and God mother. The therapeutic approaches we discussed in this chapter certainly all contain a violent component, and be it just the strenuous letting go of a certain ideas of and relationship with God. Even stepping out of a harmful relationship can be emotionally painful.

I was wondering if perhaps concrete and emotional accusations of God might not sometimes enable a process of rebuilding a new relationship or changing one’s image of God. The whole point of this might be to encourage people to challenge God, a notion
unfortunately not very popular in Christianity. There often is a one-sided emphasis on giving God glory by complete submission of one’s own life and will under hers. I think this concept runs counter to the basic concept of faith. In an interview with the *Times of Israel*, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach shared his thoughts on Darren Aronofsky’s movie *Noah*, explaining why Noah is to him neither a hero nor a great leader:

He failed in the greatest mission of all. He failed to protect human life. And failed to fight with God when he wanted to take human life. He refuses to wrestle with God. Noah is a fundamentalist. He’s a religious extremist. God says “everyone will die” and Noah says nothing. But this is not what God wants. God wants people with moxie! God wants people with spiritual audacity! He does not want the obedient man of belief. He wants the defiant man of faith."259

To struggle and fight with one’s God image is essential to faith. This also means to confront difficult aspects of God. I could imagine that the integration of so called protest or process theology into pastoral care might prove useful in overcoming damaging God images. Protest theology attempts to “protest against the silence and inaction of God, to remind God of the promises of the covenant even though God seems to have forgotten them. The reality that faith confronts forces it to ‘put God on trial,’ to be ‘for God by being against God.’”260 Such concepts can be altered or elaborated to fit therapeutic efforts. It seems valid to me to be *for* God by destroying certain images of him. I think the entire process of letting specific unhealthy God images go is emotionally highly charged and more than a mere intellectual or cognitive exercise, there must be room for anger and frustration with God as well. It would be interesting to see further research in the field of translating theoretical concepts such as protest theology into the practical setting of pastoral care.

The last words should be words of caution and food for thought. I have been using words such as ‘healing’, ‘well-being,’ or ‘mental health’ without ever establishing what it precisely means to be healed, to be ‘normal.’ It was naturally assumed that people who suffer from certain issues such as anxieties, tensions, and discontents must be cured from such maladies. The entire notion of mental health contains the problematic preconceived notion that there is a broad consent on what is healthy and what is not. Such notions of objective mental health have been challenged particularly by those who regarded psychoanalysis as a tool for critical social theory rather than individual healing. One of those proponents of critical theory was Herbert Marcuse, who pointed out that Sigmund Freud himself “recognized the ‘general unhappiness’ of society as the unsurpassable limit of cure and normality.”

According to Freud there truly is a certain ineradicable unease in every individual that is forced to oscillate between drive satisfaction and civilization. What some might judge as Freudian pessimism could also be described as mere realism: that there is a “basic unchangeability of human nature.” The individual will always stand in a certain opposition to society, as critical psychoanalysis does acknowledge. Marcuse is critical of all the post-Freudian schools that emphasize in an idealistic, to him also ideological way, human creativity and power to reinvent the self. On first sight this approach might seem more optimistic and positive, although it could come at a great price. If the patient’s happiness is the only goal to be achieved, therapy is forced to keep tensions and unease with society at a minimum by encouraging the patient to fully adapt to society – even if said society is oppressive and unjust, and the patient’s anxieties are well founded. As Marcuse writes, “the affirmative attitude toward the claim for happiness then becomes practicable

262 Ibid., 238
only if happiness and the ‘productive development of the personality’ are redefined so that they become compatible with the prevailing values, that is to say, if they are internalized and idealized.”263 Simply put, happiness is achieved if the patient is transformed into a perfect citizen who makes a society’s values his own. Obviously, this approach leaves no more room for critical theory. Above all, this situation puts both, the therapist as well as the chaplain or pastor, into a highly difficult position, since “the analyst, as a physician, must accept the social framework of facts in which the patient has to live and which he cannot alter.”264 I do not want to elaborate on Herbert Marcuse’s notions here, but to read *Eros and Civilization* is certainly a worthwhile enterprise for everyone entering any healing profession. The conundrum of wanting to help clients while trying to preserve their individual identity without just assimilating them to society cannot be escaped. Do we have to choose between the two alternatives, using our psychoanalytical skills either for critical theory or complicity? Probably both aspects deserve attention and have their place in modern civilizations. In the best case, I assume, those who treat patients are aware of the conundrum and proceed with caution, not trusting simple solutions that promise quick fixes and everlasting happiness. Perhaps much is gained if a patient feels taken seriously when confessing anxieties and tensions, and if the therapist can help bear this burden rather than shake it off.

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263 Ibid., 245.
264 Ibid., 247.
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