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ANTOINE VERGOTE, FOUNDER OF THE EMPIRICAL
AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH
IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION**

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The monograph introduces the reader to the psychology of religion through the work of Antoine Vergote, a theoretician who has influenced the development of this discipline in Europe in fundamental ways for several decades. Behind the iron curtain, the importance of a psychology of religion was suppressed and its cultivation banished from the scope of research. On the solid basis of his life's work and of his psychoanalytically oriented pioneering research, Vergote now presents the Hungarian reader with empirical methods of studying various cases, his preliminary considerations, and the results of his investigations supported by his insight into several disciplines. Vergote approaches definitions, symbols, and rituals from a wide theoretical foundation making use of different fields such as psychology, theology, and a religiously based and practically oriented pedagogy. While the author has developed a system of criteria to distinguish between healthy and pathological forms of religious practices, he points out that the adequate training of the practitioner is key to a successful treatment. Vergote's works are now an indispensable resource for any research in the field connecting psychology and theology.

Keywords: psychology, theology, psychology of religion, clinical psychology of religion, teamwork, limits of competence, psychoanalysis, empirical research, representations of god, socio-cultural determination

Antoine Vergote, der Begründer des empirischen und psychoanalytischen Ansatzes der Religionspsychologie: Die Abhandlung gibt anhand der jahrzehntelangen Arbeit von Antoine Vergote, die einen großen Einfluss auf die Entwicklung der Religionspsychologie in Europa hatte, einen Einblick in dieses Wissenschaftsgebiet, das bislang infolge der langen Isolation

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nur wenig Bedeutung im ungarischen Wissenschaftsbetrieb erlangt hat. Mit Hilfe des auf einer breiten theoretischen Basis ruhenden Lebenswerkes von Vergote und seiner psychoanalytisch ausgerichteten Arbeit, die eine neue Schulrichtung begründete, stellt sie die vielfältigen, auf empirischen Untersuchungen basierenden wissenschaftlichen Methoden, die im Vorfeld angestellten Überlegungen und die die Ansätze mehrerer Disziplinen integrierenden wissenschaftlichen Ergebnisse des Pioniers der Religionspsychologie dar. Vergotes Betrachtung der Definitionen, Symbole und Rituale basiert auf einer Verbindung der Praxisfelder von Psychologie, Theologie und religiös motivierter Pädagogik. Er hat ein Kriteriensystem für die Unterscheidung zwischen gesunder und pathologischer Religiosität erarbeitet, wobei er aber betont, dass eine erfolgreiche Intervention eine entsprechende Kompetenz der Fachkraft voraussetzt. Das Werk von Vergote zählt zu den unverzichtbaren Quellen einer Tätigkeit im Grenzbereich von Psychologie und Theologie.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Psychologie, Theologie, Religionspsychologie, klinische Religionspsychologie, Teamarbeit, Kompetenzgrenzen, Psychoanalyse, empirische Forschung, Repräsentation Gottes, soziokulturelle Determination

1. Introduction

For a long time, the psychology of religion was considered a territory unapproachable from mainstream psychology, and many factors hampered its integration and development. Not merely the totalitarian regimes' paralysing effects on the humanities in Central and Eastern Europe, and not only palpable tendencies towards secularisation in European civilisation, stood in the way of its growth, but another handicap has been – and, indeed, we cannot yet speak of this in the past tense – the very limited number of experts who would be prepared for teamwork as required in this complex field by the historical, social and psychological embeddedness of religious phenomena. One reason for this may be that the psychology of religion is a danger zone: its questions and problems may deeply affect the practitioners of psychology themselves. As Vergote puts it, 'in no other branch of psychology are psychologists so much personally involved, including their own emotional reactions and implicit philosophical conceptions, with the subject matter' (VERGOTE 1993).

Vergote's personality and work have set an example demonstrating that this involvement, when accompanied by appropriate competences, need not become paralysing. It need not prevent the appropriate contextualisation of a given content by confounding, or, at the other extreme, needlessly isolating, religious phenomena and their psychological explanations. Neither will an approach based on well-integrated knowledge prevent the discovery and application of appropriate diagnostic methods and theoretical explanations.

Antoine Vergote's great achievement is that he established a school of the psychology of religion in the difficult times beginning in the 1950s. The school's magisterial synthesising studies are concerned with the foundations of the psychology of religion and, as if by extension, with the pathological expressions of religious phenomena.

An important part of his work is the author's personality standing behind it, which must therefore be presented, by way of introduction, through a summary and the highlighting, as it were, of his ideas. That allows us to give a flavour of the topics which the author discusses with copious examples and by elaborating on the attendant questions in considerable detail. We do that by drawing on the writings of his students and contemporaries, HUTSEBAUT et al. (1998), STICKLER (1999), HEINE (2005) and VERBOVEN (1999) as well as of himself, highlighting the ideas that we think may function as a compass in East Central Europe to point the way forward for psychologists concerned with the psychology of religion and spiritual counsellors open to this field.

2. Vergote's life and studies

The complexity of Vergote's achievement cannot be grasped without some knowledge of the varied context he entered through his birth and studies.

Antoine Vergote was born in Kortrijk, Flanders, on the 8th December 1921. He spent his childhood in Kortrijk and Gent, and then studied in the seminary of Brugge and at the University of Leuven-Louvain. After finishing his studies in philosophy and theology, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the Fourth Gospel in 1950. He started teaching rhetoric for two years, i.e. Greek and Latin at a secondary school. His second doctorate in 1954, a treatise on the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, shows his genuine interest in philosophy. Following this, he started teaching in the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Leuven. He taught epistemology and philosophical anthropology for several years and looked back on this activity later as something that shaped his own consistent way of thinking in a fundamental way. Following an invitation from Jozef Nuttin, head of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the time, Vergote started to teach the Psychology of Religion in 1959 in Leuven and in Louvain-la-Neuve. In three years he was granted tenure at the University of Leuven. Vergote's rapidly advancing career itself shows his extraordinarily creative and assiduous scientific activity and the dynamic intellectual life in Belgium in the middle of the previous century.

The young Vergote was awarded several grants and fellowships in the framework of a cultural exchange program with France. As a result, he attended lectures by Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology, by Koyre on the history of science, by Levi-Strauss on structural methodology, by Piaget on intelligence and affectivity, by Daniel Lagache and Françoise Dolto, took part in Jacques Lacan's seminars, was granted a membership in the French Psychoanalytic Society, worked in the famous Salpêtrière Institute under the leadership of Henry Ey, and, in the course of his linguistic studies, came into contact with linguists like Benveniste and Guillaume and Jakobson.

In the 1950s Paris became an important intellectual centre for the humanities. Figures like Martin Heidegger, the Hegelian Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite, Binswanger and Medard Boss, representatives of the Dasein-analysis, and the newly arrived Lipót Szondi contributed to the exchange between psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and linguists. While Eastern Europe was effectively cut off from new influences

by the Iron Curtain, the bilingual and varied academic circles in Belgium maintained a fruitful exchange with the intellectual centre of the world. The receptive atmosphere acted as fertile ground for intellectual progress. The Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Leuven hosted lectures on the psychology of religion, which were also attended by students of theology and philosophy. However, following the political reorganisation of Belgium, the university was divided. The old campus adopted Dutch as the language of education together with English in some faculties, while a new French speaking university was also built. Vergote stayed teaching in both universities.

Vergote's studies in psychoanalysis and his practical activity in the Paris of the 1950s naturally continued in his years of teaching at Leuven. Together with some friends, he founded the Belgian School of Psychoanalysis, among whose members, besides medical practitioners, there were several scholars of the humanities. Apart from his endeavour to impart knowledge, Vergote, an erudite humanist, also gave an example of the stature of a teaching personality and way of life. In his personality he unites knowledge and wisdom, modesty and firm conviction, an ardent pursuit of truth and the morale of tolerant dispute.

Vergote's activity as a leading scholar is accompanied by high standards in teaching. This is especially apparent in the field of research. He acknowledges his students' achievement and references their results among those of accomplished scholars in his works. The products of work carried out under his influence and as a result of his encouragement, he attributes to his students. At the same time, all these results enter a larger framework that bears his hallmark. His scholarly work has been published in all the main European languages (STICKLER 1999).¹ For Vergote, the study of religious phenomena must be regulated by certain strict rules. The object of investigation may be approached only in psychological terms. In order to develop the methodology of research, Vergote, together with leading scientists like Michotte and Nuttin, joined the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology in Belgium, originally founded by Mercier, and attended a course on clinical and psychoanalytical methods in Paris. The course gave him an opportunity to become acquainted with Piaget, Lacan, Lagache, Pontalis, and many other experts in the field, who had a strong influence on his work.

3. Scientific achievement

Antoine Vergote, as a theoretician and practitioner, has extended his activities to various fields of study. The three main areas of his interest are theology, psychology and psychoanalysis, and the psychology of religion. For a better understanding of these branches of study he has trained himself in phenomenology, hermeneutics, linguistics, anthropology, and ethnography. For him, problems of theology can best be grasped

¹ See the complete bibliography in the Leuven University Mail.

through an anthropological-cultural approach and by means of an examination of internal mental processes.

1. Accordingly, a substantial portion of Vergote's work deals with issues of theology. Instead of a traditional theological framework, he approaches even the most enduring problems from his own individual viewpoint. The mainstays of this position, according to Vergote, are the testimonial of the Church, the Holy Scriptures, and the fundamental truth of humanity.

2. Although Vergote's work does not focus on psychology or psychoanalysis, problems of deep psychology have affected his approach in two important ways. On the one hand, they define his thinking as a broad theoretical background and a frame of reference.² On the other hand, they surface in his practice in clinical psychology as a theoretical basis, for example for the examination of anthropological factors (like the human wish to establish contact with God and to achieve perfection, i.e. an ethical and prophetic longing) affecting religiosity (VERGOTE 1979). Psychology has helped him to uncover the mechanisms at work in some pathological religious experiences. For example, mystical longing can develop into clinical cases of hysteria, and an ethical desire can assume the shape of an often narcissistic obsessional neurosis. Such clinical experiences have enabled VERGOTE (1979) to establish a set of criteria to distinguish between healthy and pathological religious behaviour.

3. Considering the main tendencies in his work from the 1950s, Vergote appears to be the founder of a psychoanalytical approach to the psychology of religion rather than an empirical-statistical one. His familiarity with adjacent fields of study also supports this fundamental interest in him, since it allows him to break away from ready-made panels of explanation to original insight into the religious experience. One of his most outstanding achievements is that he introduced empirical research as a legitimate method in the psychology of religion.³

When he started his career as a researcher in the 1960s, Vergote's views were unique in the field. In contrast to leading experts, he did not subscribe to the conviction that the verification of hypotheses with measurements, i.e. purely experimental methods alone, can yield satisfactory answers to questions of the psychology of religion. Consequently, he attempted to combine theoretical knowledge and empirical data in a dialogical interaction. In his research he consciously sought and emphasised the limits of a scientific approach.

One of Vergote's typical working methods is to choose the most complex and most comprehensive approach, i.e., to reveal multiple layers of the same problem by involving several disciplines and with the help of a team of varied theoretical backgrounds. At the same time, he requires of others, as of himself, a disciplined application of individual methods of investigation. Another characteristic of his method is the endeavour to avoid general statements and to provide specific answers instead to clear questions in research.

² It is attested by two summary works: VERGOTE (1966, 1984).

³ cf. VERGOTE (1970) 139, 232 and VERGOTE & TAMAYO (1981).

Due to his strict methods Vergote was able to prove the hypothesis that representations of God are not immediately comparable to one's picture of one's parents. Vergote describes three intimately connected levels: experiences of the concrete relationship with parents, ideas or images derived from the emotional bond, and the 'symbolic image of mother and father' rooted in the wider symbolic order. Representations of God correlate with this latter position.⁴ According to results of his research, representations of God are not the product of a conscious intellectual activity, but rather of unconscious, normal (not pathological) processes; and these representations feed back into the mental process. Vergote's empirical investigation also verified the assumption that a considerable discrepancy between the reality and the symbolic image of one's parents can have serious pathological consequences in the child. With the help of his theological, ethnological, psychological background, and ideas from Winnicott and Fr. Dolto, Vergote established a new structure of the symbolic order complemented by a third level and developed a Semantic Differential Parental Scale to examine it.⁵

In the course of his research in the psychology of religion Vergote's means of approach have become more and more sophisticated. He is willing to experiment with new methods. He believes in the existence of a specially appropriate approach to every phenomenon as opposed to one universal method of analysis. Nonetheless, his background in psychoanalysis, its theoretical notions and frame of reference, have always been fundamental for him in every single research project and in the course of the application of various methods.

In the course of his work in the Centre for the Psychology of Religion, Vergote has introduced projective tests, questionnaires, interviews, and surveys, and with his colleagues he has developed new research methods to examine religious phenomena. Vergote repeatedly emphasises the fallacy of an expectation to find the origin of religion. This would inevitably mean a reduction of many possible aspects to one single cause⁶ and a step towards an ontological monism which he opposes in the psychology of religion. Different concepts would certainly focus on different causes or origins, which might trigger severe scholarly and ideological arguments. According to Vergote, the fact that there is no general and unified definition that would comprise all religions is a further reason for rigorous methodological constraints on research. An attempt to unite all aspects of religion cannot yield a genuine result, and the resulting abstract concept would lead to false conclusions. Every discipline needs to define the object of its investigation. However, according to Vergote, this definition can only evolve from phenomena existing in a given culture. Therefore, the research has to be familiar with the culture, its religious documents, and writings that represent contrary views. Vergote criticises conclusions in the psychology of religion that have been reached without a sufficient level of literacy in the cultural context.

⁴ VERGOTE (1970) 226 and VERGOTE & TAMAYO (1981) 3, 5, 20.

⁵ VERGOTE & TAMAYO (1981) 25, 234.

⁶ Susanne HEINE emphasises that Vergote has compared this kind of process with the work of the tailor who tried making an entire suit from a single button (2005, 252).

Accordingly, Vergote examines symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition and of Western Civilisation which, since the Enlightenment, have been offset by dynamic elements of atheism. He formulates his definition of religion with respect to this duality and as a working hypothesis to examine various religious phenomena.

Vergote's research connects three areas of study (HUTSEBAUT et al. 1998)⁷ First, he uses the results of the humanities (mainly psychology) to enrich theology; second, he attempts to widen the field of the humanities by combining it with the knowledge of theology; and finally he intends to augment the theological literacy of teachers and students who have committed themselves to Christianity. Vergote is less preoccupied with the enhancement of the knowledge of facts than with practical questions of religious education and with the endeavour to help those who seek to experience God. In this enterprise he considers the effort of the intelligence insufficient and even more so the search for the solution to a specific problem. The religious language of his own formulations itself constitutes a scholarly challenge for him, which incites him to publish papers on the style of religious discourse and the anthropological lesson found in myths.

4. On religion

There are two possible views: one of an impersonal, sacred, divine, and all-encompassing reality, and another of a personal God. The reference of the word 'god' is different in these two concepts.

In order not to lose his orientation among so many diverse phenomena, Vergote has based his working hypothesis on the self-representation of any given religion and, with no consideration of value, has separated it from the symbolic system of other religions and from other cultural phenomena. In his view, a scrutiny cannot be designed in order that it would fit every religion, since religious dimensions, the reasoning and behaviour of a believer can be interpreted only within the cultural context in which the phenomena and their investigation are embedded.

Hence, Vergote narrows his scope of observation down to the symbolic system of the Western World in an exclusively Biblical Christian or 'post-Christian' cultural context. His topic is therefore connected to Christianity and its denial since the Enlightenment.⁸ Consequently, he undertakes to define only the Christian religion.

Vergote says religion is the answer, the reaction of man to God's reality and action, as it reveals itself in its divergence from the human world. Although the tendency of merging the human and the divine rules some particular religious intentions, we still have to insist on the conception that religion exists only where the divine pole

⁷ The authors have categorised Vergote's writings based on his nearly 260 articles.

⁸ In the world which has been permeated by the Enlightenment the religion has come into conflict with the devotion to autonomy and the fear from illusion and passivity, and it has rejected the belief of a personal, caring, loving God, who transcends the everyday experience, and who is appeared by human agents (VERGOTE 1994).

appears as superhuman or, if we want to use the metaphysical term, transcendent particularity. Similarly we believe that real transcendency is the place where the sacred appears in its individuality, like the centre of consciousness and the will (VERGOTE 1970, 28).

Vergote opposes reducing religion to the experience of impersonal divine power. He has never investigated the common features of religions either. He explores only the religion of the Biblical, transcendent, and personal God, which appears to Christians in terms of a personal relationship to God. As a first instance of this in the history of religions, Vergote points to the encounters of men with God, when God allows himself to be known more closely, at least through his words. As to the question if, apart from a wish to satisfy personal needs, there is a need of God, Vergote comments that one does not necessarily feel this need until one is shaken by a personal crisis. Nevertheless, most people do not live in harmony with themselves and the surrounding world, which urges them to search continuously (VERBOVEN 1999).

5. The religious life

Vergote intends to prove empirically that the Christian religion can be construed as the sum total of two anthropological impulses. One is the longing for the presence of God (mysticism), and the other is the (ethical or prophetic) desire for perfection (VERGOTE 1979). However, the theory of the *homo religious* for him does not mean a religious attitude which would be the consequence of a congenital mental (psychological) feature of humans. The religious attitude of an individual evolves (or does not) to intelligence as a result of mutual influences between personal mental development and the socio-cultural effects of the surrounding world with its religious signs. A religious belief may evolve in different ways depending on the particular culture and family relations one grows up in and the specific religious impacts experienced during one's formative years. One is sensitive to everything one encounters within the given religious symbolic system. As a result, religion cannot be considered the product of an individual psyche, but rather a cultural outcome of the circumstances of one's life; and it affects them via symbolic systems mediated by society in the form of values, religious representations, discourse, etc. Ideas, motivations, and a sensitivity to, or refusal of, religion evolve through all this in the personality in a more or less conscious way (STICKLER 1999).

Vergote emphasises that the evolution of religion cannot be accounted for by one or two social or ethical norms; besides a variety of socio-cultural effects the diverse and infinitely complex personal propensities also have to be taken into consideration. He proves, through experimentation, that personal psychological structures determine the modality of individual religious experience (VERGOTE 1993).

In Vergote's mind, religious development, as mental development, is not a harmonious process of maturation, but rather an alternation of fulfillment and disappointment. Since humans are not entirely rational beings, they are not in total control of their internal motivations. Thus, the internal dynamic of a religious or irreligious atti-

tude is, according to Freud's deep psychological approach, also fraught with unconscious conflicts. Depending on the individual response to conflicts concerning religious belief, they will embrace or reject religion. Models of possible identification, formative experiences with influential persons, endeavours, prohibitions, desires, and fears can convey such conflicts related to religion.

6. A psychological approach to religious phenomena

His studies in, and debates on, the history of the psychology of religion – as VERGOTE (1993) likes to call it to express its subject matter and limits – confirmed Vergote's conviction that an explanation of the origins and essence of religion is a matter of philosophy rather than psychology.

In his development of a definition and delimitation of the psychology of religion Vergote gradually determined the scope of observation and the boundaries of competence within which religion can be studied from the point of view of psychology, similarly to methods applied in philosophy, theology, ethnology, or sociology. For him it is important that theories of psychology, after a critical theological evaluation, be brought in line with anthropological premises defining religion. At the same time, he emphasises that the competence of psychology cannot be anything other than an investigation through its own categories and by means of its own methodology.

Vergote points out the exceedingly complex reality of religious reality, regarding religion, with FREUD (1955), as the most complicated issue in civilisation, and believes that psychology necessarily has to see religion as an objective instantiation of culture, and that it can examine only the human aspect of religious manifestation, i.e., the way religion is evidenced in its empirical reality.

As VERGOTE (1993) puts it, 'every human act is psychological in nature, but nothing is purely and *only* psychological'. Neither human phenomena themselves nor the means of their understanding consist exclusively of psychological processes, but culture also plays a significant role in shaping them. Accordingly, a judgement of religious or irreligious conviction or a comparative deliberation of truth in different religions is not an object of psychology. The only exception can be cases where religious belief has an undoubtedly negative effect on the individual's mental health (VERGOTE 1994). In these cases Vergote assumes the presence of a distortion in the religious phenomenon, since religion and laws of the created world should be in harmony with each other.

What may be a subject of psychology is the examination of processes in religious belief and behaviour: concepts, perceptions, affective dispositions, manifestations, and transformations in behaviour. This is everything through which an individual expresses and describes their religious feelings and opinions, i.e., joy, fear, and the images that help or accompany the communication of intended content. The observation of how an individual perceives and represents their relationship to God, of the mental instrumentation of the process and of what means they use to look for solutions (VERGOTE 1994). The subject matter of psychology can be the examination of positive or

negative individual responses to religious opinions existing in the given culture in respect of their own personal existence and the way religious opinions manifest themselves in their own frame of reference.

As an example, Vergote mentions that the believer's desires and an image of God appear in their prayer. The image of God consists of personal elements and those derived from the Christian symbolic system of religion. For the persons examined, this is not merely a symbol in language, but it connects them to a personal God (the existence or nonexistence of whom is not the competence of psychology to verify or falsify), and it affects the development and behaviour of the personality. Psychology can reveal the personal elements contained in the image of God as they surface in the relationship, but the elements connected to the religious symbol system can only be expounded, the truth value of their content can only be examined by theology. Psychology can, for example, establish that the person's image of God is in several respects similar to their father-image, but only theology can answer the question if this image of God is correct or not – irrespective of the origin of the image of God (VERGOTE 1993).

According to VERGOTE (1993), the apparent religious attitude and behaviour can only be interpreted by psychology if they are examined as elements of a conflict and strategies of its resolution, because the process of their evolution is affected, apart from the social and cultural context, by internal subjective problem solving mechanisms. For Vergote, to wit, the confirmation of a religious or irreligious attitude depends on the way these conflicts are resolved.

In conclusion, the subject matter of the psychology of religion can be:

- on the one hand, the effect of mental factors on the manifestations of the individual's religious belief and behaviour: what mental causes bring them about and affect their evolution, or what circumstances result in the suppression of religious impulses?
- on the other hand, the examination of the content (and not the truth value) of responses to conceptions labelled as religious or irreligious, the influence exerted by religious belief and by the components of faith on an individual's mental health, on the development of their personality, and on their social relations. According to VERGOTE (1993), the quality of the religious experience is crucially determined by the psychic quality, i.e., by mental health.

Certainly, responses to religious conceptions can be exceedingly diverse, not only because the way an individual reacts to these religious phenomena is subjective, but also because these reactions will be categorised by individuals too.

7. Mental health, religion, and the clinical psychology of religion

VERGOTE (1993) does not consider maturity a notion that can easily be grasped in terms of psychology. As a result, he uses the concept of mental health to determine the psychological quality of religion. Mental health and a healthy religious attitude can together form an organic whole. However, a totally undisturbed harmony is, as in other

areas of life too, an illusion. The most we may expect is that these two together diminish our deficiencies.

Understanding the faith of others is not easy, because faith is intricately bound up with other mental mechanisms that are also partially unconscious. As a result, faith can often only be described in similarly indistinct terms. Vergote points out that scientific enquiry into religion tends to ignore the fact that the believer's love and desire are directed towards a being who concurrently exists in- and outside of them and whom the believer defines as the Divinity. (Vergote does not insist on giving an exhaustive explanation of the observed phenomena, and he does not extend the analysis to include supernatural occurrences. His main instrument is the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, but he also takes religious phenomena into consideration that affect the observed phenomena.)

The understanding of faith takes two simultaneous approaches. On the one hand, the psychologist reveals dramatic processes of the psyche; on the other, the pastor assists the person by elucidating their faith more completely, which then leads to a better understanding of psychic patterns and regularities. Vergote distinguishes the pathological and the healthy personality on the basis of their ability to resolve a psychological conflict and of the relative length of time it takes them to do so. The interrelations between religion and mental illness depend on complex processes, and the state of balance is extremely delicate. In fact, we cannot even speak of a state, but rather of a course along which mental reality has to be examined from both an instinctual and a cultural point of view.

In their respective capacities, both the pastor and the psychologist may contribute to the preservation of balance in the personality. The pastor has to make every effort to strengthen the relationship between God and the individual, while the psychologist has to work on the often unconscious tensions which frequently appear in a religious guise and keep healthy religious representations from unfolding.

In his book *Guilt and Desire* VERGOTE (1988) examines possible interrelations between the independent fields of religious functions and psychic pathologies. In pathological cases it is even more difficult to reveal these interrelations which are present in any case, because then, elements of healthy functions are transformed and negative and positive components are confounded. With respect to the necessary intervention it is of crucial importance if the underlying cause of an anomaly lies in religious tensions or in the distorted functioning of the personality. The examination and treatment of these phenomena require a thorough knowledge of and extensive experience with both mental processes and religion.

Vergote introduces two important forms of neurosis to further the understanding of the interrelations of mental disturbances and religious functioning: obsessional neurosis, the religious manifestations of which can cause deformation in ritual practices, and hysteria resulting from an inappropriate handling of suppressed desires, which is comparable to, and easily confused with, sublimation and manifestations of mysticism. Rituals are part of religious practices, they are the believer's symbolic acts intended to establish or restore a relationship with the Divinity. They are conscious acts with a specific aim and thus have an effect on the world, but at the same time they are

also symbolic. They express the human condition in relation to God and temporarily incorporate the person in the divine quality of being. For the religious person 'ritual is neither a religious film nor a social action but an effective communication with the supernatural' (VERGOTE 1988, 98). Ritual can also constitute a part of the pathology of the psyche and appear to be what has been described above. However, in this case there is an unconscious motivation that deprives, at least in part, cultural representations of their symbolic meaning. Accordingly, although obsessional ritual assumes a symbolic form known from the culture (from religious practices), it does not aim at an encounter with the Divinity, and it is a covert expression of an unconscious representation disguised as a manifestation of faith.

In the case of hysteria, the religious desire may be distorted through the entanglement of a genuine religious intention with an illness. It may turn out that emotions seemingly directed at a personal divine being are, in fact, a surrogate for an expression of feelings towards a desired 'primeval person'. It is very important to determine, for example, if the experience of a vision results from a mystical or a neurotic background. In order to do so, we need to know first if suppressed thoughts act hidden behind the experience or if the person is in conscious control of the ritual act.

In his *Guilt and Desire* VERGOTE (1988, 153–63) elucidates concepts and knowledge of psychic pathologies with examples of well-known personalities. As a psychologist, he tries to answer the question of what influenced St. Teresa of Avila in the choice of her faith as a way of life and in her firm adherence to it. The psychologist is not interested in the role of divine grace in this, as a theologian would be, but, remaining within the bounds of their own competence, endeavours to bring to light the work of sublimation in the effort to surmount desire. Vergote presents examples from the psychic life of St. Teresa of Avila where an act of pleasing others and a fulfillment of desire in love is achieved through the suppression of the ego: she surrenders her ego to God and receives God in herself. On the symbolic plane of this process the words received through mental perception are authentic to the person and perform in them the promised transformation in real, verifiable sense.

The criteria developed by VERGOTE (1979) are useful in distinguishing healthy and pathological forms of religion. The most important of these – such as the individual attitude to material goods, to independence, to work, or one's desire for the presence of others or for communication, and the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life – are valuable not only in psychopathology, but in clinical practice and pastoral care too (HUTSEBAUT et al. 1998). Vergote enumerates four practical activities that determine human existence: work, communication in language, love, and pleasure. The impairment of any of these may be the cause of mental illness (VERGOTE 1988). Vergote delineates the successful way to prevent mental illness in religious individuals, on the one hand, as an effort to accept their own human reality through the recognition of God's design, rather than to try to conceal their deficiencies in their relationship with God. On the other hand, one has to reorganise one's relationship to oneself and to others through psychological labour.

8. The attitude of the psychologist

The psychologist needs to be in command of a comprehensive knowledge of the patient's religion, religious practices, and of the significance (influence on emotional life and behaviour) of these to the person. They must accept elements of the patient's belief and are not allowed to judge or question its content, either explicitly or in the form of indirect questions. They have to retain their neutrality in order not to transgress the limits of their competence towards philosophy or theology. They should not consider their patient religiously immature just because their world views are different (TOMCSÁNYI et al. 2008).

Vergote is peeved when psychologists of religion judge the quality of religion on the basis of their own religion or, more frequently, their lack thereof. Thus, they interpret religion from the point of view of psychology and represent atheism as a sign of maturity in the personality.⁹ (HEINE 2005, 254)

It is a demanding challenge for the psychologist to understand the ongoing religious and mental processes in an individual. The discovery is further complicated by the fact that due to the complex pattern of life itself, diverse constituent elements often remain hidden. It is necessary that we maintain the distinction so that we do not psychologise religion and do not worship psychology. Scientific analysis, as in Vergote's words 'a film of a jump in slow motion', reveals the truth and details hidden before becoming visible.

Vergote's work also makes many details visible that professionals and laypersons may have intuited even before they read his explications, but now, thanks to the integrating approach of the theologian-psychologist, they have them in clear formulations. We look forward to more of Vergote's films in slow motion.

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⁹ Vergote considers nonsense the comprehensive argument which suggests the theologians cannot act as neutral researchers regarding the religion, because for example neither a scientist of sexuality is expected to abstain from sexual life for the cause of the scientific neutrality (VERGOTE 1998, 40).

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