

# Vocabulary for the Study of Religion

*Volume 1*

A–E

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## Dissociation

The term “dissociation” refers to an altered state of mind in which part of a person’s consciousness is split off. Dissociation consists in a sudden disruption with respect to the integrative functioning of consciousness, memory, identity, motor function, or perception. The spectrum of dissociative phenomena ranges from everyday alteration of consciousness and induced forms of trance—e.g.

connected to specific religious ritual, shamanism, or hypnosis—to pathological states. Mostly, it stems from psychological or psycho-physiological strain, due to stressful or traumatic life events. Therefore, if not self-induced, it constitutes a psychological defence mechanism and prevents destructive consequences for the individual’s mental health.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) there are five subtypes of dissociative disorders: *Dissociative Amnesia* (DSM-IV 300.12) is an inability to recall important personal information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that is too extensive to be explained by normal forgetfulness. This disorder involves a reversible memory impairment in which memories of personal experience cannot be retrieved in a verbal form. Psychogenic amnesia has to be distinguished from organic amnesia. *Dissociative Fugue* (DSM-IV 300.13) is a sudden and unexpected rambling away from home or one’s customary place of daily activities with the inability to recall some or all of one’s past. This is accompanied by confusion about one’s own personal identity or even the assumption of a new identity. *Dissociative Identity Disorder* (DSM-IV 300.14) is the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states that recurrently take control of behaviour. The different identities are characterized by their specific way of living, feeling, and behaving. The occurrence of persistent or recurrent episodes of depersonalization characterized by a feeling of detachment or estrangement from one’s self is called *Depersonalization Disorder* (DSM-IV 300.6). The individual may feel like an automaton or as if he or she is living in a dream or movie. There may be a sensation of being the observer outside of one’s mental processes or one’s body and also a feeling of expansion or shrinkage of the own self and body. Unlike that in schizophrenic patients the quality of depersonalization in patients with dissociation symptomatology is the one of “as if” and not fully realistic and complete (Davison & Neale 1996). According to the ICD-10 (Dissociative Disorders F.44), *Conversion*

*Disorders* count as dissociative disorders, as well. Conversion describes the phenomenon that psychological strain is alienated to the organs, and thus patients feature symptoms like tremor, paralysis, fits, or other chronic somatic adverse effects for which no physiological cause can be detected.

Dissociative experiences without clinical relevance are highly prevalent in the general population (Waller et al. 1996). For instance, some rituals, certain states of estrangement in adolescence, and extreme bodily or psychological fatigue can lead to a dissociative state. Psychoanalysis sees dissociation as massive form of repression in a Freudian sense. For learning theory dissociation is a basic reaction of avoidance to straining events (Davison & Neale 1996). Research on mood-congruent memory (Bower 1981) shows that information can be memorized better if the emotional state while learning and the emotional state while recalling are equal. Dissociative states are associated with certain forms of information processing that allow the individual to cope where threat or ambivalence are so strong that it gets necessary to step out of reality.

Phenomena like dissociation, hypnosis, and psychopathology are mediums of reality manipulation or distortion. During a dissociative state consciousness is detached from its integrative functioning and hence from mental processes that constitute higher rationality. Certain alarming emotional or rational contents are pushed aside. In a spiritual context, religion can be assumed to be a culturally-defined medium of reality manipulation. Religious beliefs can be an adaptive means of regulating reality (Schumaker 1995). This leads towards the controversial, but generally reported, finding that mental agitation has a significantly greater effect on nonreligious individuals than on religious individuals. Dissociative states of consciousness are facilitated by religious ritual and enable the integration of uncensored suggestions (Schumaker 1995). "Accordingly, dissociative states, frequently induced by ritual enactment, can play an important part in religious celebrations as they provide less resistance to the

religious information (suggestions) that consolidates religious beliefs" (Dorahy & Lewis 2001: 316). The acceptance of religious suggestions is crucial for practitioners as such an acceptance supports, fosters, and strengthens their religious beliefs and ultimately their way of making sense out of reality. Individuals with rigid and strong religious beliefs are found to be exposed to significantly more dissociative experiences than individuals with more liberal religious belief systems (Dorahy & Lewis 2001). All religious services are characterized by dissociative elements in one form or the other which are necessary to enable the individual to detach from merely physical reality and to experience faith. Spiritual techniques like ritual movements and dancing, meditation, fasting, deprivation of sleep, hyperventilation, or mantra chanting are often designed to manipulate the mind in such a way that one part of consciousness gets dissociated from daily consciousness and connected to transcendence.

An evolutionary theory of religion founded in the concept of dissociation is the theory of the bicameral mind (Jaynes 1976; Kuyjsten 2007). It states that during the history of evolution the brain consisted of two independent parts between which the information was transmitted via auditory hallucination. The bicameral individual was guided by mental commands believed to be traced back to external "gods." Such commands were then recorded in ancient myths, legends, and historical accounts. These godly voices were emanating from the individuals' own minds in which the left hemisphere was the listener and the right hemisphere was the speaker. The human ability of consciousness and introspection emerged in the course of time as a neurological adaptation to social complexity in a changing world. Phenomena like divination, prayer, and oracles arose in an attempt to summon instructions from the "gods" whose voices could no longer be heard.

Dissociation is a concept fundamental to human being and dates back to ancient cultures with their rituals, ecstatic experiences, and states of obsession.

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## Dissonance (Cognitive)

In his well known book *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Death Camps* (1979) Eliezer Berkovitz presents a moving account of how Jews in the concentration camps maintained religious practices at great cost to their lives. Despite overwhelming suffering and humiliation they were still able to maintain the conviction that God was present and would save them. Even in their last moments, as they entered the gas chambers, children and adults alike, they recited the *Shema*, the affirmation of faith: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." How were these individ-

uals able to retain and even intensify their beliefs in the presence of disconfirming evidence that the omnipotent, omniscient, and scrupulously just god of Israel did not prevent their suffering? How did they deal with the dissonance between their convictions and empirical reality?

The theory of cognitive dissonance, widely used in social psychology, refers to the uncomfortable feeling caused by holding conflicting ideas simultaneously. The theory maintains that persons are driven to reduce the dissonance and that they do so by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and actions. There are three key strategies to reduce or minimize cognitive dissonance: rationalisation, denial, and confirmation bias. The theory of cognitive dissonance was popularised by Leon Festinger in his *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957).

It is easy to find examples of the undermining of religious belief by empirical disconfirmation: disconfirmed prophecy, the contradiction between the notion of an omnipotent and benevolent God and the existence of suffering in the world, and the contradictions between fundamentalist biblical beliefs and the findings of contemporary science. Faced with the prospect of disconfirmation, believers are likely to adhere even more firmly to their beliefs than to abandon them (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis 1993). Additionally, anything that is not consonant with a belief in God is reinterpreted to make it consonant.

Perhaps the best-known scholarly work on this topic is Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter's *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). Festinger and his colleagues conducted fieldwork among the Seekers, a flying saucer group in the USA who predicted the imminent destruction of the world. When the appointed end never came, the believers, rather than relinquishing their convictions, reinterpreted their beliefs. Now the aliens were delaying the destruction.

Festinger's main contribution was to argue that failure of prophecy does not spell an end to the group or to faith in the group. Many subsequent studies have confirmed that, in the wake of failed prophecy, individuals cling tenaciously to their convictions. Believers reaffirm their faith by rein-