

# ‘I do not have such a belief myself’

## An interview with Otto Kernberg on psychoanalysis, religion and belief in a personal God

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In September 2017, we had the opportunity to interview dr. Otto Kernberg on his views about psychoanalysis and religion. Dr. Kernberg was one of the experts present at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Society for the Study of Personality Disorders (ISSPD) in Heidelberg. At the age of 89, his influence and importance in the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy is widely recognized. Since the 1960’s, his extensive theoretical and empirical work has integrated psychoanalytic perspectives with descriptive and biological approaches. In particular, he is one of the main figures in the field of borderline and narcissistic psychopathology. His writings on religion and spirituality (2000, 2008, 2010) are of relatively recent date and seem to be less well-known. Dr. Kernberg is critical of Sigmund Freud’s position on religion, while also affirming and elaborating on Freud. In this respect, his work is reminiscent of the writings of Ana-Maria Rizzuto and William Meissner, psychoanalysts whose work is more well-known in the psychology of religion and among those working with religious patients. The interviewers conduct psychotherapy with religious (Christian) patients and are researchers in the field of psychology and religion, with a focus on God representations. Heidelberg proved to be a fitting location for the interview, as in 1563 a Catechism that has been influential in the Reformation and churches springing from it, was published here.

*Dr. Kernberg, it seems to us that you have a great respect for the world’s religious expressions. Could you mention any religious writers or figures, that have been important to your formulations regarding religion, or to you personally?*

In my views about religion, I have not been influenced directly by any great writer. In concrete issues about spirituality, I have been influenced by writers. [Martin] Buber influenced me in my respect for the spiritual dimension of relationships, and the value system involved in respect for other individuals. Respect for individuals not only as individuals, but as spiritual beings that can reflect – often without being aware of it – a general value system. C.S. Lewis’ (1961) book about mourning has had an important influence on me, in particular when I read it in the middle of a mourning process of my own. Personal influences have been more important than readings in that regard. I trained in Chile, South America, then became professor in the school of psychology of the Catholic University. Its director Father Hernán Larraín was an important leader of Chilean Catholic intellectual movement. He became a very close friend, and influenced me personally. In spite of the fact of my being a Jew. I’m Jewish by background, but I never received a dimension of spiritual education from my parents except for maintaining myself within rituals and feasts. And of course, one very positive aspect of the Jewish religion is the tremendous sense of community. The expression of

faith in God, prayer, is collective. In order to organize a prayer, a minimum of ten adult men have to be present. This indicates a kind of community setting which I think is a great value of Jewish religious tradition. But I did not get the more intellectual aspects of it. I got that much later from discussions, particularly with orthodox rabbis. I have found them more interested in these issues than the very practically oriented, reformist ones. Manfred Lütz is a German psychiatrist, director of Alexianer hospital in Cologne, and also a Catholic theologian. He has been influencing me, we have been good friends for years. He has a book about the history of atheism (Lütz, 2007) that deals with issues of faith, that I found very thought-provoking.

## *In our mutual relationships we get activated in an understanding of general, moral values*

### *Spirituality and moral values*

Again, throughout time I have reached a sense – and I’ve written very little about religion, but it’s a personal conviction – that in our mutual relationships we activate or get activated in an understanding of general, moral values. Moral values that don’t have immediate instrumental implications in day-to-day life, but that become fundamental imperatives. The sense of love, goodness, loyalty, of reconciliation. Speaking of reconciliation, the acknowledgement of the negative, hostile and aggressive aspects of one’s own behavior and experience, and the need to repair potential damage done, of forgiveness of damage done by others. I think within psychoanalysis, the Kleinian approach to the depressive position implies that recognition of aggression in oneself, and the need to redeem oneself. The need of personal redemption, I think of it as an emotion, has profound religious and spiritual implications.

### *God and the meaning of existence*

Of course, when we talk about religion, we talk immediately about relationship to God. That means: a higher entity, a higher intelligence that rules the uni-

verse as opposed to the total senselessness of existence, of reality. The fact that the universe, whatever the evolutionary process is, is organized so intelligently, speaks for a principle of higher intelligence beyond our capability of comprehension. So we can approach, by means of science, more and more understanding of how this intelligence – expressed in the laws of nature – works. But not the ultimate reason or conditions or existence of that superior intelligence. My thought is that one could argue that humans have evolved a unique intelligent understanding of the world, that is a limited understanding of the world. Limited clearly by our, by the very development of science that shows that we understand more and more, we know more and more, come to know more and more, we come understand about the intelligence of systems that go beyond our reach. So the idea that we have created the idea of God – period – doesn’t answer the question of an ultimate intelligence. Is there – personified – an entity, an ultimate intelligence that observes the development of the world? that relates to humans as a God who is concerned about individuals, a God to whom we pray? That seems to me to be problematic. I don’t know. My first wife Paulina, who died eleven years ago, was very concerned with this question. She thought God existed but that he was indifferent to humans. That was her basic position. I don’t know, but I feel that there is an imperative for moral action and that there is a spiritual world that we can aspire to. If we reach that, it enriches life and gives us a sense of responsibility. It is about the capacity for repair, reconciliation, forgiveness, and love itself. I think that the people who believe in God have a grace, that it is a strength of spiritual determination to have a realistic relation to a higher entity that dictates personal morality. I don’t have such a belief in a personal God, but I admire and respect people who have it. It’s a grace. It’s a state of grace.

### *Religion and aggression*

All value systems may be contaminated by aggression. And so, our very spirituality is not free from being contaminated with aggression. Which leads to the negative issues with religion, and the terrible things that can be done in the name of religion. It is very

important to free religious convictions from that contamination. I think that there are basic belief systems that protect the humanistic essence of religion; which is the respect for the individual, the opposition to aggression, to damage, to murder. I have been interested in the psychology of the Ten Commandments. A French [psycho]analyst, Chasseguet-Smirgel (cf. 1984) – if you are familiar with her work – has written about that. We were very close. I think that the Ten Commandments contain two basic, absolutely fundamental rules: against murder and against incest. Against attack on others and against infringing the rights of private sexual love life, that shouldn't be destroyed, interfered with and degraded. As some religions do it. It seems to me that there is an element of degrading women in Islamic religion, which is a major aggressive infiltration. At least as much as I get to know it. There may be other strands, there may be trends in Islamic religion that don't participate in that, but it certainly is an important feature. There is practically none of this in contemporary Christian belief, and only some aggression against women in some extreme religious Jewish sects – talking about major religions.

*Might there be some parallels between orthodox forms of the Jewish and Christian religions? A study by our colleagues (Eurelings-Bontekoe & Luyten, 2010) suggests that Orthodox-Reformed patients with borderline personality organization show less impulsivity (possibly because of social control). It has been suggested in the literature that among religious orthodox groups there is a repression of sexuality and aggression, and of women.*

Yeah, sure, a kind of particular, moralistic constraining of women has existed traditionally in Christianity and in Judaism. In Christianity it has mostly been abandoned, mostly it only remains in small sects. I mean, if I think of contemporary Protestant and Catholic thinking, it recognizes the equal rights of women. There is a current within Catholic religion that permits women to become priests and officiate religious services. The restriction on nuns and women who retire from ordinary life, the sexual restrictions that also operate on men, I think that these are remnants of psychological inhibitions infiltrating religion. Realistically, religion tries to protect the intimacy and the privacy of the

couple. I think the stress on marriage is a very positive aspect of both Christian and Jewish religion. Now in Jewish religion, there are orthodox groups, rules and regulations, that severely limit women. And I think these are problematic. So, nobody is free of that. And of course, even the acceptance of aggression within Jewish orthodoxy. When a son abandons the religion, the parents declare him to be dead. This is at least a symbolic expression of aggression and intolerance.

*Sometimes the religious group and personal religious experience helps to hinder antisocial behavior and contribute to some recovery, among patients with an antisocial personality who have converted to God. One of our patients lived in a religious community for several years. From time to time he is still inclined towards antisocial behavior. However, he says: my faith does not allow me to do these things. I am part of a religious community, God is with me. Have you encountered this in your practice?*

*I think that the people who believe in God have a grace*

Several issues come to mind about that. One is that, yes, religious education reduces antisocial behavior. In the United States, it has been my impression that if children of socially disadvantaged groups, children of impoverished blacks in the center of big cities, have the luck to be in the Catholic school system, they have less antisocial behavior than the same youngsters that are in public educational institutions, that don't consider religion as an aspect of the education of children. So that, clearly, community and being part of a community that accepts general religious value systems, reduces antisocial behavior, and probably prevents it in disturbed adolescence. That's one point. Second is that, in truly antisocial personality disorder, in contrast to antisocial behavior in other personality disorders, antisocial behavior usually shows up regardless. It overruns any educational effort. That is one limit. The other thing I want to mention is that patients with borderline personality organization, with severe personality disorders characterized by splitting mechanisms and projective

identification, may tolerate antisocial behavior in spite of their being part of a severely religiously oriented social group. I have seen extremely religious people behave antisocially in a dissociated or split-off way. In Chile I have treated Catholic priests who would have sex with little girls, while at the same time having a profound, honest conviction of their religion. You know about all the scandals of homosexual seduction. I am not criticizing homosexual orientation and behavior in priests, but the seduction of children, yes! I have seen rabbis who are totally unethical in their business dealings. Who are very engaged in severe antisocial behavior, chronically, without seeing that in conflict with their other convictions. So, this is an indication of severe personality disorder.

*According to you, religious education is not very strong to hinder that type of behavior, if there is an antisocial personality disorder?*

If there is antisocial personality proper. But, the diagnosis of antisocial personality proper is a very specific diagnosis I make.

*So, this patient might exhibit antisocial behavior, but not the antisocial personality proper?*

Yeah, sure. Yeah.

*There is evidence (cf. Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016) to suggest that some persons with insecure attachment representations, might experience secure attachment in their perceived relationship with God. In clinical practice we have heard patients with severe, even psychotic, psychopathology speak of experiencing comfort and stability in their relationship with God.*

Yes, I think that even psychotic patients may maintain behavior that is within moral limits, that it reflects their profound convictions of moral value systems, in spite of particular delusional systems that affect them. And of course, delusional systems express severe aggression. And these patients may develop delusional rationalizations for which they have to act and kill, to prevent that others be killed. And that, of course, signifies serious distortion of religion because of unacknowledged, enacted, severe aggression. But you can no longer hope for or expect a realistic attitude or value system of somebody who has no reality testing.

So, I think that psychotic patients cannot avoid that their value system will be distorted and contaminated by delusion formation.

*I think the stress of a punishing God is a more primitive view of God, highly contaminated by aggressive tendencies projected onto the Deity*

*Some say the defense mechanism of splitting is involved. God is safe, all-good, as opposed to the devil. Or, the God representation is split into a good part, and another part of God who has predestined many people to hell, leading to fear of death.*

Yeah. Well, the very notion of hell implies savage punishment, which is a projection of human aggression. In a way this is contrary to the concept of a God who is a God of love and forgiveness. I think the stress of a punishing God is a more primitive view of God, highly contaminated by aggressive tendencies projected onto the Deity. The images that humans have had of God, have evolved with the evolution of human beings. Polytheistic religions simply transferred unto the gods all the positive and negative characteristics of humans. Gods who were envious, jealous, fighting each other. Then, with monotheism, came an integrated concept of God which reflected an awareness of an integrated, universally valid spiritual reality (cf. Kernberg, 2000). And that has slowly been evolving. But still, and first infiltrated for the projection of God as having that quality of judging severely and cruelly, condemning some people eternally to hell. I think that that is still a primitive aspect within the development of religious convictions.

*Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) suggests that we all have God images, influenced by our education and psychological makeup. This creates a God object relation which always goes along with us. Do you believe in such a psychological concept of God behind the universal religious question? A God image which in some cases we might have to work on in psychotherapy?*

Yes, it originates in one's object relations. But as it

becomes more and more a relation to abstract concepts and abstract value systems, it transcends an object relationship. It's a new dimension that humans discover throughout life. The relationship to God, for those who believe in God, starts out as an object relation, and gradually becomes a more abstract, general one. I had a patient, an engineer, who had the very concrete fantasy, that every time he masturbated God was getting sad. He had an image of God, who all day was watching who would be masturbating. He only gradually got himself out of that. I had another patient, a psychiatrist with an obsessive-compulsive personality. He was one of the psychiatrists who were used by the church with individuals who proclaim having perceived miracles or been part of miracles. The Church has to decide: has this been a miracle, or has this been a psychotic phenomenon? Is this an ill person? So they used psychiatrists. And my patient was one of the psychiatrists with that function. And, when he started out the treatment he had the concrete conviction that Satan, the devil, would infiltrate people to control them from the inside. He believed that concretely. It was a belief that came from his childhood. Throughout the treatment he became aware that aggression was a biological and psychological predisposition of human beings. That one then connected with religion, but that really had [other] sources and couldn't be traced back to an external enemy trying to poison one's mind. He recognized it as being part of himself. So there you see. At the same time, he recognized that by the very fact that our biology predisposes us to love and hatred, it makes us the scenario of a struggle between good and evil. There is where moral values help us, help the good in human beings in spite of our profound ambivalences. A universal value system of what is good helps survival and giving sense to life. So this was the evolution that my patient made.

*You say psychotherapy helps people to evolve in a religious direction, it helps to change religious images?*

Sure, it influences it. I think that psychoanalytic treatment helps people modify their relation to religion. I think psychoanalysts are not spiritual counsellors.

*No. That's what we say to our patients.*

Yeah, yeah.

*What can be said about countertransference issues in treating religious patients? Even if a therapist is not practicing a religion (anymore), his or her personal history with religion might still influence their approach of the patient.*

Why should that be a problem? I don't quite understand. Can you give me an example of what you have in mind?

*Patients come to our institution because we have an expertise in the area of psychiatry/ psychology and religion, we do research. Some tell of experiences in previous treatment situations, where they will have brought up their spirituality or their struggles in relation to God, only to have been told that their religion is the problem. "You just need to get rid of religion, if you stop going to church you will become healthier." This does seem to happen from time to time.*

I am very critical of that. I think that therapists should respect religious conviction. They should analyze whatever aggressive distortion exists, but not the religious system. I am very critical of that old-fashioned attitude in psychoanalysis that says that religion is always a remnant of an infantile neurosis. I am dead set against that! Totally opposed to that. I wouldn't try to induce religious convictions in a patient nor take that away. I would only look at whatever misuse of religion, and I would expect that with treatment patients should acquire a higher capacity for religious experience.

*Is it only a question of conviction, or do these psychotherapists have to work on their images of religion in their own training psychotherapy too?*

Psychotherapists should learn not to impose their own value systems on their patients.

*I would expect that with treatment patients should acquire a higher capacity for religious experience*

*Sometimes when treatment effects changes in patients' religiosity or spirituality – when they experience an increase of trust in their relationship with God or feel more free – we as*

therapists can also experience such developments with a kind of wonder. This seems to be a different level than the psychological domain. There can be a resonance with the therapist's spirituality.

Well, if patients change in their religious domain, that means change in their value system, or in their relationship to their own value system, I would respect that. I would not see it as a task for me to influence that. I see my task of resolving the unconscious conflicts, [patient's] inhibitions, their problems in relating to self and to others, and I would expect that they would acquire greater freedom in their value system. Greater freedom to develop the spiritual dimension of their existence.

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