

# Reflections on Erik Erikson’s Stance on Religion

## What are the Intellectual Origins and Traditions that give rise to Psychosocial Theory?

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### Introduction

A boy named Erik never knew the identity of his biological father, the Danish pediatrician Alek. Erik’s mother, Karla Abrahamsen, was Jewish, and was married and living in Copenhagen. About four years before Erik was born, she divorced and remarried Valdemar Isidor Salomonsen<sup>1</sup>, a Jewish currency broker<sup>2</sup> who fled to Frankfurt, Germany. Erik was born June 15, 1902, and goes by the name Solomonson<sup>3</sup>.

In his autobiographical essay, Erikson describes him as “blonde, blue-eyed and growing”<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, he was rejected by his German classmates due to his stepfather’s Jewish religion<sup>5</sup>. Between the ages of 9 and 18, he attended secondary school and the Humanist Gymnasium in Karlsruhe, Germany<sup>6</sup>. This was different from the German Oberrealschule, which focused on natural sciences, modern languages, and mathematics, and the Realgymnasium – a compromise between the gymnasium and

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1. R. H. Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing choice in a changing world*, Hachette UK, 2018, p. 320.

2. R. M. Ryckman, *Theories of personality psychology series*, Wadsworth 2000, pp. 177-178.

3. L. J. Friedman, *Identity’s architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

4. E. H. Erikson, *The quest for identity*, Newsweek 1970, pp. 84-89.

5. J. Smart, *Disability across the developmental life span: For the rehabilitation counselor*, Springer Publishing Company 2011, pp. 80-81.

6. H. W. Maier, *Three theories of child development: The contributions of Erik H. Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Robert R. Sears, and their applications*, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 13-14.

the Oberrealschule. A typical German gymnasium, Erik's school focuses solely on education, disregarding sports, music, and extracurricular activities. At the end of nine years, he took his examinations and received the Abitur, a certificate of graduation that granted him the privilege to enroll in a university. At that point, however, he had received enough formal schooling<sup>7</sup>. After graduating from the Karlsruhe Gymnasium, Erik traveled through the Black Forest for several months. He then joined the Baden State Art School in 1921. Art was not considered as a respectable profession within the Jewish community of the city. By choosing artistic pursuits instead of pursuing a university education or a professional career, Erik deviated from his stepfather's path. Gustav Wolf ran a small school similar to a studio, where students worked in various arts and trades, including the manual construction of small art books. Jewish and acquainted with the Hornberger family, Wolf developed a fondness for Erik. While it was a school for boys, it also allowed Erik's half-sister Ellen to attend classes<sup>8</sup>.

Erikson returned home at the age of 25 with the intention to work as an art teacher. He was invited to Vienna to teach at a new school for the children of families who had come to Vienna for psychoanalysis. He taught art, history, and various other subjects. Erikson was given a free hand to create an ideal educational program<sup>9</sup>. He also studied the Montessori system and was one of only two males who graduated from the Montessori Teachers' Association during that period. His interest in game therapy and child analysis stems from his continuous teaching, influenced by his Montessori education<sup>10</sup>.

In 1930, Erikson married Joan Mowat Serson, a Canadian artist-dancer whom he met at a community gathering<sup>11</sup>. Having completed his education in Vienna in 1933, Erikson immigrated to the United States<sup>12</sup>.

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7. L. J. Friedman, *Identity's architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

8. L. J. Friedman, *Identity's architect...*, *op.cit.*

9. R. Frager, *Personality and personal growth*, Pearson Prentice Hall, 1940, pp. 234-235.

10. R. Frager, *Personality and personal growth*, *op.cit.*, pp. 234-235.

11. J. A., Fadul, *Encyclopedia of theory & practice in psychotherapy & counseling*, Lulu, 2014, pp. 163-164.

12. D. G. Benner, *Psychology and religion*, Baker Book House Company, 1988, pp. 96-97.

After arriving in America at the end of 1933, two passionate love stories began between the childish psychoanalyst trained in Vienna and “the Americans”. A federal immigration clerk in Boston smiled warmly at the apprehensive 32-year-old refugee and expressed a heartfelt welcome to the United States. This initial entry into the country was exuberant. He whispered “Yankee Doodle” on leaving the immigration office, and for the next sixty years, he continued to express that optimistic spirit. To him, the nation of Franklin Roosevelt was more than a bulwark against a Europe gone mad with fascism. The United States represented a human endeavor to achieve a minimum level of economic, social, and psychological dignity for all. The United States was also hopeful in establishing a strong sense of personal identity in the context of the surrounding society.

During his early years in this country, Erikson began to develop the concept of identity and explore its significance in the context of the ultimate identity crisis. In 1950, the famous psychoanalyst was subjected to the persecution of Marxism in the United States due to suspicions of his sympathies with the Communists<sup>13</sup>. He passed away on 12 May 1994, in Harwich, Massachusetts, at the age of 91<sup>14</sup>.

Erikson was a brilliant, astute theoretician and an elegant author. He was one of the most prominent and influential psychoanalysts of the 20th century<sup>15</sup>. Wright (1931) sees in Erikson a prophet for our age who needs to be read and understood.

### Essential Features of Erikson’s Theory

Unlike early psychoanalytical perspectives<sup>16</sup>, Erikson focused on the objective relationships between the individual (*Ego*) and his social and cultural environments (*ethos*), as well as the influence of these interpersonal

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13. L. J. Friedman, *Identity’s architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson*, Harvard University Press.

14. J. R. Shook, *Dictionary of modern American philosophers*, A&C Black, 2005, pp. 734-735.

15. D. L. Sills, *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (Vol. 18), Macmillan Company, 1979, pp. 172-173.

16. R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg, *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (3rd ed., Vol. 1), Wiley 2009, pp. 448-449.

relationships on the development of psychosocial identity. Erikson argues that “psychoanalysis has traditionally focused on describing the changes in instincts and the Ego only until adolescence”, and that his shift in interest reflects a growing focus on the present as an essential aspect of a person’s orientation. Young people are particularly concerned about “what they should believe and who they should – or indeed, could be or become”<sup>17</sup>. He made three major contributions to the study of personality: (1) that, along with Freud’s psychosexual developmental stages, the individual simultaneously goes through psychosocial and Ego-development stages, (2) that personality development continues throughout life, and (3) that each stage of development can have both positive and negative outcomes<sup>18</sup>.

In his masterpiece *Childhood and Society*, Erikson suggests his idea for a stage in personality development<sup>19</sup>. He identified the stages of psychosocial development that cover the entire lifespan. According to his views, development is a product of the interaction between heredity and the environment. In this respect Erikson is known as a psychosocial theorist. Moreover, a sense of the self develops as a way of anticipate certain goals and possibly attain them; this is not just a way to stabilize present experiences related to the past<sup>20</sup>.

Erik Erikson delineated the eight stages of psychosocial development and, in his later work, frequently reflected on religious themes. In fact, at the core of his work lies his theory of the human lifecycle, a model that integrates human growth and development from birth to old age. The stages are organized on the basis of different interests or concerns that emerge from the maturation of social pressures in individuals. Each stage has its own “task” which requires new ways of interacting with others and dealing with new patterns and impulses<sup>21</sup>. Erikson’s model

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17. K. Weissbourd, *Growing up in the James family: Henry James, Sr., as son and father*, UMI Research Press 1985, pp. 23-24.

18. R. Frager, *Personality and personal growth*, op.cit., pp. 234-235.

19. E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and society*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1963.

20. K. Weissbourd, *Growing up in the James family: Henry James, Sr., as son and father*, UMI Research Press, 1985, pp. 23-24.

21. M. J. Meadow & R. D. Kahoe, *Psychology of religion: Religion in individual lives*, Harper & Row, 1984.

of the life cycle (known as his eight stages of man) is a comprehensive representation of human development in which mind, body, and social milieu merge in a dynamic process of identity formation. Although Erikson tied his theory to chronological age, each stage depends not only on the person's age changes but also on social factors such as school and college, childbirth, retirement, etc.

Consequently, Erikson viewed the main challenge of life, not simply as biological survival, but as the search for identity. Broadly conceived, at each stage of life, people ask themselves, "Who am I?" and at each stage, they arrive at somewhat different answers<sup>22</sup>. The Eriksonian identity language has demonstrated its unique transformative power. Conceiving social and political conflicts explicitly in terms of identity has substantially altered them<sup>23</sup>. Erikson aimed to establish a link between understanding the human mind and psyche and comprehending social, political, and cultural problems<sup>24</sup>. Popularized by Erik Erikson as a central psychoanalytic concept, identity is a defining characteristic that shapes one's sense of the self. In adolescence, individuals acquire a sense of their own identity within their social group, or they become confused about who they are and what they want in life<sup>25</sup>. It also examines the influences of the family, religion, culture, and social groups associated with the formation and maintenance of identity. It represents continuity in the integrating functions of the Ego, which must be attained<sup>26</sup>.

Erikson, popularly known for his study of the "identity crisis," pioneered the discipline of psychohistory. At each stage of life, the person must accomplish a major task, which Erikson referred to as a crisis. As Erikson notes, "human nature can best be studied in a state of conflict;

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22. W. L. Haight, E. H. Taylor & E. S. Ruth, *Human behavior for social work practice: A developmental-ecological framework*, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 21-22.

23. G. Izenberg, *Identity: The necessity of a modern idea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, pp. 18-19.

24. K. Welchman, *Erik Erikson: His life, work and significance*, Open University Press, 2000, pp. 135-136.

25. T. Kucukcan, *Politics of ethnicity, identity and religion: Turkish Muslims in Britain* (illustrated ed.), Ashgate, 1999, pp. 47-48.

26. W. H. Swatos, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of religion and society*, AltaMira Press, 1998, pp. 233-234.

and human conflict deserves the detailed attention from interested recorders mainly under special circumstances”<sup>27</sup>. The individual’s sense of identity is formed when these crises are resolved. Erikson sees his stages as reflecting potential resolutions to normative (or predictable) life crises. Normative identity formation has its dark and negative side, which can persist as an undisciplined aspect of one’s overall identity throughout life. Each person and each group harbors a negative identity as the sum of all these identifications and fragments of identity that the individual was overwhelmed with himself as undesirable either irreconcilable or taught by his group to perceive as the fatal mark of the sexual role of race, class or religion<sup>28</sup>. Ideally, when resolving these situations, the person should strive to come out on the positive side of the dichotomy, while also internalizing certain aspects of the negative pole<sup>29</sup>.

Later, as adults, people reflect on their past experiences and either find meaning in their lives, or despair over unfulfilled goals and wasted opportunities. Amid the identity crisis, Erikson introduces the possibility of autonomy and integrity, as well as the threat of excessive aggression towards oneself or some other prohibitive presence<sup>30</sup>. Perhaps most central to the concept of identity consolidation is the young person’s sense of presence or integrity. This includes a relationship of mutual adaptation with the social system, the ability to directly interact with others, and inclusive responsiveness.

Other research has linked Ego identity status with religious exploration/crisis, and commitment in predicting outcomes. Religious growth is associated with Erikson’s hypothetical establishment of a safe identity<sup>31</sup>. Young adults will find faith meaningful only if they believe it assists

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27. W. L. Richter, *Approaches to political thought*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009, pp. 186-187.

28. E. H. Erikson, *Life history and the historical moment*, Norton, 1975.

29. M. D. Kermis, *Mental health in late life: The adaptive process* (J. a. Bartlett, ed.) Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1986, pp. 66-67.

30. K. Weissbourd, *Growing up in the James family: Henry James, Sr., as son and father*, UMI Research Press, 1985, pp. 23-24.

31. R. W. Hood, P. C. Hill, & B. Spilka, *The psychology of religion, fourth edition: an empirical approach*, Guilford Press 2009, pp. 139-140.

them in their quest for personal identity and meaningful intimacy. Furthermore, Erikson pointed out that seniors are looking for models that can help them through difficult life transitions<sup>32</sup>.

### Erikson on Ethics

In this section, we will briefly discuss Erikson's conceptions of ethics, because ethics, whether stated explicitly or implied, always relates to some form of religiosity or spirituality. And we will see how Erikson connects Ethics with religion.

Browning's essay clarifies Erikson's view of the normative image of a man, addressing certain social criticisms and exploring what we might call psychological ethics<sup>33</sup>. In general, Erikson's normative anthropology is also significantly different from Freud's in terms of the type of "Ego" that Erikson values and encourages, which is much less Apollonian compared to Freud's. Instead of the ego dominating inner passion and outer chaos through intellect and/or will, Erikson's concept of the ego encompasses the entire personality. It involves learning to mutually adjust with the environment, which includes both giving and receiving at the same time<sup>34</sup>. Erikson's contribution to ethics focuses on the principles of his theory of human psychosocial development which states that the individual passes through eight critical stages, from which a set of basic Ego forces emerges. The positive qualities of each of those steps are called virtues. They provide the power to survive, develop and pass on a similar strength in a rejuvenated form to the next generation.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the emergence of hope suggest four principles that, according to Erikson, govern the development of virtues: 1) the principle of evolution and development, through which the individual develops his ethical inclination through the eight stages

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32. W. Kornblum & C. D. Smith, *Sociology: The central questions*, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998, pp. 111-112.

33. P. Homans, *Childhood and selfhood: Essays on tradition, religion, and modernity in the psychology of Erik H. Erikson*, Bucknell University Press, 1978, pp. 46-47.

34. D. D. Evans, *Faith, authenticity, and morality*, University of Toronto Press, 1980, pp. 104-105.

of growth; 2) the concept of mutuality, basic sets of partner relations which refers to the development of the forces of the Ego that are closely linked to religious values and commitment; 3) active will/choices, and 4) generation and regeneration.

To continue with, Erikson's ethical theories contribute to three ethical issues that emerged in the 20th century: 1) a shift in emphasis from concepts of right and good to those of virtue, vice, and sentiment; 2) the question of ethical naturalism, and 3) new evaluations of human abilities that necessitate morality and ethics, as well as the significance of principles as a sense of duty<sup>35</sup>. Erikson's foundation for ethics is the Golden Rule, which he describes as: "one should treat others as one wishes to be treated"<sup>36</sup>.

### Preliminary Remarks on Eriksonian Religiosity

As we know, cognitive thinking is projected onto myths and social structures (Phenomenology)<sup>37</sup>. In addition, the use of this pattern discloses Erikson's strong affinity with traditional religious narratives. So, in this context, we will also consider the question of Erikson's religious orientation. Erikson<sup>38</sup> was one of the first scholars to conceptualize religion as part of one's broader psychosocial development, and one of the most significant contributors to the redirection of psychoanalytic thinking about religion<sup>39</sup>. From one perspective, all of Erikson's work should also be seen in reference with the psychoanalytical examination of religion. For Erikson, religion does not operate as an illusion, as Freud

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35. F. A. Summerlin, *Religion and mental health: A bibliography*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, National Institute of Mental Health, 1980, pp. 81-82.

36. H. A. Buetow, *Religion in personal development: An analysis and a prescription (American University Studies)* (2nd ed.), Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 1991.

37. D. L. Carmody & T. L. Brink, *Cengage advantage books: Ways to the center: An introduction to world religions*, Cengage Learning, 2012, pp. 24-25.

38. E. H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis*, W.W. Norton, New York 1968.

39. J. K. Boehnlein, *Psychiatry and religion: The convergence of mind and spirit*, American Psychiatric Press, 2000, pp. 63-64.



(1961) claims, but as an institution charged with faith, devotion, and inspiration<sup>40</sup>. Erikson treats religious inquiries of people with dignity, humanity, and compassion.

Contemporary literature has followed Erikson's lead and begun to utilize developmental schemas to understand religious and faith phenomena<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, until now, few studies have been undertaken to examine the role played by religious beliefs in attempts to solve the problems of life, the metaphysical and existential questions about death, and the problems of change and contingency. Wright (1931) commends Erikson for integrating scientific and artistic perspectives and for finding transcendent meanings in a secular world<sup>42</sup>. In general, the scientific community interested in religion has concerned itself with two general sorts of objects of analysis. On the one hand, the focus has been on religious content, texts, revelations or customs, and explanations considering psychoanalytic theory. On the other hand, there have been attempts to analyze why people believe, and whether religion is either a residue of infancy to be overcome in adulthood or, according to Erikson, something related to the development of a person's identity<sup>43</sup>.

For Erikson, religiosity is a salient component of ideological identity<sup>44</sup> that must be explored considering identity. Erikson claimed that quest is an important factor in the process of developing a deep commitment to religion, allowing individuals to question on conventional beliefs, examine previously held dogmas, challenge experiments, and reject simplistic slogans. Research into the relationship between religious doubts and identity status has been limited and inconsistent regarding the potential

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40. E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). W. W. Norton, New York 1963.

41. P. Verhagen, H. V. Praag, & J. J. Lóp, *Religion and psychiatry: Beyond boundaries* (Vol. 31), John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

42. K. Welchman, *Erik Erikson: His life, work and significance*, Open University Press, 2000.

43. C. G. Harding, *Moral dilemmas: Philosophical and psychological issues in the development of moral reasoning*, Transaction Publishers, 1985, pp. 175-176.

44. C. Markstrom-Adams & M. Smith, "Identity formation and religious orientation among high school students from the United States and Canada", *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 3 (1996), pp. 247-261. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1996.0023>.

links between doubts and survey processes about religious identity<sup>45</sup>. The cognitive religious structure which a person may have built up through their life history and which can give meaning to existence has rarely been an object of research<sup>46</sup>. At any rate, Professor Erikson maintains that all religions have a place for a “Provider” to whom all submit in a childlike manner, in order to obtain temporal goods<sup>47</sup>.

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how participation in the development challenges of human life can serve as a vehicle for spiritual growth. Human development and spiritual growth are synonymous concepts and share the same objective: a self-sufficient individual capable of transcendence and authenticity. Consequently, Neo-Eriksonian models focus on different aspects of spiritual growth compared to Fowler’s formulation. Theistic perspectives, particularly Christian ones, contribute to deepening the understanding of this process; however, they do not modify the development process itself<sup>48</sup>; or, they suggest that God is most fully engaged in the process of development. By His grace, God allows individuals to mature both spiritually and psychologically<sup>49</sup>. These patterns begin with Erikson’s idea that the biological and social stages of the human life cycle are structured to produce psychological growth<sup>50</sup>. Erikson states that “much cruel, cold, and exclusive totalness has dominated some phases of the history of organized religion”. He also reminds his readers that a modern self-made man does not appear

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45. G. Halevy & Z. Gross, “Classic and novel exploration styles in religious identity formation”, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 11, 2 (2019), pp. 158-159. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000190>.

46. C. G. Harding, *Moral dilemmas: Philosophical and psychological issues in the development of moral reasoning*, Transaction Publishers, 1985, pp. 175-176.

47. N. A. Kinsella, *Toward a theory of personality development: A study of the works of Erik H. Erikson*, St. Thomas University, 1966.

48. W. W. Meissner, *Life and faith: Psychological perspectives on religious experience*, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC 1987, pp. 29-30.

49. J. D. Kass & S. Lennox, “Emerging models of spiritual development: A foundation for mature, moral, and health-promoting behavior”, in W. R. Miller, & H. Delaney (eds), *Judeo-Christian perspectives on psychology: Human nature, motivation and change* (pp. 185-204). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10859-010> 2005, pp. 189-190.

50. W. W. Meissner, *Life and faith...., op.cit.*

to find the fulfillment in religion that primitive man found, which is a disadvantage for modern man<sup>51</sup>.

### Basic Trust

Erikson based his eight-stage model on epigenetic biological forces that go deeper than Fowler's concepts. In Erikson's opinion, religion functions as an epigenetic virtue. This has discussed the most widely and influential psychoanalyst over the past few years<sup>52</sup>. He suggests that God is the foundation of the epigenetic development process. For instance, in early childhood, infants learn to trust or distrust others to meet their basic needs. Infants develop a sense of trust or mistrust depending upon the care they receive; very young children develop a sense of autonomy or shame depending upon the encouragement they receive; slightly older children develop a feeling of guilt, based on the initial success of their efforts. Children who are capable or unable to maintain their initiative continuously develop a sense of industry or inferiority. In adolescence, the main activity is the development of identity; of course not to confuse identity. Moving into adulthood, young people make use of all the previous stages to achieve intimacy with others<sup>53</sup>. Luther's internalization of the father-son relationship is accompanied by the internalization of God, whose image, then, is no longer external and threatening. Initiative and industry should be pursued despite internal conflicts<sup>54</sup>.

For Erikson, the development of a religious sense is related to the first stage of his eight-stage schema. Erikson finds religious roots in the early stages of development and sees the first stage of infant development as resembling religion, as it involves the universalization of trust in a higher power.

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51. E. H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis*, W.W. Norton, New York 1968, p. 140.

52. R. W. Crapps, *An introduction to psychology of religion*, Mercer University Press, 1986, pp. 85-86.

53. J. F. Byrnes, *The psychology of religion*, Free Press, Collier Macmillan, 1984.

54. J. F. Byrnes, *The psychology of religion*, *op.cit.*

At the same time, religion universalizes distrust through an understanding of evil. According to Erikson, during the first year of life, the psychosocial crisis is trust versus mistrust. Erikson's Paradox reminds us that the very feature that enables religion to generate trust also creates boundaries, across which equally powerful distrust is projected. As we have seen, this is one of the general features of trust. This, of course, applies to organized religion<sup>55</sup>. Trust arising from care is indeed the touchstone of current events<sup>56</sup>. In Erikson's view, every person needs religion or something like it to survive psychologically, for religion serves as the systematic foundation of basic trust for all aspects of life<sup>57</sup>. Acquisition of trust is not simply that the infant comes to trust that the world is safe, but rather that the infant comes to understand<sup>58</sup>. Erikson referred to this foundational sense of trust as the "ontological source of faith and hope", the "primary and fundamental completeness" where the "internal and external can be perceived as interconnected goodness"<sup>59</sup>.

## Religious Institutions

We can see the centrality of institutions in Erikson's vision of life and religion. Actualization, as the essence of human interaction, cannot take place outside of an institutional process, since it is the need for institutions, that makes it possible<sup>60</sup>. The cultural institution that, according to Erikson, is profoundly linked to the issue of trust, is religion or, more generally, faith. Individual trust becomes, at this level,

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55. G. Hosking, *Trust: A history*, OUP Oxford, 2014, p. 256.

56. R. Stevens, *Erik Erikson: An introduction* (illustrated ed.), Open University Press, 1983, pp. 44-45.

57. T. A. Droege, *Faith passages and patterns*, (A. H. Jahsmann, ed.), Fortress Press, 1983.

58. T. J. Chamberlain & C. A. Hall, *Realized religion: Relationship between religion & health*, Templeton Press, 2000, pp. 11-13.

59. T. A. Lines, *Functional images of the religious educator*, Religious Education Press, 1992, pp. 76-77.

60. C., Olson, *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*, Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003, pp. 408-409.

a common faith, and individual mistrust is a commonly formulated or recognized evil<sup>61</sup>.

### Judeo-Christian Theology

Everything mentioned above contributes to fundamental theology. Unlike many others in the field of Psychology of Religion Erikson was not hesitant to deal with Theology<sup>62</sup>. Thus, we can say that in every work of Erikson, the relationship between Psychology and Theology is examined by illuminating the question of personal identity and creative self-comprehension. By concluding that the Founding Fathers' "faith in action demanded" an intrinsic unity of divine and historical design, Erik Erikson saw Jefferson as anticipating the intergration of Mahatma Gandhi's action and faith into a self-conscious, complete human identity<sup>63</sup>. According to Erikson (1975), by the time Gandhi wrote his autobiography, he had already gone through a probationary period during which he had become one of the living mahatmas, followed by a rapid rise to the Mahatmaship – a position entirely reformulated by him as a combination of politics and religion. For the theologian, this suggests that Erikson's psycho-social schema may prove to be an appealing dialogical partner precisely because Erikson, covertly if not explicitly, is already operating within a quasi-theological framework<sup>64</sup>. The sense of "I" and its potential for becoming "We" (q.v. the Body of the Church) were universal and universally available experiences, in Erikson's view. He saw Jesus' mission as a critical moment in the unfolding revelation of that experience. Jesus was meaningful to Erikson for his apparent insight into the nature of the formation of human

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61. L. Sugarman, *Life-span development: Frameworks, accounts and strategies*, Routledge, 2004.

62. R. N. Sharma, *Recent trends in social sciences* (Vol. 2), Anu Prakashan, 1975.

63. S. J. Loza, *Religion as art: Guadalupe, orishas, and sufi*, University of New Mexico Press, 2009, pp. 329-330.

64. R. H. Bainton, *Psychohistory and religion: The case of young man Luther*. (R. A. Johnson, ed.), Fortress Press, 1977, pp. 145-146.

identity. Erikson didn't seem to think that Jesus had instigated intuition. He embodies the image of someone who aspires to guide humanity towards a post-modern future. Erikson's alternative use of scientific and religious models makes it difficult to ascertain whether he believed the "I" to be numinous or not, i.e. to be rooted in a divine reality<sup>65</sup>.

### Numen and Self-Transcendence

Erikson also knows and makes use of religious and theological (mystic) terms *Numinous* and *transcendence*. In fact, with Erikson, we look at the psychological roots of a central category in contemporary Theology, transcending subjectivity. It is suggested that for Piaget and Erikson authentic subjectivity represents genuine objectivity, and personal self-realization is synonymous with personal self-transcendence.

### Religious Experience

The desire for religious experience, which is both transgenerational and transcultural, responds to a religious need within one's personality. According to Erikson, religion arose from the necessity for people to reassure and console themselves<sup>66</sup>.

Erikson connects some of the deepest aspects of human spiritual experience from the beginning of development without responding to the reductions that had tormented Freud's efforts, and others. He writes: "but must we call it regression if a man thus seeks again the earliest encounters of his trusting past in his efforts to reach a hope for an eternal future... If this is partial regression, it is a regression that, by retracing firmly established pathways, returns to the present amplified and clarified"<sup>67</sup>. Faith and faithfulness imply the concept of trust in which

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65. D. C. Andersen, "Beyond rumor and reductionism: A textual dialogue with Erik H.", *The Psychohistory Review*, 22, 1 (1993), pp. 60-61.

66. D. G. Benner, *Psychology and religion*, Baker Book House Company, 1988, pp. 96-97.

67. E. H. Erikson, *Young man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history*, W. W. Norton

there is an element of perdurance, constancy, security of stable persistence and assurance (to use a scriptural term from *Hebrews* 11, 1) of God's continued faithfulness to his promises, confidence in the finality and eternity of what one believes, in short, fidelity. There is correspondence and reciprocity between the stability of God's belief<sup>68</sup> and faithfulness on the one hand, and the psychological dimension of faithfulness on the other. The commitment of faith, then, is not a temporary and momentary commitment of assent. It is a trusting commitment of the entire being in an absolute and continuing relationship with God<sup>69</sup>.

### Religious Ritual

For Erik Erikson, religious rituals are important in rekindling fundamental trust and essential for *identity* and *integrity*. Indeed, Erikson uses psychoanalytic evidence to justify advocating the supremacy of trust over distrust as a norm for human nature in infants and adults. He considered it a human universal<sup>70</sup>. Erikson's major criticism on Freud's view of religious ritual is that Freud's comparison of religious ritual and neurotic obsession failed to recognize that the latter is a personal ritual with unique and individual meanings<sup>71</sup>. For Erikson, these rituals foster in infants a sense of *numinous* –merged feelings of *attraction* and *awe*<sup>72</sup> – that will lay the foundation for later participation in organized religion. Erikson made no effort to depart from the traditional Eucharistic and eschatological meanings associated with the depiction of Jesus and the common supper.

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& Company, 1958

68. *I Cor.* 1, 9.

69. W. F. Strobridge & A. Hibler, *Elephants for Mr. Lincoln: American civil war-era diplomacy in Southeast Asia*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006

70. P. R. Center, *Second opinion* (Vols. 1-3), Park Ridge Center, 1986, pp. 21-22.

71. L. Aden, D. G. Benner & H. J. Ellens, *Christian perspectives on human development* (Vol. 6), Baker Book House, 1992, pp. 223-224.

72. Q.v. R. Otto, *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

## Homines Religiosi

Erikson's religious biographies indicate that religion involves people in developmental tasks, something like Structuralism. In certain circles, Erikson's studies have also stimulated other attempts to come to terms with other religious figures in a similar manner<sup>73</sup>. In *Young Man Luther*<sup>74</sup> and *Gandhi's Truth*<sup>75</sup>, Erikson studied what he called *homo religiosus*, that is, the person whose nature and historical circumstances demand a religious existence – a kind of life that, Erikson insists (like A. Maslow), can be psychologically healthy. However, psychodynamics and religion Erikson's studies of Luther and Gandhi stimulated both criticism and enthusiasm not only among historians but also among religious thinkers.

## The Contribution of Religion to Psychotherapy

The mindful believer in therapy, the holistic healer, and many a religious scholar explore the paths in which basic mental attitudes – many of which essentially religious– are linked to disease or health. They do their work in an area where hyperbole, quackery, and mania often dominate. At the same time, they find strong reasons for pursuing the faith that Erik Erikson called “basic trust”. Erikson followed Jung's lead as he saw a potentially positive role for religion throughout the life cycle<sup>76</sup>. He was in complete disagreement with Freud's claim that religion was simply a collective neurosis based on childhood fears and desires. On the contrary, for him, religion was something that many people wanted. Mankind has used religion for centuries<sup>77</sup>. The essence

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73. D. Capps, W. H. Capps & M. G., Bradfo, *Encounter with Erikson: Historical interpretation and religious biography* (Vol. 2), Scholars Press, 1977.

74. E. H. Erikson, *Young man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1958.

75. E. H. Erikson, *Gandhi's truth*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1969.

76. J. L. Elias, *The foundations and practice of adult religious education*, Krieger Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 79-80.

77. B. R. Hergenhahn, *An introduction to theories of personality*, Prentice-Hall, 1990, pp. 165-166.



of wisdom in religion is not an individual realization and achievement, but instead, a living tradition<sup>78</sup> based on fidelity. Wright (1931) notes that religion presupposes “basic trust”, the first of Erikson’s eight stages of life. Thus, he exacerbates the inevitable tension of forgiveness, acceptance, and certainly the need for a return to the fundamental trust of children, who believe that there is an ultimate end and that, despite the reality of evil, life has meaning. In the case of Luther, religion provided the ingredients for a new ideology<sup>79</sup>. That’s what Erikson asserts, that the real basis is in the child’s ability to have “basic trust”. This basic trust creates a fundamental “faith” through which the healthy child gazes the world. This faith creates an expectation (q.v. hope) of love and care for those who are close to him, which in turn gives the child opportunities to be active in a world that is experienced as his own<sup>80</sup>. The “healthy” (balanced) religion preaches not only some pleasant promises for the future but also some serious concerns; a religion that renders happiness suspicious and virtue unattractive, it is, in essence, an “ascetic”, otherworldly, religion<sup>81</sup>. When a man marries, he has accomplished half of the religion; so, let him fear God about the other half<sup>82</sup>.

Psychosocial development due to religious formation is not neurotic. Erikson regards religious faith as a natural expression; the pattern of trust in psychosocial development refers to the understanding that ensures that the children in the nursery are with caring persons who communicate trust.

## Training in Ethics

For the consolidation of healthy faith and consequently of a healthy religion Erik Erikson deal with and proposes some moral principles.

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78. E. H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis*, W. W. Norton, New York 1968.

79. A. Mandelbaum, *Metastudies of the humanities and social sciences* (Vol. 3), Annals of Scholarship. 1984, pp. 115-117.

80. A. E. Nilsen, *Religion and personality integration* (Vol. 8). Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1980, pp. 48-49.

81. E. H. Erikson, *Adulthood: Essays*, Norton, 1978.

82. E. H. Erikson, *Adulthood, op.cit.*

Erikson sought to identify the characteristics of a healthy personality who actively controls the environment, shows a certain unity of personality, and can perceive the world properly. In Erikson's view, "childhood is defined by the initial absence of these characteristics and by their gradual development in complex steps of increasing differentiation"<sup>83</sup>. Erikson proposed that personality develops according to steps "predetermined in the human organism's readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with a widening radius of significant individuals and institutions"<sup>84</sup>. A favorable attitude of students toward faith and religious courses will occur in middle-adolescent when religious education combines faith with Humanist Psychology, particularly the eight stages of Erikson's man<sup>85</sup> theological progress goes along with psychological maturation so that here Erikson becomes something of a theologian himself.

### Erikson on Psychotherapeutic Teaching

Erikson, like Freud, considered moral development, religion, and educating human development from the therapist's perspective. In terms of education, he paid more attention to the influence of parents in the moral formation of children than to the role of teachers<sup>86</sup>. Erikson explains how children develop on the personal and emotional plane as a backdrop to their cognitive development. He also interpreted the meaning of this complement in all areas of life, including the most specialized religious quest for ultimate as we have consistently noted, general virtues result from good development at each stage<sup>87</sup>.

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83. E. H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis*, W. W. Norton, New York 1968.

84. D. C. Elliott & S. D. Holtrop, *Nurturing and reflective teachers: A Christian approach for the 21st century*, Learning Light Educational Counseling and Pub. 1999.

85. W. R. Culnane, *Erikson, religious education, and midadolescent attitudes: An interdisciplinary approach*, Boston College, 1978.

86. J. L. Elias, *The foundations and practice of adult religious education*, Krieger Publishing Company, 1989, pp. 75-76.

87. J. F. Byrnes, *The psychology of religion*, Free Press, Collier Macmillan, 1984.

Each healthy psychosocial stage, in Erikson's view, results from the child's experience of holding (q.v. retention and binding) and letting (q.v. defecation and absolution/remission) go<sup>88</sup>. Erik Erikson's important study "Childhood and Society" strengthens these perspectives and sheds valuable light on the place of religion in personal development<sup>89</sup>. Similarly, his analysis of the psychosocial stage of adolescence is quite helpful here. Erikson asserts that the "task" of adolescence is identity training, "selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications"<sup>90</sup>. Trust (which is the most fundamental interpersonal virtue for the development of moral relations) derives from care and is, in fact, the touchstone of the actuality of a given religion<sup>91</sup>.

## Conclusion

The core of Erikson's entire work refers to identity, religion, and how these subjects have relevance in this modern, or perhaps post-modern, era<sup>92</sup>. The science of the study of Religions may be reaching the stage of its business lifecycle, where, in the words of Erik Erikson, after human beings have known that they can do things and do them well, they seek to match their abilities with their sense of endowment, opportunity, and heritage<sup>93</sup>. Erikson sees religion as inextricably linked in the reciprocity of trust.

Religion is an institution that restores this trust, in part, using meaningful rituals. However, religion is more than the sum of particularities. Religion is a rich magnitude that cannot be explicitly defined, it cannot be tacitly "understood", but rather better, to experiment with. As a

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88. I. V. Cully & K. B. Cully, *Harper's encyclopedia of religious education*, Harper & Row, 1990, pp. 521-522.

89. J. Walter & D. Smith, *Religion and secular education*, St Andrew Press, 1975, pp. 58-59.

90. N. F. Cott, *Religion history of women in the United States*, K.G. Saur, 1993, pp. 25-26.

91. R. Stevens, *Erik Erikson: An introduction* (illustrated ed.), Open University Press, 1983.

92. E. J. Wright, *Erikson, identity and religion*, Seabury Press, 1931.

93. L. Honko, *Science of religion. Studies in methodology: Proceedings of the Study Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, held in Turku, Finland, August 27-31, 1973*, Walter de Gruyter, 2011, pp. 185-186.

dimension of life, religion is bound up with the whole of life. It interacts with, participates, and yet is not exhausted by the lived experience that Erikson calls the “real” as more against the “act” and the “fact”<sup>94</sup>. So, each national government must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine, and practice. It may not be hostile to any religion or the advocacy of no religion; and it may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against the opposing militant ideology. The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between different religions, and between religion and non-religion<sup>95</sup>.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Σκέψεις για τὴ θέση τοῦ Erik Erikson περὶ θρησκείας  
Ποιές εἶναι οἱ διανοητικὲς καταβολές καὶ παραδόσεις  
ποῦ γεννοῦν τὴν Ψυχοκοινωνικὴ Θεωρία;

Khader Alkhouri, MA  
Ἐθνικὸ καὶ Καποδιστριακὸ Πανεπιστήμιο Ἀθηνῶν

Στὸ ἄρθρο αὐτὸ ἐπιχειρεῖται νὰ παρουσιασθεῖ ἀδρομερῶς ἡ στάση τοῦ Erik Erikson ἔναντι τῆς θρησκείας μέσω μιᾶς εὐσύνοπτης ἀνασκόπησης τῆς σύγχρονης βιβλιογραφίας. Πρόκειται γιὰ ἓνα θέμα ἀμφιλεγόμενο. Ἀλλὰ ἡ χρήση τῆς θρησκευτικῆς γλώσσας καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν προσώπων ἀπὸ τὸν Erikson, μὲ στοιχεῖα ἠθικῆς, ὑπερβατικότητας, «ἱερῶν ἀντικειμένων» καὶ θρησκευτικῶν τελετουργιῶν, δὲν ἀφήνει καμμία ἀμφιβολία ὅτι ὁ Erikson –παρὰ τὸ ὅτι ἴσως δὲν ὀμιλεῖ σαφῶς περὶ ὑπάρξεως τοῦ Θεοῦ σὲ συγκεκριμένα σημεῖα στὰ ἔργα του ἢ ὑπαινίσσεται τὴν ψυχολογικοποίηση τῆς θρησκείας– ἐνδιαφέρεται γιὰ τὴ θρησκεία. Ἐπιπλέον, οἱ ἐποικοδομητικὲς καὶ ψυχοπνευματικὲς προτροπές του καὶ γιὰ ἓνα ἄριστο ἐκπαιδευτικὸ σύστημα καὶ γιὰ τὸν ἀνθρώπινο πολιτισμὸ, συντείνουν στὴ θετικὴ στάση τοῦ Erikson πρὸς μίαν «ἀνθρωπιστικὴ» θρησκεία.

94. E. Wright, *Erikson, identity and religion*, Seabury Press, 1931.

95. E. H. Erikson, *Adulthood: Essays*, Norton, 1978.