Transitional Phenomena as Evidenced in Prayer

MARILYN S. SAUR and WILLIAM G. SAUR

ABSTRACT: In this paper, we demonstrate that the study of prayer facilitates understanding of the deeply personal object related nature of religious experience. Within prayer, individuals enter the transitional sphere and meet their God representation. Both conscious and unconscious aspects of prayer can be made available through the use of a projective test developed by the authors, known as STARR: Spiritual Themes and Religious Responses test. The data obtained suggest the usefulness of Winnicottian concepts of transitional phenomena, playing, communicating, and capacity to be alone as a contemporary psychoanalytic framework for interpreting religious experience.

The writing of D.W. Winnicott has been frequently cited during the past decade by authors who have used his concepts of transitional object and transitional phenomena to understand religious experience. Winnicott (1953) describes transitional space as an area of experiencing that is neither totally objective nor totally subjective:

The third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related. . . . I am therefore studying the substance of illusion, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion. . . .

According to Winnicott, it is in this intermediate area that transitional objects are formed. The young child chooses an article such as a toy or blanket and imbues it with special meaning that is neither fully subjective nor

---

Marilyn S. Saur, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and a Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine.

William G. Saur, Ph.D., is a clinical social worker in private practice in Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, and Assistant Consulting Professor of Psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center.
fully objective. Initially the toy or blanket serves to soothe and defend against anxiety connected with the loss of the mother. The transitional object is psychologically important because it is readily available and constant. Pruysen, Rizzuto, and McDargh found it helpful to conceptualize an individual’s internal mental representation of God as a transitional object.²

In a previous study using an interview format, we found that the God representation did have the qualities of a special transitional object.³ It is special in that a concrete, tactile object does not exist and because it is not necessarily forgotten after childhood, as is the usual fate of transitional objects. The God representation is a complex image, not merely a static mental picture, but a dynamic, affective representation with conscious and unconscious aspects. The representation was found to be created from primary objects such as parents, siblings, and significant others.

In a recent book, Jones has called for a redirection in the psychoanalytic study of religion.⁴ He proposes a shift from studying an individual’s image of God to studying the object relation one has with one’s God. He argues that it is in the full, affect-laden relationship that the nuances of self and God representation are to be found.

How to study an individual’s relationship with God is a challenging question, as God is unseen and the relationship, like all object relations, contains unconscious elements. We chose the activity of prayer as a means of examining the relationship of an individual and his or her God. According to Meissner, prayer is a religious activity in which the individual figuratively enters the transitional sphere and meets his or her God representation.⁵ In this activity one encounters the inner, private, highly personalized aspects of an individual’s relationship to God. In these unique and profound moments the unconscious and preconscious elements of the relationship emerge.

The present study was structured to investigate two critical questions based on the theoretical work of Meissner and of Jones. First, we asked whether there is evidence of transitional phenomena in prayer. Second, we asked whether unconscious qualities of the relationship with the God representation could be viewed through prayer.

Since one way to gain access to unconscious material is through projective testing, we developed a TAT-like procedure specifically designed to elicit religious and spiritual content. Murray, in the original manual for the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), presents the rationale and method for projective testing. He wrote:

The procedure is merely that of presenting a series of pictures to a subject and encouraging him to tell stories about them, invented on the spur of the moment. The fact that stories collected in this way often reveal significant components of personality is dependent on the prevalence of two psychological tendencies: the tendency of people to interpret an ambiguous human situation in conformity with their past experiences and present wants, and the tendency of those who