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Critical Research on Religion 2013 1: 25
DOI: 10.1177/2050303213476102

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Critical Research on Religion

1(1) 25–32
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Psychoanalysis, religious experience, and the study of religion: *Not* "religious studies"

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Abstract

Psychoanalytic critical theory explores the dynamics of individual identity formation within specific cultural contexts. Freud understood that psychoanalysis is a critical social theory as well as a therapeutic practice. His studies on religion illustrate the depths of society and culture within the mind. Freud was thus able to respond to Romain Rolland's experience of an "oceanic" or mystical feeling in thoroughly explanatory psychoanalytic terms that led him to speculate about pre-Oedipal memories of maternal care. Freud made an important contribution to the psychoanalytic study of religion that remains relevant to contemporary academic studies of religion.

Keywords

Critical theory, Freud, psychoanalysis, religious experience

> But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. (Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845)

A psychoanalytic, critical theory of religion addresses itself most centrally to exploring the dynamics of individual identity formation within specific social, historical, and cultural contexts. Although subjects may experience themselves as acting in the world in their own particular way, their experience is necessarily mediated by multiple contextual realities of which they may, or may not, be aware. "To understand culture," Melford Spiro (1987: 162) declares, "it is not sufficient to attend to cultural symbol systems and how they work; it is also necessary to attend to the mind and how *it* works." As any psychoanalyst knows

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(or ought to know), clinical forays into an individual's unconscious encounter culture at every turn. Freud's (1923) concept of the "Above-I" (*das Über-Ich*) or "super-ego," for instance, represents among other things the internalization of the precipitates of countless parental super-egos within an individual mind that are formed, shaped, and mediated by culture (Freud, 1933a: 67). For Freud (1921: 69 italics added), the mind is *necessarily and inevitably* relational and social. "In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is *at the same time social psychology* as well."

Freud's (1935: 72) long-standing fascination with "cultural problems" infuses psychoanalytic theory, repeatedly demonstrating the powerful, pervasive, and multifaceted work of culture woven within the psychic fabric of individual minds. Freud (1908) was enough of a neuroscientist to know that the human brain supports all mental processes, the latter finding expression in and through a wide diversity of specific historical, social and cultural contexts, which often make people sick. Freud's (1938: 185) neurobiological and cultural perspectives allow him to establish psychoanalysis as both a universally relevant and specifically focused theory of the internal dynamics of culturally situated human beings. It follows that neurosis is *both* an individual *and* a social phenomenon; its earliest conduit is the family. "We must...not forget to include the influence of civilization among the determinants of neurosis," he writes, especially as "the demands of civilization are represented by family upbringing."

Freud was a scientist, meaning that what constitutes genuine knowledge for him must be grounded in evidence and rationally organized. A "scientific" *Weltanschauung*, writes Freud (1933b: 159), "asserts that there are no sources of knowledge of the universe other than the intellectual working-over of carefully scrutinized observations—in other words, what we call research—and alongside of it no knowledge derived from revelation, intuition or divination." However, Freud's (1911: 224) commitment to the exercise of reason and the privileging of evidential bases of knowledge claims in no way excludes or diminishes the role of imagination and feeling. He is much more sympathetic to aesthetic than religious illusions, in that the former have a stronger connection to reality. Freud is unequivocally consistent in the view, derived from clinical experience, that without an accompanying strong feeling, intellect and insight are of little therapeutic value. The "arrogance of consciousness" (Freud, 1910: 39) is no match for countering the work of repression, whose aim is the suppression of affect (Freud, 1915: 178). Therapeutic change is a combination of powerful affect *and* conscious insight. "{W}e have no other aim," he writes, "but that of translating into theory the results of observation, and we deny that there is any obligation on us to achieve at our first attempt a well-rounded theory which will commend itself by its simplicity. We shall defend the complications of our theory so long as we find that they meet the results of observation, and we shall not abandon our expectations of being led in the end by those very complications to the discovery of a state of affairs which, while simple in itself, can account for all the complications of reality" (Freud, 1915: 190).

It is important to bear these few basic psychoanalytic ideas in mind as they theoretically contextualize and infuse Freud's critical analyses of religious beliefs and mystical experience. Unlike many of his commentators, I argue that Freud's critique of religion cannot be accurately interpreted as a simple monolithic attack against religion. Rather, his arguments constitute a highly complex, nuanced, and *differentiated* set of insights that vary according to the particular interests addressed in any of his given texts. Although his critique of religion is less

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harsh after *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) than in the later *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), this has less to do with a change in his thinking about religion than with the fact that the concerns he addresses in the latter text are simply very different. It must also be remembered that, by religion, Freud is most often (but not always) referring to the predominantly Catholic Christianity he encountered in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Vienna, which he makes clear in *The Future of an Illusion*. In this text Freud's specific focus addresses problems of desire, fantasy, moral authority, and individual agency in the context of their rigid regulation by authoritarian religious dogmas and institutions. His concerns are also relevant to questions of epistemology and education, to what counts as the proper basis of truth claims about the external world, and the role of autonomous, critical thought. *The Future of an Illusion* examines the multiple intersections of cultural heteronomy and individual autonomy which Freud explores through an analysis of the internal dynamics of desire, need, their corresponding unconscious fantasy components and the impact of external demands upon them. With the exception of the opening chapter, Freud (1930) pursues these themes further in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Unfortunately, for a great many commentators, especially those with theological tendencies, Freud's theory of religion is restricted to unnuanced readings of *The Future of an Illusion*, which is too often derided as little more than a cranky, narrow-minded and dismissive attack on religious belief and practice.

The roots of religion, for Freud, lay in the emotional and material needs of infancy for a protector who provides a haven of safety, and which persist in adults who have not achieved full psychological maturity or autonomy. Certainly in the societies known to Freud, strong protectors tended to be identified as men and fathers to whom children become attached. Although I have addressed this issue elsewhere in much fuller detail (Hewitt, 2008), I will briefly restate my argument that Freud's description of the psychodynamics of infant development within family groups anticipates attachment theory, which emerged decades after his death in the researches of John Bowlby, and which continue to influence contemporary psychoanalysis. The biologically based attachment system, which generates an emotional longing for a protector/father/god, becomes expressed in various cultural registers (Hewitt, 2008: 68–70). We now know that attachment systems are evolutionary products that motivate helpless (infantile) creatures to seek safety and protection against overwhelming environmental dangers that compromise physical survival. Although Freud intuited the existence of an attachment system, what interested him even more was the human *response* to feelings of helpless vulnerability and dependency that he located as the source of religious feelings and beliefs.

In societies where gods and superhuman beings tend to be associated with males and masculinity, it is hardly surprising that fathers may be experienced as superhuman beings by young infants, which is in part the result of their prolonged helplessness and total dependency in the first several years of life. Adult caregivers are our only protection in infancy against the external forces of nature and the dangers of privation, and in later life, these parental figures and our attachment to them provide organizing templates for belief in deities that reconstitute earlier attachment relationships. In this sense religion can provide a set of psychic defenses against anxieties that threaten one's sense of internal cohesion when the developmental processes that foster an "education to reality" have been impaired. Freud (1907) understood that isolating neuroses suffered by individuals tend to "disappear" when they join religious communities, where their private obsessional ceremonial actions become absorbed and transformed by religious rituals. Finally, when Freud refers to an "infantile"

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stage of development, he is not being insulting—he is describing early infant experiences out of which later religious beliefs in superhuman beings emerge. Freud is engaging in a naturalistic, demystifying, and explanatory *psychoanalytic* account of the origins of desire and need for a protective other that eventually result in cultural products such as religion.

In all his writings on religion, Freud consistently acknowledges the kernel of experiential, existential ''truth'' residing within its psychic core—what he later referred to in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) as religion's ''historic truth.'' In a sense, the Father/God emerges from reminiscences of relationships with fathers of childhood experience even when they are long ''forgotten.'' This is possible because for Freud, everything an individual has perceived and experienced remains preserved within the mind. This means that the earliest, most primitive emotional experiences and their corresponding unconscious fantasies exist alongside secondary, or higher, forms of mental development. Psychological development does not unfold within progressively complex, linear stages that are surpassed with ever-increasing maturity. Psychological development takes place ''gradually,'' in a dialectic of interpenetrating movement of developmental stages that preserve elements or traces of earlier, more primitive emotional states. Freud (1937: 229) describes this as a process where ''portions of the earlier organization always persist alongside of the more recent one, and even in normal development, the transformation is never complete and residues of earlier libidinal fixations may still be retained in the final configuration...What has once come to life clings tenaciously to its existence. One feels inclined to doubt sometimes whether the dragons of primaeval days are really extinct.''

We are now in a position to better understand Freud's critique of mystical experience, most famously represented in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents*. On 5 December 1927, Romain Rolland, a French novelist, dramatist, and mystic who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915, wrote Freud an appreciative but critical letter in response to his ''lucid and spirited little book'' (cited in Parsons, 1999: 36), *The Future of an Illusion*. Although Rolland agreed that Freud's critique of organized, institutional religion was ''just,'' he wondered why Freud did not address the phenomenon of ''religious feeling'' which Rolland distinguished as ''wholly different from *religions*.'' Rolland described this feeling in subjective terms, as ''without perceptible limits,'' or ''oceanic'' (Parsons, 1999: 36). He went on in the letter to describe how familiar this ''oceanic sentiment'' was to him, that it ''never failed'' him, and that he thought it to be the ''true subterranean source of *religious energy*,'' a ''free *vital upsurge*'' that became constricted and deadened in ecclesiastical institutional contexts (Parsons, 1999: 37). An analysis of subjective mystical experience, at least as Rolland conceived of it, would reveal it to be the true source of religion, thereby emancipating its creative energies by rescuing it from the authoritarian, deadening alienation imposed by theological dogma and ecclesiastical tradition.

Freud's strong admiration for Rolland is especially evident in the serious critical engagement he adopts with regard to Rolland's question, irrespective of the fact that Freud (1930: 65) himself never had such an experience. In what is perhaps Freud's most direct and sustained thinking about the mystical, oceanic experience, he offers a psychoanalytic explanation that never questions the sincerity or reality of this subjective human experience. Again, Freud unearths the ''kernel of truth'' at the heart of the oceanic experience by situating it within his theory of primary and secondary narcissism that is integral to the development of the ego. As he argued in *The Future of an Illusion*, the feeling of mystical oneness described by Rolland is also a *reminiscence*, this time located in the pre-Oedipal psychic matrix of the mother/child relationship. These infantile experiences may become activated in later life,

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marked and distorted as they are by the inevitable vicissitudes of life. As it is impossible to jump over Rhodes, these early experiences, although preserved within the depths of mind, persist as distorted mnemonic traces, not as pure, original, discrete psychic events. Nonetheless, they may be recalled, re-experienced, and culturally reorganized in the form of mystical feelings. The plausibility of Freud's view rests upon the psychoanalytic theory of ego development where a conscious sense of self, or having an ego that seems clearly demarcated from the external world, is "deceptive" because so much of the ego is unconscious. Freud maintained that there are no hard internal boundaries separating the psychic agencies of mind. Both Freud's (1915) earlier topographical and later structural theory of the organization of the mind (Freud, 1923) and its mental agencies clearly state that consciousness exists "for very considerable periods of time in a state of latency, that is to say, of being psychically unconscious" (Freud, 1915: 167)—an observation supported by contemporary neuroscience (Solms, 1997). This explains why, in intense emotional states such as being in love, one's sense of ego boundaries threaten "to melt away." "The boundaries of the ego," Freud (1930: 66) tells us, "are not constant."

Freud speculates that the pre-Oedipal experience of the infant at the mother's breast is one in which s/he cannot "distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him." The developing sense of self-and/with-other is gradual, emerging through countless call (infant) and response (mother) interactions that gradually build an awareness of a distinct other "outside" the desiring/needy ego, "which is only forced to appear by a special action" (Freud, 1930: 67) such as cries of hunger or longing for comfort. Ego development is a lengthy and sometimes perilous process of psychic *differentiation* that unfolds through multiple interactions with an other(s) through which *self*-awareness becomes relationally constituted, which is what Freud meant by "secondary narcissism." "All through the subject's life his ego remains the great reservoir of his libido, from which object-cathexes are sent out and into which the libido can stream back again from the objects. This narcissistic libido is constantly being transformed into object libido, and *vice versa*," Freud writes (1925: 56). As the developing individual learns to distinguish between internal and external self and other, the earliest internalizations derived from experiences in relation to the satisfying, giving, and loving [m]other remain preserved deep within the unconscious. "Our present ego-feeling is...a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling that corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart to it" (Freud, 1930: 68). Rolland's oceanic feeling is understood by Freud as the recollection of an early, *real* shared human experience that can be explained psychoanalytically. It may also be motivated by a desire for "the restoration of limitless narcissism" (Freud, 1930: 72) that infused the primitive ego with a sense of deeply pleasurable well-being derived from maternal care. Here is the kernel of truth of the oceanic feeling, whose source lies within the depths of mind. It is not derived from contact with a transcendent, supernatural being, although it may often subjectively feel that way.

Although Freud (1930: 65) does not dispute the reality of Rolland's experience, he does contest that it is the "*fons et origo* of the whole need for religion." Freud (1930) reiterates his 1927 thesis that the source of religion lies in the "strong need" that derives from the infant's powerful sense of dependency and "the longing for the father" aroused by it. In later life this feeling of vulnerability may become reconstituted within conditions of extreme danger, loss,

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or serious privation, for example, as an overwhelming sense of a more diffuse, terrifying helplessness against "the superior power of Fate" (Freud, 1930: 72) against which only a god can provide strength and comfort. More importantly, considered within the context of Freud's more general theory of mind, the ubiquity of religion throughout human history is perfectly understandable. As stated earlier, for Freud (1933a: 79) there are no "sharp frontiers" dividing the mental agencies that constitute the mind. Rather, what he called the "I" or ego (*das Ich*) and "Above-I" or super-ego (*das Über-Ich*) are differentiated aspects of the unconscious "It" or id (*das Es*) energies whose fluid boundaries shift in varying ways within individual minds. Consciousness is not a fixed, stable mental state. Neuroscientist Mark Solms (1997: 683) approvingly quotes Freud's view that "mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions." Solms (1997: 689) recasts the dualistic brain/mind configuration in terms of Freud's "mental apparatus" because, strictly speaking, he writes, "the brain is a physical object like any other, {and} our conception of it, like that of any other object, is wholly determined by the properties and parameters of our external perceptual modalities." This view opens intriguing avenues for further psychoanalytic exploration of Rolland's oceanic feeling. However, my point here is not to open a separate debate about neuroscience at this time, nor to suggest that whatever goes on in the mind is reducible to neuronal firing alone. Rather, my more modest suggestion for the purpose of the argument here is that we seriously consider Freud's idea that consciousness is not fixed, it is not coterminous with mind, and that perceptions of color or gods or transcendent superhuman entities and agents are *properties of the mental apparatus*. This being the case, then Freud's (1933a: 80) idea that "certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind, so that, for instance, perception may be able to grasp happenings in the depths of the ego and in the id which were otherwise inaccessible to it" goes a long way in explaining the oceanic feeling.

Although there is far more to Freud's complex, multidimensional critique of religion than can possibly be explored here, it is nonetheless by now apparent that Freud makes an important and relevant contribution to a psychoanalytic, critical theory of religion. Freud explains religion as an entirely human phenomenon of the mind's epistemological imperative and emotional need for certainty and security in a bewildering and overpowering environment. For Freud, human beings create gods to explain nature and alleviate the unbearable anxiety that is generated by ignorance and a sense of powerlessness to control their surroundings. The most damaging and dangerous result of the creation of religion for Freud is that, although it may ease anxieties and offer consolations for suffering, it forecloses upon possibilities of cultivating individual autonomy and the capacity for critical thought. This stands in direct contrast to the aim of psychoanalysis, which is to expand and deepen self-awareness so that individuals can consciously assume responsibility for the contents of their minds, including the unconscious.

Unfortunately, contemporary psychoanalysis largely repudiates Freud with respect to religion in its current emphasis on religiosity and psychic health (Blass, 2006), which is suggestive of an increasing "theologization" or "spiritualization" of the field. The direction psychoanalysis is taking with respect to religious beliefs and experience is in direct contrast to Freud's explanatory theory of religion, which is thoroughly "grounded in anthropology" (Preus, 1987: 178) and a "naturalistic paradigm" (Preus, 1987: xv). In this sense Freud's work holds a central place within the critical, demystifying intellectual tradition of the study of religion represented by figures such as Hume, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and, later,

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a number of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (2012), it is hardly surprising that psychoanalysis was a powerful influence on this latter group, who incorporated key psychoanalytic insights in their exploration of the psychological and social dynamics of domination and submission that reverberate both within the human mind and throughout culture. Along with Freud, they too understood that psychoanalysis is a ‘‘fundamentally social and historical theory’’ (Marcuse, 1970: 1) that engages and interrogates the multiple intersections of ‘‘authority, the family, the individual, and culture’’ (Marcuse, 1970: 73). They shared with Freud a commitment to exposing the ‘‘human bottom of non-human things’’ (Horkheimer, in Aronowitz, 1972: xiii)—an approach the richness of which is most vividly evident in Freud’s reply to Romain Rolland.

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