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# Religion: A Rorschachian Projection Theory

Diane Jonte-Pace

*Santa Clara University*, [djontepace@scu.edu](mailto:djontepace@scu.edu)

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## Religion: A Rorschachian Projection Theory

### Abstract

This paper offers a projection theory of religion based on an experiential analysis of Rorschach's human movement response. An experiential analysis of the movement response reveals an understanding of projection particularly appropriate for the study of religion. The relevance of Rorschachian projection to religion is due to several reasons related primarily to the fact that projection and religion share epistemological concerns. First, because of its epistemological optimism regarding the knowledge of otherness, projection provides a legitimate means of understanding (radical) otherness. Second, in projection, knowledge of the other occurs through knowledge of the self, encompassing the same epistemological processes emphasized in contemporary theological interpretations of divine otherness. Third, Rorschachian projection can accommodate both theistic and non-theistic traditions in its understanding of religion since projection and religion are both attempts to formulate the nature of selfhood, otherness, and their relationship. Finally, a discussion of the origins of the human movement response and religious experience establishes a further link between the two. It is due to their common origin in early object relations that Rorschachian projection (the movement response) is most applicable to the understanding of religion. Both projection and religion emerge from a transitional or transcendent realm between self and other. Object relations theory enables us to extrapolate toward both culture and epistemology from Rorschach's movement response.

Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922) is well known for his development of the inkblot test as a tool

in clinical diagnosis. However, few are aware of the psychology of religion he began to create in his published writings but did not live to complete. Vitaly interested in the psychology of religion, Rorschach spent three years intensively studying two religious sects of Switzerland. His correspondence indicates that he intended to publish a book on the subject. Rorschach felt that the psychology of religion would be his major area of concentration: In 1914, "the young psychiatrist reported enthusiastically about his research; he firmly believed that this study of Swiss sects would be his life work."<sup>1</sup> Some of his preliminary findings are outlined in papers presented at conferences between 1916 and 1919.<sup>2</sup>

Rorschach's interest in religion is evident throughout his professional career. His psychological writings incorporate several themes related to religion. Early publications include articles on mythology and religious symbolism in Swiss folklore;<sup>3</sup> he also focused on religious imagery in the delusions of his patients.<sup>4</sup> In his later writings, he began to comment on comparative mythology, the history of religions and spiritual/mystical experience.<sup>5</sup> Although it may be impossible to recreate Hermann Rorschach's uncompleted theory of the psychology of religion, one trajectory within Rorschach's thought can be pursued. This is his association of the human movement response with religion.

In the Rorschach test, the human movement response, M, involves the interpretation of an ambiguous stimulus (the inkblot) as a *human figure in motion*. Rorschach believed that movement responses were indicative of intelligence, mental productivity, and creative potential. He also described the human movement response as intimately linked with religion:

This component of intelligence (M) can be nothing other than the ability to create new individual productions, the capacity for "inner creation." In its finest developments we call this artistic inspiration, religious experience, etc.

He also relates the movement response to revelation:

A broadening of the experience type . . . in the direction of introversion (a predominance of M responses) . . . is,



depending on the degree, called "inner creation," or inspiration, or even revelation.<sup>6</sup>

Few subsequent studies have inquired into the relationship of movement responsivity and religion. As psychologist E. Bohm notes: "For reasons as yet unknown, M is correlated with the creative powers of the personality and also with religious experience."<sup>7</sup> This paper suggests that Rorschach's intuition in linking religion and the movement response was correct: implicit in the movement response is a notion of projection which is uniquely appropriate for understanding religion. This paper also inquires into the "reasons as yet unknown" for the association of religion and the movement response, suggesting that religious experience and movement responsivity have a common origin in early object relations. A dual intent, therefore, underlies this paper. It creates a projection theory of religion based on Rorschach's movement response; and it grounds that theory in developmental concerns, seeking the origins of the human movement response, projective knowing, and religion in the narcissistic period of human development.

### **Religion and Projection**

Psychological theories of religion, especially psychoanalytic approaches, have viewed religion primarily as projection. In Freud's classic statement, religion is called "nothing but psychology projected into the external world":

I believe that a large part of the mythological conception of the world, which extends a long way into the most modern religions, is nothing but psychology projected into the external world. . . . One could venture to explain in this way the myths of paradise and the fall of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality, and so on, and to transform metaphysics into metaphsychology.<sup>8</sup>

Psychological theories of religion as projection are based on the clinical model of projection as distorted perception due to repressed elements of the psyche. Religion is therefore assumed to be distorted or wrong. In Freud's view, projec-

tion is a defense mechanism, by which we externalize the repressed, projecting only the qualities, drives or feelings of which we are not aware. Freud also expressed a second view of projection in some of his writings. In *Totem and Taboo*, for example, he noted that "projection is not specifically created for the purpose of defense . . . but is a mechanism which has the greatest share in shaping our outer world."<sup>9</sup> The important feature of this second view is that inner rejection or repression of a feeling is not necessary for projection to occur. Here Freud implies that projection is a normal process, an inevitable process in the perception of the world. Thus there are two views of projection in Freud's work: a positive view and a negative view.

Lindzey describes Freud's two views as classic projection and generalized projection. Classic projection is

an unconscious and pathological process whereby the individual defends against unacceptable impulses or qualities in himself by inaccurately ascribing them to individuals or objects in the outer world. . . . Generalized projection (is) . . . a normal process whereby the individual's inner states or qualities influence his perception and interpretation of the outer world.<sup>10</sup>

According to Lindzey, generalized projection underlies the "projective techniques such as the Rorschach Test."

A closer look at this understanding of projection, however, reveals the inadequacy of "generalized projection" as a description of the process of perception which discloses personality in the Rorschach test. In the "projective testing literature" projection is defined neutrally as a normal process of externalization which reveals character and personality. The underlying metaphor is one of a projector shining an image onto a blank screen: "The concept of projection as used in the projective procedures is . . . formed on the pattern of projector and blank screen." This interpretation of projection, however,

may lead to a faulty assumption that the testee, rather than encountering something and somebody in the world and experiencing and interacting with what he



encounters, is faced with a blank screen on which he projects only his own subjectivity. . . . Actually it is the encounter of the testee with the inkblots (which are ambiguous but not unstructured) in the setting of the test situation, and his experience of and reactions to this encounter that we study when interpreting a Rorschach record.<sup>11</sup>

Thus neither the pathology model (classic projection) nor the conflict-free model (generalized projection) are appropriate metaphors for the processes involved in the Rorschach test. The first is inappropriate because it assumes distortion and pathology; the second because the blank screen metaphor ignores the interactive reality of the Rorschach test encounter.

Freud's attitude to religion, and the attitude of most later psychoanalytic thinkers, partakes of the first view, classic projection. The use of the second metaphor of projection, generalized projection or blank screen to understand religion, is far less common, but it has been attempted.<sup>12</sup> However, just as both classic projection and generalized projection are inappropriate ways of understanding the Rorschach test, I believe that both provide limited means of understanding religion. A third understanding of projection might more accurately describe Rorschach processes and might contribute a more valuable tool for the study of religion. In this attempt to redefine projection along Rorschachian lines, Schachtel's *Experiential Foundations of Rorschach's Test* will provide invaluable insights.

Schachtel defines projection as

that psychic mechanism by which one attributes qualities, feelings, attitudes, and strivings of his own to objects (people and things) of his environment. This may lead to the actual perception or to the assumption of the presence of these qualities in the objects of the environment, and it may help or hinder an understanding of the object.

According to this definition, projection plays no role at all in most of the "projective techniques." In the Rorschach test

only a small fraction of the many processes are of a projective nature.

Not until the late 1930s was the Rorschach test called a projective technique. Rorschach himself called *Psychodiagnostics* neither a projective test nor a projective technique. He referred to the test as an "experiment in the diagnosis of perception" and as a "form-interpretation test." He considered the test a revealing study of individual differences in perception and a contribution to the problem of perception and personality, not a projective test. Schachtel concurs with Rorschach's original estimation of the experiment as a test of perception and refrains from calling the Rorschach Test a projective test. He does, however, find that projection is the process underlying Rorschach's movement responses. "The mechanism of projection . . . is essential for an understanding of . . . the kinesthetic responses." Let us look more closely at Schachtel's experiential analysis of the movement response and the psychology of projection.

### **Experiential Understanding of the Movement Response**

Schachtel states that the implications of Rorschach's ideas about the movement response

not only make it one of the most important tools for the analysis of character structure in the test; they also throw light on the nature of the mechanism of projection.

In movement perception or kinesthetic perception, he explains,

there is an element of projection. The subject understands the movement . . . that he perceives . . . in terms of his own inner experience. . . . Thus his personal kinesthetic . . . feeling, aroused by what he sees, is projected onto the person or object seen and merges completely, without the subject being aware of it, with the percept of the person or object empathically perceived.

Movement perception or projection can be broken down into the following steps: 1. the individual perceives an ob-



ject (a person, a thing, or anything other than the self); 2. the object arouses a personal feeling; 3. the feeling is projected upon the object seen; 4. the projection merges completely with the percept of the object. There is usually no awareness that this is anything other than a simple perception of an object. This may or may not produce accurate knowledge of the other. In kinesthetic perception or projection, therefore, the subject perceives the object through knowledge of himself: paradoxically, knowledge of reality is obtained through self-knowledge.

According to Schachtel's experiential analysis, the elements of projection include anthropomorphic thinking, a connection with the experience of selfhood, epistemology, and reliance on somatic experience. The first three of these will be most appropriate to our discussion of religion as projection; all will contribute to our search for the roots of projective knowing in early object relations.

Schachtel's view of projection involves the human tendency toward anthropomorphic thinking, the tendency to "perceive and think of others in one's own image and to expect and to find one's likeness in others." Through anthropomorphism actual perception of the other can result. On the other hand, anthropomorphism can result in the mistaken assumption of the presence of qualities in the other: projection can help or hinder an understanding of the object. Distorted projection, due to anthropomorphism, constitutes one end of a continuum at the other end of which genuine understanding of others has its place.

Kinesthetic perception or movement responsivity results in a kind of knowing wherein one experiences in oneself the sensation of movement that is perceived in the other. Rorschach noted that the movement must be felt (*erfühlt*), not merely named. An actual kinesthetic sensation, however slight, must be present, as if the subject were inside the figure seen. The perception of one's own body in the kinesthetic sensation is inextricably fused with the object of perception through the visual data received by the eye. In movement responsivity, body knowing or somatic experience is at the root of perception. Related to this body knowing is the experience of selfhood. Schach-



tel associates movement perception with the "deepest trends in the personality." This is based on two facts. First, only through kinesthetic sensations does the individual have "direct, immediate, physical experience of himself from within." Secondly, "every human feeling, attitude, striving has both a physical and a mental side and finds expression in physiological and neuromuscular as well as in psychic processes."<sup>13</sup> Thus the movement response represents a profound demension of knowing the self which is body-oriented.

This mode of knowing, in effect, transcends the polarity of self and other since it is through the self (body perception) that we know the other in the movement response. Yet paradoxically we perceive this knowledge as coming from the other rather than from the self:

the experiential perception of movement displays a strong sense of otherness which tends to bracket or suspend the more reflective recognition that . . . the origins of such a sense of otherness do in fact lie within oneself.<sup>14</sup>

This is Rorschach's epistemological paradox. It grapples with the question of selfhood, otherness and their relationship in the process of knowing the other.

Through an experiential analysis of projection in kinesthetic perception (movement responses), it becomes clear that projection is a legitimate means of achieving knowledge of the other, and that this form of projection transcends the subject-object dichotomy, the polarity of self and other. Rorschach is "succeeding thus in that hitherto impossible task. He is bridging the gulf between the knower and the object of his knowledge, the *Ding an Sich*."<sup>15</sup> Thus an experiential analysis of the movement response allows us to conclude that movement responses represent projective knowing, that this form of perception involves knowing the other through knowledge of one's own body, that movement responsivity can be either accurate or inaccurate, and that movement responsivity is linked with the deepest trends in the personality. The central mechanisms in projection thus involve the self, the other, and their relationship. Most sig-

nificant in Rorschachian projection are epistemology and anthropomorphism. These two dimensions of projection make Rorschachian projection a particularly appropriate model for understanding religion.

### Epistemology

The Rorschachian view of projection is essentially epistemological. It deals with the issue of knowledge of the other, asking how we, the subjects, have knowledge of objects in the external world. Projection is "an attempt to formulate the nature of otherness." It inquires into

the relation of knowledge derived from sensory experience about objects in the external world to knowledge derived from reflection upon those processes which constitute our internal awareness of ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

From an epistemological point of view, the negative view of projection is understood as a distortion of otherness. Through projection, Freud implied in his "classic" view of projection, we cannot accurately know the other, for projection involves unconscious repression of self and pathological distortion of otherness. In the negative view "the mistaken attribution of a quality or trait of which one is not aware in himself [is projected] onto others, thereby distorting reality."<sup>17</sup> Accurate knowledge of reality or of otherness is possible only by means of identifying one's projections, recognizing their distortions, and renouncing the projections.

The view of projection implicit in the M response, however, differs substantially from the negative view of projection. First, inner rejection or repression of a quality or trait is not necessary for projection to occur. Secondly, projection can function as a step toward knowledge of otherness in which the subject defines the object. While projection

appears to be an imposition of subjective elements on reality, (it) is in fact not a distortion at all. . . . Projection arises from within, yet does not distort what is with-



out. . . . What is projected comes to lie between what is subject and what is object.<sup>18</sup>

The epistemological nature of projection is clear. In the lower view there is only a limited potential for knowledge of otherness while in the view of projection deduced from the movement response in the Rorschach test, non-distorted knowledge of otherness is a real possibility and projection is a legitimate component of knowing the other.

Projection is more than an attempt to formulate the nature of otherness: it is also an attempt to formulate the nature of selfhood. It is in an encounter between self and other that projective knowing occurs. Movement responses are intimately related to knowledge of selfhood: only through kinesthetic sensations do we have direct inner physical experience of ourselves. Several Rorschach theorists in addition to Schachtel have made this point:

Those kinesthesias which find their way into a person's movement responses are drawn from a repertoire of kinesthetic memories which express some of his core experiences of selfhood.<sup>19</sup>

Others similarly link M with a "tolerance for experiencing the self" and with the origin of the awareness of self:

In the development of thought lies the origin of the awareness of the self and self concept since the delay of gratification and fantasy, M, clearly differentiates the organism from the immediate environmental situation. This differentiation makes possible more self-directed responses.<sup>20</sup>

Rorschach's emphasis on the necessity of a "felt movement" indicates that projective knowing involves an awareness of the physical sensation of movement in one's body, a body knowing. M thinking is body oriented thinking; M thinking involves somatic participation in perceptual experience.

An epistemology of the body emerges: through our bodies we know ourselves and we know others. This body oriented knowing may have its origin in the infant's relationship with the mother. Rorschach's epistemological para-

dox, the paradox that we perceive projective knowledge as coming from an external source rather than from our own bodies, an internal source, is resolvable when we postulate that the origin of that knowing is in the infant's undifferentiated state where self and other, I and not-I are not experienced as separate. The origins of movement responsivity and projection may lie in early object relations where the nature of selfhood, otherness, and their relationship is initially formulated. This point will be developed later.

### Anthropomorphism

The origins of anthropomorphism in the Rorschach movement response are clear: a movement response in the Rorschach test involves the perception, in the ambiguous figure, of a human figure in motion. We project our human form, our anthropomorphic image, onto the inkblot, and we perceive that form dynamically. The human form is doing something.

Anthropomorphism refers to the tendency to think of the universe in human terms and to think of others in terms of one's own experience. Anthropomorphic thinking can be a legitimate means of understanding others. Through anthropomorphic thinking one understands the experience of another individual most deeply and most empathically:

In every act of understanding something akin to one's own experience is felt in the other person. All understanding of others is made possible only by the fact that the other person is essentially like oneself, that . . . we are all much more simply human than otherwise. It is the essential likeness of man which is the basis of all real psychological understanding.<sup>21</sup>

Anthropomorphism and epistemology are deeply intertwined in projection: it is through anthropomorphic thinking that true understanding or knowledge of otherness takes place. Knowledge of otherness (epistemology) and anthropomorphism, then are central components of projection. Otherness and anthropomorphism are also central



issues in theistic religions. The two major elements in theism's *Imago Dei* are the radical otherness or transcendence of God and the personhood of God. Sharing these central concerns makes the vocabulary of projection a potentially valuable tool for understanding theistic religions.

### Rorschachian Projection and Religion

Two main points are made in the following pages. First, Rorschachian projection is a valuable model for understanding religion because of its epistemological dimension. Projection is a legitimate component of knowing reality, and it participates in the process of knowing the other through knowledge of the self. Secondly, the anthropomorphic dimension of projection makes it particularly relevant for the study of theistic religions. However, it will be shown that projection is also relevant to the study of non-theistic religions.

### The Otherness of God

Projection can function as a step toward knowledge of otherness. In a religious context, what is otherness? The nature of otherness, the epistemological question regarding the possibility of knowing the other, and the relation of self and other, have been central concerns of religious thinkers, particularly Western theistic thinkers.

In the Western, theistic, Judeo-Christian tradition, God has traditionally been conceived as other or not-self, while self is not-God. Theistic doctrines of God's transcendence maintain the radical beyondness and otherness of the deity. Rudolph Otto's classic description of the divine or "numinous" as the *Ganz Andere*, the Wholly Other, exemplifies this position. Otto saw God as transcendent, beyond, and other. He focused on humanity as a "creature" (created by another) who relates to God as an object outside the self. He called this object the numinous or Wholly Other, that which utterly transcends the mundane sphere.

An epistemological point has emerged in recent de-

scriptions of the mystery, the divine, or radical otherness. A reciprocal relationship is said to exist between knowledge of the other and knowledge of the self:

Throughout modern descriptions of mystery by Otto, Buber, Marcel, and others, runs an epistemological theme: knowledge of "the other" is a precondition for knowledge of self and vice versa.<sup>22</sup>

The Rorschachian model of projection is a particularly appropriate tool for dealing with theistic religions, first because unlike previous psychological understandings of projection, it addresses the radical nature of religious otherness with the potential for true understanding, and secondly, because it encompasses the very process emphasized by contemporary understanding of divine otherness. That is, in Rorschachian projection, knowledge of the self is a precondition for knowledge of the other and vice versa. A process of projection that transcends subject and object and that provides knowledge of the other through knowledge of the self is particularly relevant for theistic religions wherein the divine is radically other and wherein knowledge of self and other (God) are mutually interdependent.

The epistemological nature of projection makes it particularly valuable for the study of religion because both Rorschachian projection and religion attempt to conceptualize the nature and knowability of selfhood and otherness. Religion and Rorschachian projection share an additional agenda as well: anthropomorphism.

### **The Personhood of God**

In the religions of the world, God is usually portrayed in human form, with human qualities and attributes. The creation story in Genesis makes sense of this by explaining that God created man and woman in his own image. Feuerbach reversed this explanation, proposing that man makes God in his image, i.e., that human beings project their essential nature onto the form of divinity. Thus theology is anthropology and the study of God is really the study of



human nature. Feuerbach's point is well taken: the *Imago Dei* in the Christian and Jewish scriptures is clearly anthropomorphic. God creates, God speaks, God listens, God cares, God protects, God acts, God feels . . .

William Blake called him the Ancient of Days and portrayed him as a white bearded, stooped, cloud-swept mathematician . . . measuring his creation and his household. Others developed about him an imperial image, the exalted ruler of all men and nations . . . Others imagined him as a warm personality in whom one could confide.<sup>23</sup>

These are human qualities, or extensions of human qualities to their furthest possible developments. God in other words, is encountered *qua* person in theistic thinking.

Schachtel's discussion of the anthropomorphic dimension of projection emphasizes 1. the tendency to think of the universe in human terms; 2. the legitimacy of anthropomorphic thinking; and 3. the profound understanding of otherness that can be achieved only through projection and especially anthropomorphic thinking. These points intersect with theistic religions in which the divine is viewed as other and as person. But how is Rorschachian projection relevant to non-theistic religions, religions which maintain that the divine is not other, and that the divine lacks human attributes? Following are some speculations regarding Eastern and monistic religions. The monistic view of the divine, I believe, can still be conceptualized in the vocabulary of Rorschachian projection in spite of an understanding of otherness, selfhood and their relationship which differs radically from the theistic view.

### Monistic Religions

Two important points must be made prior to a discussion of monism. First, the non-theistic position is a highly abstract theological stance which is neither limited to the Eastern world, nor typical of the "common person's" way of viewing the divine. Tillich's God beyond the God of Theo-

logical Theism for example involves a non-theistic view of the absolute. And yet Tillich's theology is clearly part of the Western *Weltanschauung*. Secondly, the non-theistic stance is not the theology of the majority, even in the East. This is well documented in Hinduism and Buddhism. In monistic Hinduism one finds a belief in an abstract, non-personal, non-anthropomorphic divinity, *Brahman*. But along with the persistence of a monistic strain, theism is very predominant, especially in the doctrine and practice of Bhakti, devotion to a personal God who bestows grace. The situation is similar in Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism a belief in God is entirely absent. The average devotee, however, in Buddhism's Mahayana tradition has a myriad of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to worship, love, and fear. Nor is it the case that only the "simple folk" are theists. On the contrary, many of the most sophisticated religious thinkers of the East have been Bhaktas, Mahayanists, or theists of other sorts.

Viewing the divine as other, and as an other with human qualities, is not unusual in the East. Therefore Rorschachian projection need not be abandoned as a tool for understanding the image of and the relationship to the divine in Eastern theism. However, let us also address the more abstract non-theistic positions.

In non-theistic traditions such as Upanishadic (Vedantic) Hinduism the boundaries between self and non-self are not sharp. In monistic Hinduism the belief is held that the divine is mistakenly perceived as other only because the individual is in a state of ignorance, *avidya*. When in a state of knowledge or realization, the individual experiences the divine as self, not as other; the practitioner knows *Brahman* (the divine) as *Atman* (self or soul):

The maintenance of ego boundaries, between "inside" and "outside," between "I" and "others"—and the sensory experiences and social relationships based on these separations is the stuff of reality in Western thought and yet *maya* (illusion) to the Hindus. . . . All mental processes are grounded in *Chitta* which has as its specific aim "I" awareness and fusion with the "Other."<sup>24</sup>



The monistic position collapses the distance between self and other that the theistic position maintains. The monist comes to a realization that the divine is not merely other but is also self, and that self, other, and all things are divine. In the words of a classic Hindu saying from the Upanishads, *Tat tvam asi*: "that thou art," "you are everything," or "the human soul is one with the divine."

Two facets of the experiential analysis of projection and the M response are helpful here. First let us recall that projection is an attempt to formulate the nature of selfhood, otherness, and their relationship. While theistic religions focus on the divine nature of otherness, and monistic religions emphasize the divine nature of selfhood, neither entirely omits emphasis on the opposite pole or on the relationship itself. Secondly, in the M response, it is through the self that we know the other. Paradoxically, we perceive this knowledge as coming from the other rather than from the self:

Movement perception is predicated on the conviction that what one is perceiving is truly other than oneself . . . the sense of otherness is stronger and taken for granted. . . . Simply because it most clearly originates within the self it would seem least able to create a sense of otherness.<sup>25</sup>

Schachtel states that the process of projection usually takes place outside of awareness. The content of the projection may or may not be known to the person as being part of himself, but the process, i.e., the mechanism of perceiving the object in terms of one's own inner experience is generally not conscious.

Applying this facet of Rorschachian projection to monistic religions, perhaps it can be said that monists reach an awareness of the process of projection, realizing that the perception originates in the self instead of coming from the other. Instead of concluding that the perception is thereby distorted, they conclude that self and other are one, and by extension that self is God, that *Atman* is *Brahman*. In his existential analysis of the processes underlying the movement response, Schachtel found that although it is unusual,

conscious awareness of the internal source of projective knowing is possible:

The attitude typical of kinesthetic perception of the Rorschach inkblots is not that of a detached outside observer but one in which the subject experiences in himself the movement perceived in the inkblot. The degree of awareness of this experience varies. When there is marked awareness of the kinesthetic experience, the subject has the feeling that he knows from the inside how the object perceived moves.<sup>26</sup>

He describes a kind of projective knowing in which the internal source of the projection or of the knowledge is recognized, analogous to the Hindu concept of the composite self wherein the individual develops and maintains an awareness of self within himself and within the other. Kakar emphasizes that "until this awareness of I in the composite self and in the generalized other is established and maintained, man, Hindus would say, is living in *avidya*: ignorance or false consciousness."

The Buddhist understanding of self and other differs substantially from the Hindu view, but precise awareness of the nature of perception is not uncommon in Buddhist experience and literature. Buddhism denies the ultimate reality of the self: the doctrine of *anatta* (no self, no soul) is in direct contrast to the Hindu elevation of *Atman* to equivalent status with *Brahman*. Concomitant with Buddhism's denial of self or soul, however, is an emphasis on the analysis of the processes and structures of the mind, an analysis unparalleled in psychological profundity among the world's religions. Buddhist meditative practice focuses precisely on awareness of mental processes. Intense and careful observation is applied to all experience, particularly to the mental states and perceptual processes: thinking, feeling, judging, sensing, etc.

Buddhism denies the ultimate reality of the self, emphasizing instead the transitory nature of both selfhood and reality (otherness). In order to communicate the impermanence of reality (*anicca*) and the insubstantiality of self (*anatta*) Buddhist teachings emphasize constant awareness



(mindfulness) of the processes of perception and analysis of the elements which seem to make up the self. The focus is not on self and other, for self and other are ultimately illusory. The task is to uncover their illusory and impermanent nature by detailed observation of the relationship between them: the mental processes of perception. This verse by the Third Zen Patriarch emphasizes the Buddhist view of the relativity of self and other:

When thought objects vanish the thinking subject vanishes.  
As when the mind vanishes, objects vanish.

Things are objects because of the subject (mind);

The mind (subject) is such because of things (objects).

Understand the relativity of these two

And the basic reality: the unity of emptiness.<sup>27</sup>

Brown and Engler, in their Rorschach study of advanced Buddhist meditators, have drawn a parallel between the practice of Buddhist meditation and taking/interpreting the Rorschach test. They suggest that both involve the awareness of the mental mechanics of perception:

The Rorschach test requires a subject to attribute meaning to a set of ambiguous stimuli . . . the experimenter learns something of how the subject constructs an inner representation of the world. This task is congruent with the meditator's own practice, namely to analyze the process by which the mind works in creating the internal and external world. . . . Meditation is primarily an analysis of perception of the world and how ignorance of perceptual processes contributes to human suffering.<sup>28</sup>

Projection, we postulated, involves knowing the other through the medium of knowing the self, while knowledge is perceived as coming from the other rather than from the self. Buddhism leads the meditator to investigate exactly that process of knowing: it invites an analysis of the elements of projective knowing. Buddhist meditation is an invitation to epistemology.

In non-theistic traditions the view of self and other is different from the theistic view. Rorschach's view of projec-

tion, however, encompassing the nature of selfhood, otherness, and their relationship, is valuable for understanding both of these traditions. We need not limit our projective theory of religion to those religions in which the divine is other. Both knowledge of self and knowledge of other are involved in projective knowing. Eastern and Western views conceptualize self and other differently but both make the relationship between them central to their teachings. Therefore the epistemological and anthropomorphic dimensions of projection are appropriate to the study of non-theistic and theistic religions.

### **Rorschach's Movement Response, Object Relations, and Religion**

What are the "reasons as yet unknown" for the relationship of religion and Rorschach's movement response? I suggest that the ontogenetic origins of both religion and the movement response lie in the narcissistic period of human development, and that this common origin accounts for the relationship between them intuited by Rorschach.

Several theorists have sought the origins of religious experience in preoedipal development, but few have inquired into the developmental origins of the movement response. I would like to establish the origin of movement responsivity in the narcissistic phase of development by showing the relationship of M to several factors which have been specifically associated with narcissism. These include empathy, narcissistic identification, creativity, interpersonal orientation, and time sense. I believe that the crux of the movement response is in the relationship between self and other, and that the other factors associated with M stem secondarily from this.

### **Object Relations Theory**

Object relations theory originated in psychoanalytic insights. It focuses on 1. the interaction between the individ-



ual and significant others or "objects" and 2. the early relationship between mother and infant. The maternal-infant dyad is considered the most crucial relationship for the development of selfhood and the capacity for relationship with others. The developmental period in question is the preoedipal period, also known as the narcissistic period or the period of early object-relations (the first few months of the infant's life). Central issues are self-other differentiation, dependence and independence, merger and separation, sense of self cohesion and self fragmentation. "This stage is . . . the source of the capacity to idealize others and to possess self esteem for oneself and the capacity to be a 'single one' in relation to 'the other' ".<sup>29</sup> It is also the source of the capacity for empathy.

### M and Empathy

Gerald King proposed in 1958 that the area of interpersonal relationship might be a "fruitful frame of reference" for a redefinition of Rorschach's movement response, M. Suggesting that M represents "the ability in fantasy to project the self into time and space in the interpersonal sphere," he demonstrated that the number of M responses is positively associated with the degree to which a subject defines a problem in self-other terms and is concerned introspectively with the quality of interpersonal relationships. Self-other orientation or interpersonal emphasis in M has been emphasized by others as well. Dana enumerated six constructs to define Rorschach's M: tolerance for delay, accuracy of time sense, high intelligence, high creativity, high fantasy, and an ability to conceptualize experience in terms of interpersonal relations.<sup>30</sup> Schachtel's analysis of the experiential dimensions of the Rorschach test suggests that M reflects the subject's ability to be attuned to the subjective experience of others. He indicates that the movement responses

play a role in every act of empathic understanding since the subject cannot have an inner understanding of

another person's feeling except in terms of his own experience of that or a similar feeling. In empathic understanding the projection of the subject's own feeling merges inseparably with the perception of the other person's feeling.<sup>31</sup>

Extrapolating from Schachtel's discussion, J. Urist focuses specifically on empathy and Rorschach's M. He defines empathy by means of five dimensions of the self-other relationship and finds that M reflects some but not all of these components:

M appears to reflect the following: a. the capacity to experience others via a sensitivity to their internal, subjective experience; b. the capacity to cathect people and experiences as alive and human; c. the capacity to experience others as whole figures whose total personalities represent a complex integration of various affectively charged and more neutral attributes.

Two additional elements of empathy, he finds, are *not* reflected in Rorschach's M. First is "intactness of ego boundaries": the subject may lack a sense of self/other differentiation in Rorschach's M, but not in the experience of empathy. Secondly, M can represent narcissistic investment in a self-object whereas in true empathy "the tie to the other exists independently of narcissistic concerns."<sup>32</sup>

Mayman also believes that M responses can reflect either empathy or narcissistic identification. He states that the kind of M response and the style in which it is given can reveal whether the subject is capable of empathy or merely narcissistic identification:

Empathy is a higher level psychological attainment than identification . . . in empathy an experience is shared, in simple identification the self-other distinction is blurred or lost. In identification the ego becomes the other, or by projection, the other becomes an externalized facsimile of the self . . . Identification dissolves the self-other differences in order to reduce to an absolute minimum the separateness of self from other; empathy does not.<sup>33</sup>



Mayman advocates a system of scoring these two types of M to clarify the distinction between empathic M and identificatory M.

Mayman's identificatory M and Urist's non-empathic M seem to represent the M responses that Schachtel calls "potentially distorted knowing." Movement responsivity becomes distorted when it has a defensive function; when tangential or partial data from the other person's behavior are used to "attach meanings taken from one's own life experience which do not correspond to the real and total picture of the other person's behavior"; or when qualities are ascribed to the other person "the presence of which in one's own life is unknown to him or which he tends to deny in himself." (Cf. Schachtel) Empathic knowing, in other words, is non-distorted knowing, whereas narcissistic knowing is more likely to be distorted. M therefore refers to the entire range of self-other relationship, from narcissistic identification to clear perception and accurate knowing made possible by the separation of self and other.

### The Origins of the M Response

Many authors have suggested a relationship between M and empathy<sup>34</sup> but few have asked the genetic question of origins. Urist even commented on the importance of empathy in object relations literature, and found M to represent some of the dimensions of empathy, yet he did not explicitly seek the roots of M in early object relations. Both Mayman and Urist believe that M can represent "narcissistic identification" but their use of the term narcissism does not imply developmental concerns. Schachtel as well avoids any genetic or developmental speculations, as is appropriate in an experiential analysis. One study, however, does indirectly address the question of developmental origins of M responsivity. Bene studied the effects of the relationship with the mother on Rorschach M responses. Her results indicated that "the ability to make M responses (in boys) develops at an early age when the relationship with the mother is of overwhelming importance."<sup>35</sup> Although Bene

did not elaborate her point, we can conclude that the M type of knowing, the knowing of the other through the self, originates in the relationship with the mother, in early object relations during the narcissistic phase of development. In other words, the form of projective knowing that transcends self and other originates in the mother-child interaction. To make a Rorschachian pun, one might say M plus other equals mother.

### The Transformations of Narcissism

Object relations theorists have argued that empathy arises from the early period of object relations. Kohut called empathy a "transformation of narcissism" and saw the source of empathy in "the fact that in our earliest mental organization, the feelings, actions, and behavior of the mother was included in ourself." Empathy, he says, involves the ability to attain access to another person's mind. It stems from the experience of primary empathy with the mother which

prepares us for the recognition that to a large extent, the basic inner experiences of people remain similar to our own. Our first perception of the manifestations of another person's feelings, wishes, and thoughts occurred within the framework of a narcissistic conception of the world.

Thus whereas others have linked M with empathy, Kohut's words point to the crucial element which has not been addressed: the origins of empathy (and therefore of M) in the preoedipal narcissistic relationship with the mother.

Kohut finds creativity to be another transformation of narcissism. In creative work, he states,

narcissistic energies are employed which have been transformed into . . . idealizing libido . . . [The creative product] is cathected with narcissistic libido and thus included in the context of the self.<sup>36</sup>

The creative person is attempting to recreate a perfection which formerly (during the phase of primary narcissism)



was an attribute of his own. Although the exact relationship between the movement response and creativity remains controversial, many studies have linked M and creative thinking. Rorschach himself made this association and considered "inner creativity" a very important aspect of M. Schachtel finds that the creativity expressed in the M response represents a particular type of relatedness to the world, a creative factor in the act of experiencing which is a prerequisite for creative production. Kohut's clarification of the source of creativity in early object relations sheds light upon the reasons behind the association of Rorschach's M with both empathy and creativity.

A third transformation of narcissism, Kohut maintains, is the capacity to acknowledge the finiteness of our own existence. The acceptance of the transience and impermanence of objects we love and of our own selves is an accomplishment of the ego which is linked to "a valid conception of time [and] of limits." The rare feat of accepting one's own impermanence thus rests upon "the creation of a higher form of narcissism", a cosmic narcissism which transcends the bounds of the individual. Kohut explains that the child's primary identity with the mother is the precursor of an expansion of the self late in life when the finiteness of individual existence is acknowledged:

The achievement—as the certainty of eventual death is fully realized—of a shift of the narcissistic cathexes from the self to a concept of participation in a supra-individual and timeless existence, must also be regarded as genetically predetermined by the child's primary identity with the mother.<sup>37</sup>

Rorschach's M has been linked with a sense of the impermanence of the self in two ways. First, tolerance for delay and accuracy of time sense has been related to the movement response as has the tendency to project oneself into the past and into the future. These time oriented elements indicate an association of M with an awareness of transience and of impermanence in general terms. Secondly, Kuhn has shown that people who produce the rare

WM+ responses\* may, under the impact of grief, display increased creativity and "awareness of the finiteness and totality of human existence." These responses were also associated with placing a "high value on the past and on sequential aspects of existence."<sup>38</sup> The fact that these qualities are characteristic of the WM+ response rather than merely the M response, emphasize the difficult and unusual nature of these "transformations of narcissism."

I believe that Rorschach's M response originates in early object relations. M represents a transformation of narcissism, and it is the origin of M in narcissistic object relations that accounts for the divergent parameters of M ranging from creativity, empathy, and religious experience, to interpersonal relations, projection, and time-orientation. The association of M with object relations is particularly relevant to religion, for the experience of religion seems to originate in early object relations as well.

### Object Relations and Religion

Several object relations theorists have attempted to rethink the Freudian critique of the role of religion in human life. Freud's normative vision involved a logical and rational "acceptance of the impersonal universe of factual reality, in which the only acceptable objects are genital objects of the opposite sex,"<sup>39</sup> and in which dependency is antithetical to true maturity. The key to object relations theory's reevaluation of religion is its revision of the image of normative human life as isolated, alienated, and autonomous. Object relations theory revises the psychoanalytic image of psychological maturity and the direction of human development.

Object relations theorists . . . have redefined the problem which religion attempts to solve. . . . The life issue which defines religion is not the problem of guilt or powerlessness but the problem of separation . . . the problem of maintaining a sense of self in relationship.<sup>40</sup>

\* WM+ refers to a movement response, M, which integrates the whole Rorschach card, W, into the percept. The plus, +, refers to the good form quality or the realistic quality of the percept.



The central point in object relations theory's revaluation of religion is a revised understanding of separation and dependency, of interaction with and dependence on the other. Rather than locating the origins of religion in the oedipal stage and viewing religion as a projection of the father image, object relations theorists find the origins of religion in the infant's earliest relationships to loving persons, in the narcissistic period of development.

By viewing religious experience as "of the same kind of stuff as human personal relationship experience" object relations theory avoids the psychoanalytic pitfall of viewing patriarchal Western theism as the paradigm for all religions. It leaves room for the contribution of maternal images, non- or prepersonal images, etc., to the view of the absolute.

Object relations theorists agree on finding the source of religion in the narcissistic period of development. However, some theorists differ in their ideas of just what stage of the narcissistic period is most crucial for the origins of human religiosity. For two theorists, Kohut and Rizzuto, the entire period of narcissism is relevant to the emergence of religion. The emphases of other object relations theorists seem to fall into developmental stages within the narcissistic period. The period of narcissism involves a gradual transition from a totally undifferentiated phase where self and other are not distinguished to a phase of clear separation of self and other, and an ability to tolerate the absence of the mother. Fairbairn places the origins of religion in the earliest undifferentiated symbiotic stage. Guntrip locates the origins of religion slightly later, in the early relationship of dependency wherein personal relationship begins to be possible and some differentiation of self and other has occurred. Winnicott finds the antecedents of religion even later, in a "transitional realm" in which true separation from the mother becomes possible.

#### *Kohut and Rizzuto*

Kohut describes the developmental phases during the narcissistic period. There is a brief original phase of "pri-

mary narcissism" which is inevitably disturbed. Two parallel and simultaneous lines of development begin subsequent to this disturbance: a grandiose self and its concomitant mirror transferences; and an idealized parent imago or omnipotent object and its concomitant idealizing transferences. With respect to the idealized parent imago, he explains:

The psyche saves a part of the lost experience of global narcissistic perfection by assigning it to an archaic, rudimentary (transitional) self-object, the idealized parent imago. Since all bliss and power now reside in the idealized object, the child feels empty and powerless when he is separate from it and he attempts therefore to maintain a continuous union with it.

In their attempts to preserve a part of the original experience of narcissistic perfection, the two basic narcissistic configurations create the ideas "I am perfect" (grandiose self) and "You are perfect and I am part of you" (omnipotent object). These antithetical but coexisting mechanisms have been linked with religion and "mystical merger with God" by Kohut himself.<sup>41</sup> Kohut's descriptions of the omnipotent other and the idealizing transference may be more relevant to a theistic and personalistic view of the divine as God whereas his comments on the gradual differentiation of self and other in the mirror transferences of the grandiose self may be more appropriate to monistic or non-theistic experiences.

Rizzuto, another psychoanalyst in the object relations tradition focuses not on the experience of religion but rather on the image of God. She argues that the image of God is formed in the narcissistic period; that maternal, paternal, and other figures in the infant's life contribute to the image; and that the image of God and the relationship with God change throughout the life cycle, even for non-believers. Rizzuto notes that it is in the context of the primary experiences of knowing the other that the image of God emerges. Her work points toward a Kohutian analysis of the contribution of the idealized parent imago (omnipotent other) to religion via the image of God. But she does not neglect the Kohutian grandiose self. She remarks on the



constant dialectic processes between primary object representations and the sense of self [which] bring the pre-oedipal child to form some representations of a being like the parents . . . who is "above all" and bigger than anyone else. This being becomes a living invisible reality in the child's mind.<sup>42</sup>

While Rizzuto's emphasis is on the image of God, Fairbairn, Guntrip, and Winnicott seek the source of the experience of religion.

### *Fairbairn and Guntrip*

Fairbairn locates the source of religion in the earliest phase of primary narcissism: "the experience of symbiosis, or original relationship with the mother constitutes the deepest core of the religious imagination and is the historical source of the mystic experience of union with the deity."<sup>43</sup> Fairbairn's view is similar to Freud's brief but famous speculation on the origins of the "oceanic feeling" in the union of mother and child.

While Fairbairn focuses on the symbiotic stage of the maternal-infant relationship as a source of the experience of mystical union, Guntrip's work implies that the antecedents of religious experience lie in personal relationship and dependency. For Guntrip the origins of religion seem to be in a stage of narcissism which involves some degree of self-other differentiation, and a level of dependency with some degree of mutuality. Many of Guntrip's descriptions of religion focus on a sense of union or communion with the universe. His is a monistic approach to religion:

Mature religion would express man's fundamentally dependent nature, in a relationship of emotional rapport with and reverence for external reality as a whole, immediate and universal.<sup>44</sup>

Guntrip's emphasis is on oneness with ultimate reality, rapport with and reverence for the cosmos, at-home-ness in the universal milieu, and "communion with all that is around

us". He does not describe a transcendent theistic deity. In fact, when he does discuss the experience of "God" he defines God in terms of this universal or cosmic oneness: "mature and sensitive minds will still experience a loving rapport with the all environing reality and will express this in personal terms as communion with God."<sup>45</sup> Guntrip finds the source of religion in the psychology of human personal relationship, yet he does not stress the personal component of the divine. Rather than the anthropomorphic or personal dimensions of the divine, his emphasis is on dependency and mutuality in a universal sense, a dependency which encompasses the entire universe in a cosmic system of mutual interdependence. Thus although he defines religion as "the culmination of the personal-relationship essence of human living" he nevertheless does not emphasize mystical union with a personal deity.

Guntrip's emphasis on a non-theistic relatedness to the universe is particularly appropriate in view of the phase of narcissism that he believes is most formative for human religiosity. The infant's experience of being one with the environment and having absolute power and control over the environment has been explored by many theorists. Awareness of dependence on the environment (or the other) precedes any awareness of self or other as person. This pre-personal, and non-theistic stance corroborates our earlier suggestion that projective thinking (the M response), similarly originating in early object relationships, is a relevant tool for understanding both theistic and non-theistic religions

### Winnicott

Winnicott places the psychological antecedents of religion at an even later developmental stage, although still within the pre-oedipal, narcissistic period. For Winnicott, religion and culture are produced/created/discovered in the transitional space, in the period of separation of self from other. Although Guntrip, Fairbairn, and Winnicott locate the antecedents of religion in different phases of the narcis-



sistic period, all agree in finding the origins of religion in the relationship between mother and child, in the maternal-infant dyad. Object relations theorists agree that religion belongs at some point on the continuum of self-other differentiation; they see it as an extension of the paradigm of relationship.

Winnicott believes that during the narcissistic stage of early development, the infant creates "transitional objects" in order to accomplish the necessary separation from the mother. The classic example of a transitional object is the teddy bear, selected from the environment by the infant and treated as if alive. The transitional object functions as a symbol of the mother's comforting and reassuring presence when she is absent. In one sense this object is an illusion, but in another sense it is real: it has a powerfully real effect on the child. Paradoxically, the transitional object is both real and illusory.

### **Winnicott's Cultural Conclusion**

Winnicott draws two important conclusions from his understanding of the ability to construct transitional objects: a cultural conclusion, and an epistemological conclusion. In cultural terms, this ability is the developmental antecedent of all later cultural experiences such as religion and art. These cultural products are created in the "transitional space" and require the capacity for play, creativity, and illusion. Winnicott locates religion in this "transitional realm," the realm between the self and the other, the potential space between the individual and the environment. Winnicott describes the areas of life encompassed within the transitional domain:

Transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion . . . which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really

exists. This intermediate area of experience . . . constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion, and to imaginative living and to creative scientific work.<sup>46</sup>

Winnicott's cultural conclusion regarding the psychological source of religion and the arts confirms the ideas of Fairbairn, Guntrip, and others who find the origins of religion in early object relations. If the psychological antecedents of Rorschach's M response and of religion both lie in the narcissistic phase of human development, we have confirmed Rorschach's intuition regarding the relationship of M and religion. It is due to their common origin that Rorschachian projection is applicable to the understanding of religion.

### Winnicott's Epistemological Conclusion

In addition to the cultural conclusion drawn from his understanding of the ability to construct transitional objects, Winnicott also draws an epistemological conclusion. Epistemologically, the ability to construct transitional objects is the developmental antecedent of the process of knowing the other, a point which brings us back to Rorschachian projection. The ability to construct transitional objects is the developmental antecedent of knowing, and knowing consists of a dual process of creation of the other (from within) and discovery of the other (from without).

Winnicott describes the infant's process of knowing the environment:

In health the infant creates what is in fact lying around, waiting to be found. . . . Yet the object must be found in order to be created. This has to be accepted as a paradox and not solved by a restatement that, by its cleverness, seems to eliminate the paradox.<sup>47</sup>

Winnicott's paradox encompasses nothing less than the question of subject and object and how they are intertwined



in the process of knowing reality. Subject and object are inseparably interrelated as the human mind creates the objects it finds. According to Winnicott, we create what exists, we create the objects of the environment, we create the other. And yet, paradoxically, the other also exists separately, apart from us. In order to know what is outside, the child must create a representation of that other as a part of his inner world. Perception or knowing, therefore, is an active, participatory process involving both the self and the other. For Winnicott external and internal reality are integrated, mutually influenced. What is external is simultaneously created by the individual.

In Winnicott's understanding, knowing is a process in which the other is simultaneously discovered as other, created by the self, and perceived as other. Winnicott was speaking of an epistemological process very similar to that of Rorschachian projection. Projection involves knowing the other through the medium of knowledge of the self, while the knowledge is perceived as coming from the other rather than from the self. Winnicott's developmental paradox struggles with the same issue addressed by Rorschach's epistemological paradox: the issue of self, other, and their relationship in the process of knowing reality. Rorschachian projection results in a kind of knowing that like Winnicott's originates within the self, or between self and other, but need not cause distortion. Both of these views of knowing transcend the subject-object or self-other dichotomy without collapsing the polarity. In addition both of them involve a participation in a kind of body knowing, a somatic participation in perceptual experience. In Rorschachian projection (M responsiveness) there is a "felt movement," an ephemeral body sensation. Through the body this grounded knowing of self and other occurs. Similarly in Winnicott's work, the point is made that the roots of perception and knowing are in the physical contact between the infant and the mother. The nursing experience, the sensation of mouth and breast, the eye contact with the mother—these are crucial for the organization of perceptual experience and for the process of knowing the other. They are also the source of religion and culture.

Rorschachian projection like Winnicott's transitional space transcends subject and object, self and other, individual and environment. The realm of Rorschachian projection, like Winnicott's transitional realm is both the realm of religious experience and the realm of deepest knowledge of selfhood and otherness. Implicit in both Rorschach and Winnicott are an epistemological and a cultural conclusion. Culture (religion) and epistemology (knowledge of otherness and selfhood) are related in two ways: developmentally through their origins in early object relations and experientially through projective knowing.

### Conclusion

Rorschach's assertion that M "in its finest developments" is religious experience, becomes quite understandable, knowing the common origins of religion and M in early object relations. I believe that M is an index of the relationship between self and other, an index of narcissism. M can measure the continuum of self-other differentiation.\* The entire range, from the undifferentiated perception of other as self to the clear and accurate perception of otherness is accessible to measurement by M.

I have suggested that the understanding of projection emerging from an experiential analysis of M is particularly appropriate to viewing religion as projection. This is due to several reasons primarily related to the fact that projection and religion share epistemological concerns. First, because of its epistemological optimism regarding the knowledge of otherness, projection provides a legitimate means of understanding (radical) otherness. Second, in projection knowledge of the other occurs through knowledge of the self, encompassing the same epistemological processes emphasized in contemporary theological interpretations of divine otherness. Third, Rorschachian projection can accommodate both theistic and non-theistic traditions in its under-

\* Relevant in this context is Mayman's suggestion regarding differential scoring of M responses. Mayman offered a set of criteria to differentiate empathic Ms from identificatory or narcissistic Ms. (See reference 19.)



standing of religion since projection and religion are both attempts to formulate the nature of selfhood, otherness, and their relationship. Finally, a discussion of the origins of M and religious experience established a further link between the two. It is due to their common origin in early object relations that Rorschachian projection (M) is most applicable to the understanding of religion. Both projection and religion emerge from a transitional or transcendent realm between self and other. Object relations theory enables us to extrapolate toward both culture and epistemology from Rorschach's movement response.

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 Department of Religious Studies  
 The University of Santa Clara  
 Santa Clara, CA 95053

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