

**Theses of PhD dissertation**

**THE COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF GOD  
REPRESENTATION**

Robu Magda

Supervisor: Dr. Pék Győző



University of Debrecen

Doctoral School of Human Sciences

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## **1. The goal of the dissertation**

The relationship between religiousness and mental health or psychological wellbeing has been a controversial field of psychological research since the emergence of psychology as an individual field of study. For example Freud refers to religion as an illusion that was created by humans in order to control their instincts and to defeat their fear of the forces of nature, and of which they should be set free. James speaks about healthy and ill religiousness. Jung, also a psychoanalytic psychologist, states that religion is a psychological reality and that every person has to take stand regarding it, and that neuroses are caused by not taking stand regarding this issue. Contemporary psychology is just as divided too. Albert Ellis spoke about religion as institutionalized irrationality that has harmful effects on psychological functioning. Meanwhile several researchers have proved that religiousness is positively related to different aspects of mental health. And several decades later even Ellis admitted, based on his therapeutic experience, that it could be benefic to integrate the religious beliefs of the client in the process of rational-emotive behavior therapy.

The dissertation aims to examine a slice of this complex relationship, namely the relationship between God image (or God representation) and psychological wellbeing, since for the religious person the quality of his/her relationship with God defined as a person is a central aspect of the religious experience.

Our goal was to grab the relationship between God image and mental health in a frame that can bring up gains for both pastoral counseling and psychotherapy. This is why we decided to use the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) founded by Albert Ellis. Although this is mainly a therapeutic paradigm, its theoretical background can give pragmatic foundation and well-defined frames to our research too. Although in earlier phases of his work Ellis repeatedly had an anti-religious attitude, later in his practice he addressed the issue of “healthy” and “pathogenic” (in his words rational and irrational) aspects of religiousness. REBT makes it possible to grab and examine God representations in a simple, well-defined and empiric frame.

### **God representation**

Rizzuto defined the term God concept as cognitive, produced by thoughts, the “God of the theologians”. It has few emotional components and is the result of theological and philosophical thought and learning. It is acquired through catechesis and is conscious. On the other hand, God images form on the ground of early interpersonal relationships, are

dominated by emotional components, are the products of the inner experiences of the child and often they are unconscious. This is why often the God concept and the God image of a person can be contradictory: consciously one thinks that God is loving, merciful but has the feeling that God will punish him/her and experiences fear. God representation is in the understanding of Rizzuto the combination of God concept and God image.

The forming of God representation starts with birth and its development continues throughout the life. In childhood the main mechanism of its formation is the projection of the parents' images to God, later it comes into view through coping with the accidental and normative crises of one's life. God representation is unique because it isn't based on concrete, physical experiences, this way why it can be easily distorted.

### **Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy**

REBT is part of the broad group of cognitive therapies. Albert Ellis started to state his own theses up against psychoanalysis in the '50-s. He starts with the statement that humans are the most happy when they have important goals and strive actively to achieve them. In this frame rationality concerns all those thoughts, behaviors, feelings, attitudes that help the person to achieve these goals, while irrationality concerns all those thoughts, behaviors, feelings, attitudes that prevent him/her in achieving them.

When one feels impeded in achieving his/her goals, he/she chooses more or less consciously between the possible "healthy" or "unhealthy" responses. If one has a basically rational belief system, he/she will be able to mobilize attitudes, life philosophies that will help him/her to cope with these impediments, and reacts with so-called "healthy" negative emotions. But if one has a basically irrational belief-system, he/she will react with absolutistic, "dogmatic" thoughts to this impediment, that are expressed in the form of "should"-s, "must"-s. These lead to "unhealthy" emotional responses (depression, anxiety, anger, jealousy) that undermine the coping abilities of the person and can lead to behaviors like retreat, procrastination, alcoholism etc.

According to the famous A-B-C model of REBT it is not the activating event (A) itself that leads to emotional or behavioral consequence (C), but the thoughts, beliefs (B) that the person links to this event. REBT describes 4 core irrational beliefs (demandingness, awfullizing, low frustration tolerance and global evaluation of the human worth) and also presents their rational equivalent (wishes, anti-awfullizing, high frustration tolerance and unconditional self-acceptance).

According to the A-B-C model, behind every emotion there is also a belief: rational beliefs have healthy consequences while irrational beliefs have unhealthy consequences.

### **Goals of the study**

The goal of the dissertation is to examine whether the use of the paradigmatic frame of REBT brings us closer to understanding the complex relationship of God representation and mental health and to understanding certain aspects of healthy religiousness.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Irrational attitudes regarding an event in the past lead to bigger distress and to diminished psychological wellbeing.
2. Mature religious attitudes (intrinsic, committed, symbolically interpreting, identified) are associated with rational beliefs, while the immature ones (extrinsic, less committed, literally interpreting, introjected) are associated with irrational beliefs.
3. The content of one's God representation is related to his/her religious maturity.
4. Linking the content of God representations to rational beliefs leads to higher religious maturity.
5. The more negative content one's God representation has, the higher psychological distress he/she experiences.
6. Rational and irrational beliefs influence the relationship between God representations and psychological distress.

## **2. Study 1**

The goal of Study 1 was to develop and test a scale for the measurement of God representation in a rational-emotive perspective.

### **Sample**

The people involved in the study were recruited with the involvement of students from different Hungarian and Transylvanian higher education institutions.

A total of 179 persons filled out the questionnaire: 70 men (mean age 25,07 years, SD 9,15) and 109 women (mean age 22,95 years, SD 4,58). The youngest respondent was 17 years old, the oldest 82.

## **Methods**

One of the scales used in REBT, the „Rational and Irrational Beliefs Scale – General Format” was the base for the development of the Rational and Irrational Beliefs about God scale. To each of the 8 items taken over from the original scale, we attached 8 items that describe one of the 8 “healthy” or “demonic” images of God described by Frielingsdorf. We tried to word each statement in a way that doesn’t contradict beliefs acquired through religious socialization, don’t bring about automatic rejection even in the case of negative content. The scale consisted of 4 rational and 4 irrational beliefs that had to be rated on a 7 point Likert scale by the respondents. Each rational/irrational belief was followed by 8 statements about God with the following instruction: “Now, justify your previous answer using the following points of view. I answered this way because I feel that ...”. 4 items contained positive and 4 negative statements about God.

Some other scales were also part of our questionnaire: The Age Universal I-E Scale that measures religiousness motivated intrinsically, by personal (extrinsic personal) or social (extrinsic social) gains; the Christian Religious Internalization Scale that examines the integration of religious behavior according to the self-determination theory; and finally the Satisfaction with Life Scale.

## **Results**

In the case of the subscale measuring rational and irrational beliefs we found three subscales through principal component analysis. Global evaluation of human worth and its rational counterpart, unconditional self-acceptance loaded on a separate factor, that is why we created a separate subscale for them named Global evaluation. From the point of view of the psychology of religion, it is important, that the global evaluation of human worth appeared on a separate subscale, since global evaluation is the irrational belief that could be the background of distorted (demonic in the words of Frielingsdorf) God representations.

The relationship between different aspects of religiousness and the content of the God representations were in concordance with our expectations: the positive ones related to the more mature, the negative ones to the more immature religious forms.

Table 1: *The standardized regression coefficients of positive and negative God representations and variables of religiousness and the change of the coefficient of determination. Significant values are in bold. (\*  $p = 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0,01$ ). The relationship was controlled for the effect of age, gender, education, positive and negative emotions, other variables of religiousness and rational/irrational/global evaluation beliefs.*

	introjected r.		identified r.		intrinsic v.		extrinsic pers.		extrinsic social	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
pos. God repr.	<b>-0,233*</b>	0,083	<b>0,226*</b>	0,025	<b>0,252*</b>	0,061	0,155	0,027	-0,221	0,024
neg. God repr.	<b>0,392**</b>		-0,152		<b>-0,330**</b>		0,071		0,163	

We also examined whether the relationship between the content of the God representations and the different indicators of religiousness is modified by the maturity of thinking (rationality, irrationality, global evaluation). Our most important result was the moderating effect of global evaluation on the relationship between negative God representations and different indicators of religiousness (see figures 1 and 2).

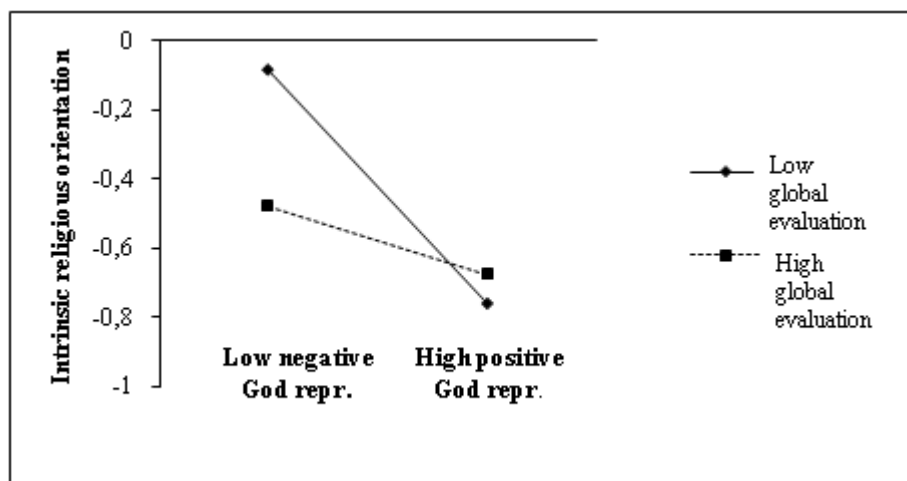


Figure 1: *The expected values of intrinsic religious orientation as a function of negative God representations and global evaluation beliefs. High and Low values: values 1 SD above and below the mean.*

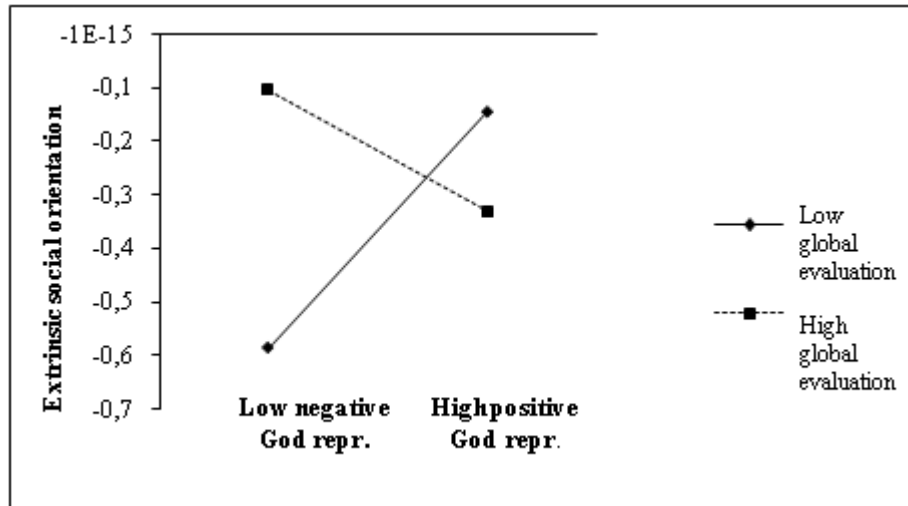


Figure 2: *The expected values of extrinsic social religious orientation as a function of negative God representations and global evaluation beliefs. High and Low values: values 1 SD above and below the mean.*

With a low level of global evaluation the relationship between the variables were in accordance with our hypotheses: the strengthening of negative God representations is associated with the decrease of intrinsic religious orientation and the increase of extrinsic social religious orientation. But with high levels of global evaluation this relationship is no longer observable, or has even turned around. That is, in the case of judgmental people or the ones who can't unconditionally accept themselves, the relationship between negative God representations and religious attitudes seems to change.

Such a connection of global evaluation and negative God representations can be explained by the fact that judgments towards the self, the absence of unconditional self-acceptance lead to the projection of the same kind of attitude to God: expectations, judgments, criticism, conditional acceptance etc. Information about God is often vague, so the person interprets it according to the way he/she thinks about himself/herself and emphasizes the circumstances that are in accordance with these schemas.

Our interpretations are limited by the fact that our questionnaire didn't have any questions about the self-rated religiosity of the respondents, so we have no information whether the agreement with the positive God representation items is more than a simple measure of religiosity.

### **3. Study 2**

The goal of Study 2 was to nuance the results of Study 1 and to examine the complex relationship between God representation, the maturity of thinking (rational/irrational beliefs), religiousness and well/being (hypotheses 5, 6, and 7).

#### **Sample**

294 people filled out our online survey, 80 men (mean age 33,66 years, SD 14,08) and 214 women (mean age 29,5 years, SD 10,71). The youngest respondent was 15 years old, the oldest 72.

69,4% of the respondents were Roman Catholic, 17,3% Calvinist, 1% Lutheran, 5,4% belonged to other Christian denominations (Unitarian, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist etc.), 1% belonged to other religious groups, 3,1% were religious but not belonging to any denomination, 2% were non religious.

67% practice their religion regularly in their denomination, 11,9% practice their religion seldom but in their denomination, 16,3% are religious in their own way, 1,4% don't practice their religion and 2,4% stated that they are not religious at all.

#### **Methods**

Study 2 was carried out online, and the methodology of filling the scales was slightly different: the respondents had to click on a band that recorded the grade of their agreement with the item on a 100 point scale.

Psychological distress and wellbeing were measured by the Spielberger Trait Anxiety Scale, Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Hopelessness Scale and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

For the measurement of different aspects of religiousness, besides the scales mentioned in Study 1, we used the Post-Critical Beliefs Scale that has two subscales: inclusion of transcendence – in what measure is the transcendent part of one's life; interpretation of religious statements – literal or symbolic.

The Rational and Irrational Beliefs about God scale was modified: respondents had to divide 13 points between the 8 God representation items.

Background variables were: age, gender, education level, marital status, denomination, subjective importance of religion and level of religious practice.



## Results

Principal component analysis revealed particular structures of rational and irrational beliefs again. Global evaluation loaded negatively on the factor of rational beliefs, so we worked with the subscales Acceptance and Shame. Religious variables also loaded on two factors, we named them Deepness of Faith and Religious Autonomy, the first being the relational, the second the cognitive aspect of religious maturity. The scales measuring distress and wellbeing formed a single Distress scale.

Examining the complex relationship between God representation, religiousness, attitudes towards past mistakes and distress, we discovered a mediating and a moderating relationship (see Figure 3)

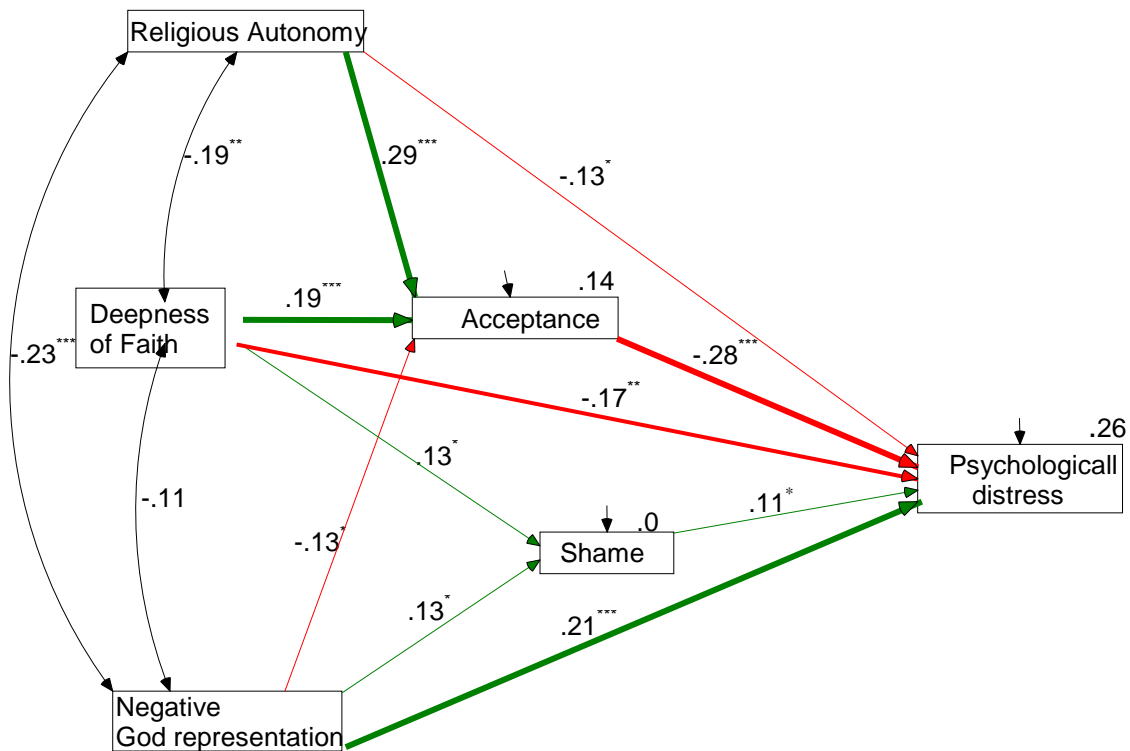


Figure 3: *The complex relationship between negative God representations, religiousness, attitudes towards past mistakes and psychological distress. (\*  $p = 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p = 0,01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq 0,001$ )*

We were able to prove that the negative effect of the agreement with negative affirmations regarding God on mental health is diminished if it is associated with non-evaluative beliefs. These beliefs and attitudes are shaped by relational and cognitive aspects of religious maturity. Our complex model showed that the deepness of one's faith correlates

negatively with psychological distress, but it also connects to mental health through the mediating effect of non-evaluative, accepting beliefs. The dimension religious autonomy (which was defined as the cognitive aspect of faith maturity) diminishes distress mainly through the mediating effect of accepting beliefs.

It seems that negative God representations are connected to negative aspects of mental health mainly in the absence of accepting, flexible, nuanced attitudes. But if these negative beliefs that are related to God's power and almightiness are associated with self-acceptance, capacity to learn from past mistakes, they lead to better mental health indicators.

Religious Autonomy is related to distress almost exclusively through Acceptance. The common factor in Religious Autonomy and Acceptance is flexible, non-extreme way of thinking that tolerates ambiguity and mistakes, that is, a mature way of thinking. It seems that it is this complex, accepting attitude that shields one's psychological equilibrium.

On the one hand Deepness of Faith is negatively related to distress through Acceptance, on the other hand it has also a direct, non-mediated negative link with it. That is, deep, intrinsic, identified faith, close relationship to God has effect on mental health both directly and through self-acceptance, nuance thinking about mistakes and sins. This results links our research to several investigations of the psychology of religion, but it also refrains the secular tradition of Christian spirituality and mysticism that states that the close and deep relationship with God can help the believer in maintaining his/her psychological equilibrium.

Our research has many drawbacks too: the cross-sectional design, the dominance of religious people in the sample, the methodological problems that derive from the development of a new scale.

#### **4. Conclusions**

1. Regarding a past mistakes or sins, it is not the presence of irrational beliefs, but the absence of rational beliefs, more exactly the absence of accepting attitudes that leads to psychological distress.
2. We succeeded in demonstrating that there is a relationship between the cognitive aspects of religiousness (religious autonomy) and the rational beliefs (accepting attitude). It is more difficult to interpret the relationship of the relational dimension of the maturity of religiousness (Deepness of Faith) to rational beliefs. We should differentiate between securely and insecurely attached people, but had no measure for this aspect. Nevertheless, it is an important finding that we managed to differentiate between these two aspects of religious maturity. Our results suggest that these two

define religious maturity together. Deepness of faith by itself can be linked to irrational, rigid interpretations and religious autonomy by itself is just a philosophy of life.

3. The relationship between the content of God representations and religious maturity was made difficult in the first study by the fact that we had no data on the subjective importance of religion. In the second study we included these measures and we found, that is not the positive, but the negative content of God representation that differentiates between different forms of religiousness. Negative content of God representations is linked to an undeveloped religious autonomy.
4. The mediating effect of rational and irrational beliefs on the relationship between God representations and religious maturity was proved only partially and only in the first study. This relationship needs further research.
5. Negative God representations are associated with distress.
6. This relationship is moderated by rational, accepting attitudes, that is, in the presence of accepting attitude the relationship between negative God representations and distress diminishes.

## 5. Publications connected to the subject of the dissertation

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