

# Can Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) Be Effectively Used With People Who Have Devout Beliefs in God and Religion?

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Several writers on religion and psychotherapy claim that people who follow a “loving God” model and who see God as a partner who works with them to resolve their problems are less emotionally disturbed and can benefit more from “rational” systems of therapy than religionists who have a more negative view of God. Some authors have specifically written that rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) includes many religious philosophies and that the principles and practices of REBT are similar to those endorsed by certain kinds of devout religionists. In this article, the author describes the constructive philosophies of REBT and shows how they are similar to those of many religionists in regard to unconditional self-acceptance, high frustration tolerance, unconditional acceptance of others, the desire rather than the need for achievement and approval, and other mental health goals. It shows how REBT is compatible with some important religious views and can be used effectively with many clients who have absolutistic philosophies about God and religion.

Certain rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) practitioners have attempted to demonstrate that REBT is compatible with many religious philosophies and that it can be used by clinicians who accept their clients’ religious orientations and show them how their disturbance-creating beliefs can be religiously disputed. For almost 40 years I have known many therapists, including members of the clergy, who nicely combine REBT teachings with religious teachings and have no difficulty doing so. These recent contributions considerably add to other attempts (Backus, 1985; DiGiuseppe, Robin, & Dryden, 1990; Hauck, 1972; Johnson, 1993; Lawrence, 1987; Nielsen, 1994; Powell, 1976; Robb, 1988; Thurman, 1989) to use REBT with a religious outlook. I think that they will encourage other psychotherapists to do the same.

These writings have afforded me another opportunity to review some of my older views about devout religiosity being antithetical to good mental health and effective therapy and to bring them up-to-date and once again reverse some of them. Because I agree with Johnson, Ridley, and Nielsen (2000), and others, I had better review my former contention that dogmatic and absolutistic religiosity—or what I called “devout religiosity”—tends to be emotionally harmful (Ellis, 1983).

A great deal of everyone’s trouble—including my own trouble—in this area seems to be definitional. Terms like *mental health* and *religion* are omnibus terms that have multiple meanings. So, if I say that mental health is incompatible with devout religiosity, as I have said on several occasions, I had better define my terms

clearly. That, alas, is not easy to do, because they are ambiguous terms and hard to pin down to prescribed definitions.

As I was about to write an article offering a tentative proposal on this topic, to my surprise, a similar hypothesis appeared in the August 1996 issue of the *APA Monitor* in an article by Rebecca A. Clay (1996), “Psychologists’ Faith in Religion Begins to Grow.” Clay noted that Kenneth I. Pargament (1997) had studied people’s use of religion to cope with major life stressors ranging from illness to war to the Oklahoma City bombing. She wrote:

When you look more closely, you find there are certain types of religious expression that seem to be helpful and certain types that seem to be harmful, he [Pargament] said. In several studies involving hundreds of subjects, Pargament has found that people who embrace what could be called “the-sinners-in-the-hands-of-an-angry-God” model do indeed have poorer mental health outcomes. People who feel angry toward God, believe they’re being punished for sins or perceive a lack of emotional support from their church or synagogue typically suffer more distress, anxiety and depression, explained Pargament.

In stark contrast are people who embrace the “loving God” model. These people see God as a partner who works with them to resolve problems. They view difficult situations as opportunities for spiritual growth. And they believe their religious leaders and fellow congregation members give them the support they need. The result? They enjoy more positive mental health outcomes, said Pargament. (Clay, 1996, pp. 1, 48)

Clay also cited the findings of Lee Kirkpatrick (1997) and Richard Gorsuch (1988). They both noted that people who viewed God as a warm, caring, and lovable friend and saw their religion as supportive were much more likely to have positive outcomes and to stay free from substance abuse than those with a more negative view of God. This point has been backed by a good deal of empirical research, such as that included in Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (1996), and Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993).

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Even before I read Clay's article, my review of the work by the authors cited in the previous paragraph led me to conclusions similar to those of Pargament (1997), Kirkpatrick (1997), and Gorsuch (1988). My view now is that religious and nonreligious beliefs in themselves do not help people to be emotionally "healthy" or "unhealthy." Instead, their emotional health is significantly affected by the kind of religious and nonreligious beliefs that they hold.

I came close to making this same point in my 1983 article, "The Case Against Religiosity." I pointed out there that absolutism is the main core of Irrational Beliefs (IBs), which, in turn, lead to disturbance. I showed that dogmatic atheists (such as devout communists) as well as rigid religionists (such as Christian or Islamic fundamentalists) can both be inflexible and absolutistic. Hence, they both tend to be disturbed. I still believe that my point about connecting absolutism with disturbance has some validity. Nevertheless, I now see that it is too general and therefore questionable. Hunsberger, Alisat, Pancer, and Pratt (1996) have also shown that religious inflexibility and rigidity are associated with potential problems, including prejudice and discrimination. However, this does not mean that all rigid religionists have emotional problems.

Take, for example, someone who devoutly believes that she is always a good person, she deserves to get her main desires fulfilled, and she will definitely succeed at work and love if she keeps trying to do so. Take, also, another person who devoutly believes that he is always a bad person, that he does not deserve to get his main desires fulfilled, and that he will definitely fail at work and love no matter how hard he tries to succeed. Both these individuals are devout and absolutistic. Both are unrealistic and illogical, but will they both cope with life equally well or disturb themselves to the same extent when assailed by some of the grim facts of social reality? Most probably not! The first absolutist will most likely be happier and better adjusted than the second one. Why? Because her absolutism, though risky, will tend to help her achieve more practical, and therefore "better," results in Western society than will the second person's dogmatism.

If I am right about this, absolutism is a risky philosophy for practically all people to hold. Because even if they think that they are always good and will definitely succeed at work and love, social reality will frequently not accord with their absolutistic demands, and they will therefore tend to suffer disillusionment. An absolutistic pollyannaish philosophy seems more practical than an absolutistic pessimistic and damning philosophy and is more likely to help one cope with adversity (Seligman, 1991). Absolutism, whether religious or secular, does not always lead to emotionally unhealthy results.

As I reflect on the research and writing mentioned earlier, I see once again that REBT, as I have said for many years, is highly compatible with liberal and nonabsolutistic religion (Ellis, 1983, 1992, 1994a, 1994b). I now also see, however, that it can be compatible with some forms of absolutistic and devout religiosity. To make this point clearer, let me take a plunge here and speculate how some of the main principles of REBT are similar to some aspects, though hardly all aspects, of a dogmatic religious view. I shall first briefly describe one of the main philosophies of REBT and then state an absolutistic, but still healthy, religious viewpoint that repeats the REBT outlook in God-oriented language.

In the religious versions that follow the REBT philosophies that I present here, I try to incorporate some of the attitudes that Nielsen, Johnson, and Ridley (2000) seem to include in their REBT-oriented work with disturbed people. I also rephrase some concepts included in the research that they refer to (Bergin, 1983; Johnson, 1992, 1993; Johnson, DeVries, Ridley, Pettorini, & Peterson, 1994; Johnson & Ridley, 1992; Nielsen, 1994). A number of other writers have also pointed out that REBT teachings can successfully be used along with a religious-oriented outlook (Backus, 1985; DiGiuseppe, Robin, & Dryden, 1990; Hauck, 1972; Lawrence, 1987; Lawrence & Huber, 1982; Powell, 1976; Robb, 1988; Stoop, 1982; Thurman, 1989; Young, 1984). Borrowing from all these theorists and clinicians, I have come up with the following samples of religious-oriented philosophies, including absolutistic ones, that can be compared to common REBT philosophies. My examples of religious philosophies are largely taken from Christian writings, but some of them are also espoused by Jewish and Islamic sources. Although this brief article does not allow me adequate space to demonstrate how most, and probably all, of these religious philosophies can be supported with specific scriptures or statements from the texts of various religions, I suspect that scriptures would largely support them. For example, the New Testament offers many verses that support a God-oriented philosophy of unconditional acceptance of others (e.g., "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Matt. 19:19]; "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" [Luke 6:27]; and "Be merciful" [Luke 6:36]). A table that compares some REBT philosophies with their God-oriented counterparts appears in the appendix.

As can be seen by my attempts to restate some of the basic REBT philosophies in God-oriented form, people who tend to follow the teachings of REBT can presumably also hold absolutistic religious views that overlap with their religious concepts. My contention would therefore be that anyone who takes the kind of religious outlook that I have stated can also be "rational" in the sense that REBT defines *rational*, that is, having self-helping beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. In this sense, therefore, REBT and devout religiosity are hardly the same, but they can at least at times be compatible.

If I am right about this, we have a possible explanation for the fact that a good number of members of Christian, Jewish, and other clergy have little trouble in using REBT principles in their counseling and why many clinicians who favor REBT have no trouble believing deeply in some deity-oriented kind of religion. On the other hand, many devout religionists who adhere to negative and punitive views of God and the universe may rarely use REBT in their own lives or with their clients, pupils, and parishioners.

The question still arises: If REBT is compatible with many religious views, will people who use it gain better emotional health and less disturbance if they are purely secular and not also religious? The answer may well be that many secularist clients and self-helpers will benefit more from REBT when it is not combined with God-oriented views because of their nonreligious convictions. I would guess that both secular humanists and religious humanists may significantly benefit if they strongly and persistently practice REBT, because most humanists follow the REBT philosophies that I have described.

My personal view is that secular REBT has several advantages over religiously oriented REBT and is likely to help those who

adopt it achieve a more elegant, lasting, and thoroughgoing solution to their emotional and behavioral problems. This is because I think that God-oriented approaches require strong beliefs in superhuman entities and all-encompassing laws of the universe that are unprovable and unfalsifiable. On the other hand, secular-oriented REBT makes fewer unfalsifiable assumptions about humans and the world. It is more closely related to checkable observations of how humans operate, how they manage to live happily and less happily, and what can be done to help them function less disturbedly. Therefore, secular REBT may be a more pragmatic and more realistic way of thinking and of behaving than is any form of God-oriented religiosity.

On the other hand, several studies such as those summarized by Larson and Larson (1994) and Gorsuch (1988) have shown that religion is associated with a decrease in criminal activity, suicide, drug abuse, and other kinds of serious self-destructive behavior. So, some evidence exists that God-oriented religiosity may lead to realistic self-helping thinking and action (Propst, Ostrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn (1992). Few of the positive studies, however, have included consideration of religious absolutism, fundamentalism, and rigidity.

### Conclusion

Although I have, in the past, taken a negative attitude toward religion, and especially toward people who devoutly hold religious views, I now see that absolutistic religious views can sometimes lead to emotionally healthy behavior. As several studies have shown (Batson et al., 1993; Donahue, 1985; Gorsuch, 1988; Hood et al., 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Larson & Larson, 1994), people who view God as a warm, caring, and lovable friend, and who see their religion as supportive are more likely to have positive outcomes than those who take a negative view of God and their religion.

Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) has been found by many religiously oriented therapists, including Christian, Jewish, and Islamic practitioners, to be quite compatible with religious views. Accordingly, I have attempted, in this article, to describe some of the basic constructive philosophies of REBT and to indicate how they are similar to and compatible with basic religious philosophies. This appears to be particularly true of some of the REBT and benevolent religious philosophies of self-control and change, unconditional self-acceptance, high frustration tolerance, unconditional acceptance of others, the desire rather than the dire need for achievement and for approval, the acceptance of responsibility, the acceptance of self-direction, the acceptance of life's dangers, the philosophy of nonperfectionism, and the philosophy of accepting disturbance. There are many remarkable similarities in some of the major religious and REBT attitudes.

Although we cannot empirically investigate human processes that are attributed to God and other supernatural elements, we can research what will tend to happen to people who devoutly believe in God and in absolutistic religious concepts. So, by all means, let us do a great deal more research into the outcome of using REBT with religious and nonreligious individuals.

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## Appendix

### A Comparison of Some Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) Philosophies and Their God-Oriented Counterparts

REBT philosophy	God-oriented philosophy
Self-control and change	
Because I often make myself undisciplined and self-defeating by demanding that I absolutely must have immediate gratifications, I can give up my short-range "needs," look for the pleasure of today and tomorrow, and seek out life satisfactions in a disciplined way.	God gave me some degree of free will and the ability to think for myself and control myself, and I can, with God's help, use this ability to discipline myself. God helps those who help themselves.
Unconditional self-acceptance (USA)	
I can always choose to give myself USA and see myself as a "good person" just because I am alive and human—whether or not I act well and whether or not I am lovable. Better yet, I can choose to rate and evaluate only my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors but not give myself, my essence, or my total being a global rating. When I fulfill my personal and social goals and purposes, <i>that</i> is good, but I am never a <i>good</i> or <i>bad</i> person.	My God is merciful and will always accept me as a sinner while urging me to go and sin no more. Because God accepts the sinner, though not his or her sins, I can accept myself no matter how badly I behave.
High frustration tolerance	
Nothing is terrible or awful, only at worst highly inconvenient. I can stand serious frustrations and adversity, even though I never have to like them.	With God's help, I can weather the worst stress. If I worship God and uncomplainingly accept life's tribulations, I will cope better with them.
Unconditional acceptance of others	
All humans are fallible, and therefore I can accept that people will make mistakes and do wrong acts. I can accept them with their mistakes and poor behaviors and refuse to denigrate them as persons.	My God and my religion tell me to love my enemies, to do good, and pray for them. Blessed are the merciful.
Achievement	
I prefer to perform well and win approval of significant others, but I never have to do so to prove that I am a worthwhile person.	Because I am one of God's children, I am a good person and do not have to accomplish anything to prove myself. Although rigorous adherence to the rules and sacraments of my religion and obedience to God are desirable, I will be a worthy person even if I do not have any notable accomplishments.
Needing approval and love	
It is highly preferable to be approved of and loved by significant people and to have good social skills, but if I am disapproved I can still fully accept myself and lead an enjoyable life.	What does it profit me if I gain the whole world and lose my soul? Because I love God and God unconditionally loves me, I do not need the love and approval of other people.
Accepting responsibility	
It is hard to face and deal with life's difficulties and responsibilities, but ignoring them and copping out is, in the long run, much harder. Biting the bullet and facing the problems of life usually becomes easier and more rewarding if I keep working at it.	God and my religion ask that I face life's difficulties and responsibilities, no matter how hard I may find it to do so. My soul will suffer if I am a sluggard but will be abundantly gratified if I am diligent and responsible.
Accepting self-direction	
I prefer to have some caring and reliable people to depend on, but I do not need to be dependent and do not have to find someone stronger than me to rely on.	I have my own resources to help me take care of myself, but I also have God to rely on and to help me.

## Appendix (continued)

## A Comparison of Some Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) Philosophies and Their God-Oriented Counterparts

REBT philosophy	God-oriented philosophy
Ability to benefit from and change the past	
No matter how bad and handicapping my past was, I can change my early thoughts, feelings, and behaviors today. I do not have to keep repeating and reenacting my past.	When I am united with God, I live in a new world. The older order has gone, and a new order has already begun for me.
Accepting life's dangers	
Life has many possible dangers, discomforts, and ailments, but I never need to worry obsessively about them. Continual worry will not help me to solve dangerous problems, will often interfere with my solving them, and even contribute to my making them worse. I can make myself concerned and cautious without indulging in obsessive worrying if I give up my demands that my life be absolutely safe and secure at all times.	God is with me and will show me how to deal with the dangers, discomforts, and ailments that may plague me. I need not be anxious about anything if, with prayer and petition, and with thanksgiving, I present my problems to God. Faith in God will calm my anxieties.
Nonperfectionism	
Doing things perfectly well may be advantageous, but I am far from being a perfect person. So, I had better try to do well but not think that I have to do perfectly well. No matter how desirable perfection may be, it is never necessary.	Only God is perfect. I am merely a human, not a god, and I can therefore try to do well but not demand that I do perfectly well.
Accepting disturbance	
My disturbed feelings, such as anxiety and depression, are quite uncomfortable but they are not awful and do not make me a stupid person for indulging in them. If I see them as hassles rather than as horrors, I can live with them more effectively and give myself a much better chance to minimize them.	God will accept me with my disturbed feelings, such as anxiety and depression, and help me to successfully uproot them. If I am really disturbed, God's will will be done, and I can therefore handle my disturbance.

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