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RELIGION AND OBSESSIONAL NEUROSIS

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This article arose out of an evening spent with the members of the Association of Moral Theology Teachers discussing the relationship between religion and psychology.¹ Being knowledgeable people they were able to put my remarks to some use of their own but I was left with an uneasy feeling of having traded on the commonsense experience that twenty-five years as a psychologist can hardly fail to bring rather than having made an attempt to formalise and articulate intelligibly the link between religion and psychology as I am attempting to understand it.²

The Limits of Psychological Inquiry

A discussion of the relationship between religion and psychology ought to begin, it seems to me, with a lowering of the expectations of what can be expected from the side of psychology.

Psychology strives to be scientific - although its precise status among the scientists remains a matter of dispute - and can thus make no claim of offering a complete or well rounded understanding of human life. This disclaimer is not easily tolerated by people who turn to psychology in the hope that men and women who have given their lives to the experimental, or in any case the empirical, study of what human beings actually say, do, think or feel should be in a better

¹ I would like to express particular thanks to Professors Patrick Hannan and Vivian Boland and to my colleague Dr. Josephine Newman as well as to all those who contributed to the discussion.

² Moral theologians, like psychoanalysts, know from experience the earthy origins from which virtues proudly spring and know too that the most authentically religious person is the one least likely to insist upon his/her own fundamental goodness.

position than most to offer some solution to the problems of living. The honest psychologist can, however, do little more than try to help them overcome the hatred of learning from their own experience and the thirst for ignorance, that moral philosophers have long identified as one of the principal passions of the human soul.

Freud remarked towards the end of his life that...

... what people seem to demand of psychology is not progress in knowledge, but satisfaction of some other sort; every unsolved problem, every admitted uncertainty is made into a reproach against it.

Purveyors of psychological snake-oil can therefore always be assured of a ready welcome in the market place.

Despite these limitations psychological science and theology still have business with each other. Michael Argyle's classic study *Religious Behaviour*³ gives a comprehensive enough review of the way different schools of psychology have tried to make sense of religion from a scientific point of view. The theories of religious behaviour and belief that he lists include a social learning theory of religion, religion as a response to frustration, religion as a way of resolving personal conflict, religion as a remnant of childhood fantasy, as well as theories involving cognitive needs and theories of religious experience as deriving from alterations of physiological states, drug induced or other.

All of these approaches have something to offer but the line of enquiry that seems to me to be the most fundamental and fruitful is the one initiated by Freud almost a century ago under the name of psychoanalysis. I will try briefly to justify this option⁴ and to dilute the stereotype of dogmatic pansexualism which still prevents some

³ M. Argyle. *Religious Behaviour*. London, Routledge & Kegan. 1958.

⁴ For a more developed discussion see C. Gallagher (The psychologist as psychoanalyst: the proper study of mankind...) *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 1987. VIII, 2, 111-126.

theologians from giving Freud a fair hearing and which draws them into what appears a more comforting dialogue with writers whose apparent approval of their religious position should not blind us to the pseudo-psychological and indeed the pseudo-theological ground on which they frequently take their stand.

A psychology of the speaking subject

The revolution that Freud inaugurated in the study of human psychology derives principally from his focus on what is most characteristic of human beings - the fact that we, alone among creatures, speak. Psychoanalysis from the beginning has been a 'talking cure' and one of my interlocutors at the meeting referred to above seemed to be a little taken aback at the discovery that psychoanalysis was more Johannine than he had imagined and that it was quite willing to give its full weight to the opening words of the fourth gospel.

Freud's insistence that his patients should not try to decide in advance what they were going to say, but rather trust to the inspiration of the moment by communicating candidly and uncritically whatever occurred to them to a listener, who for the most part was to maintain a neutral and benevolent silence, he uncovered dimensions of human speaking which up to then had been overlooked. By observing the rules of non-omission and non-systematisation, by freely associating, the speaker found himself expressing not alone the pathogenic secrets which he often looked on as being at the origin of his mental suffering but also thoughts and wishes which he did not acknowledge as being his own. Freud was not unwilling to compare these unwanted disclosures to the irreligious or blasphemous thoughts of which the most pious and scrupulous people sometimes complain as being intrusions into their consciousness.

Such verbal phenomena occurred particularly in those areas of behaviour that Freud was the first to isolate as revealing, in a special way, the nature of the speaking subject: *dreams*, which to the dreamer in his waking state are frequently mystifying and which from ancient

times have been seen as ways in which supernatural powers manifest their intentions to the dreamer. For example, Saints Joseph, Paul and Patrick relied on dreams to find God's will for themselves at crucial stages of their lives; *slips of the tongue* and other mistakes which to honest examination reveal intentions which the speaker has tried to conceal; and *jokes*, which can only have their effect so long as at a conscious level we do not know what we are laughing at and which to analysis disclose hostile or sexual intentions which once again the speaker denies as being his.

Neurosis and human existence

Thus far we are dealing with phenomena - dreams, mistakes and jokes - which only the most mechanistic of psychologists could describe as abnormal, however neglected they may be by most positivistic psychologies. But Freud's principal interest in them lay in the structural identity he found between these everyday productions of the human spirit and productions which are described as mental illness. And mental illness is not so easily disposed of by neglect.

The consequences of mental illness are everywhere with us, whether we focus on strictly psychological manifestations such as anxiety, or other disorders of thinking, volition or feeling, or on the physical conditions which specialists in psychosomatic medicine have for decades seen as being rooted largely in a primary psychological disturbance. The language of our media in talking about the paranoid perceptions of religious and political opponents, the suicidal and self-destructive nature of social and industrial conflicts or the hysterical reactions to victims of sexually transmitted diseases has come to rejoin the opinion of professional observers who are increasingly aware of the role of psychological problems in the crises that confront our prisons, schools, hospitals and family law tribunals.

So, having unveiled the unwanted intentions behind the minor disturbances of normal psychological functioning Freud gave a new dignity to sufferers from mental illness by demonstrating that their symptoms, far from being foolish and senseless excrescences which

should be removed at all costs, are perfectly significant in every detail, serve important interests of the human personality and, most importantly, give expression to past experiences that are still operative and to hidden wishes which are still of vital importance to the sufferer.

To put it another way, neurotic symptoms are the consequences of long-repressed questions about one's existence and one's sexuality, vital questions which have remained unresolved and which the neurotic has consciously forgotten, but which continue to preoccupy him at an unconscious - repressed - level. To quote Jacques Lacan, 'this does not give him such a bad position in the order of human dignity'⁵ compared to the alienated acceptance of normalcy that his long-suffering entourage, his frustrated doctors and often he himself would wish for.

Sexual identity as a paradigm

The inescapable necessity of asking such vital questions and the observable fact that they are always answered more or less inadequately brings us closer to the core of the psychoanalytic position regarding man and woman's being in the world. If Freud laid such stress on sexuality, particularly in his early work, it was because the vital problem of matching the imaginary and social personality of the subject to his biological sex is one of the most delicate operations that confronts the emerging human being. It is one which experience teaches us to be the most liable to incomplete resolution or even failure, as the child struggles to comprehend what the adult world with all its obscure desires is demanding of him.

Our purpose here is to see how the attempt to resolve this question can help us to realise the degree to which the human subject has to deal with pre-existing cultural and linguistic distinctions - what Jacques Lacan has described as the symbolic order - in the struggle to achieve his or her identity. Unlike animals, human beings must work to achieve their sexual identity and this they do over against the most

⁵ J. Lacan. *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock, 1977. p. 272.

fundamental laws that govern all human societies, the kinship and marriage laws that establish the relationships which society will or will not tolerate between its males and females. A first step in obeying these laws, which are often quite literally a matter of life and death, is to be able to name oneself tranquilly as a boy or a girl.

The presence of a substantial proportion of male and female homosexuals as well as the prevalence of forms of sexual dysfunction in our society bears open witness to the difficulties of this struggle. The fact that neuroses are to be understood as bearing hidden witness to this struggle is one of the foundation stones of analytic theory and practice.

The primacy of the symbolic order

Our purpose here is not to discuss Freud's theory of sexuality but to use the progress towards sexual identity as a paradigm to illustrate the fact that human beings do not reach any aspect of their identity by a process of natural biological development, paralleled by an equally natural psychological development, but rather by means of a dialectical and potentially pathogenic interaction between what might be loosely called the two principles of language and biology. Clearly this biological reality must be informed by something beyond animality which makes it susceptible to being open to the effects of language. But from the empirical point of view few analysts feel that they can go so far as to posit the existence of what has traditionally been called a soul or even some mysterious self. The essential point for them is that language and the forms of society derived from it are primary, that to be a human being is to have a potentiality for interacting with language, and that it is in realising this potential that one can come to identify oneself to a greater or lesser extent as man or woman.

The failures in this process, of which the neuroses of later life are a memorial, are due in Freud's view less to inadequacies of the biological principle than to distortions and lacks in the symbolic order. It is primarily the language into which the emerging child has to find

his way and the realities of the psychological and social structuring of the particular family into which he is born, which pose the major obstacles in the way of realising one's human potential. In that sense particular ways of relaying the demands of society to the child can be described as pathogenic.

Religion and obsessional neurosis

These remarks, though inadequate and oversimplified, may help us to see that when, in the early years of this century, in a short paper on *Obsessive actions and religious practices*,⁶ Freud described religion as a universal obsessional neurosis, we need not immediately assume that he was simply indulging in a piece of degrading pseudo-scientific name-calling. The analogy may or may not have its value in illuminating for us some of the typical strengths and weaknesses of the religious position. But I believe that it is a serious attempt to describe religious subjectivity from the point of view of the psychologist and that as such it deserves our study and our criticism.

'In the beginning was the Word'. Religious thinkers more than others have been predisposed to hold that the religious identity of the subject is not naturally developed from within but is rather a response to a word which is addressed to the child - to continue with our analogy from psychoanalysis - at the initiative of believing parents, teachers, preachers and legislators: 'Faith comes through hearing; how will they believe if they have not heard'.

But the response to the word is not an automatic one and the history of the theological controversies on grace, freedom and predestination - controversies which Christian Evangelism is once again putting on the agenda - point up the different ways in which individuals respond either through a more or less complete acceptance or through a downright rejection. Even Freud, as he learned from his

⁶ S. Freud. *Obsessive actions and religious practices* (1907), Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, trans. James Strachey, London, Hogarth, 1953-1974. Vol 9, pp. 116-127.

mother in the course of his own analysis, was exposed from his earliest years to religious teaching through the influence of the Catholic nurse who used to take him to Church: 'When you came home you used to preach and tell us all about how God conducted His affairs'.⁷ But whatever the effect of this exposure of his infantile beliefs he would always in his later life deny any religious affiliation and describe himself as an unbelieving Jew.

The notion of a discourse which pre-exists the potential believer and with which he must interact, does not therefore appear to be foreign to the analysis of the way in which subjective religious identity is accepted or rejected. But Freud goes further than this. His claim is that to define oneself as a believer is in some way to admit to having had serious difficulties in one's early interactions with the symbolic order as relayed through one's parents and early educators and to have dealt with those difficulties by assuming a position which is analogous to that of the obsessional neurotic.

A universal obsessional neurosis

A corollary to this is to argue that the teaching, preaching and legislation of the institutional Church, which is proposed to the child initially through the medium of the parents, is itself pathogenic in the sense that it generates a neurotic-type psychological structure in believers, even though this neurosis is so universal as to appear normal and in fact saves the individual the trouble involved in constructing his own obsessional neurosis. The individual obsessional neurotic has to develop his own particular set of observances and rituals which for him are matters of life and death; - reports of First World War obsessionals described how they would put themselves in serious danger of death in the trenches by refusing to interrupt obsessional rituals which left them exposed to the immediate risks of enemy bombardment; - but religions

⁷ S. Freud. In *The origins of psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, drafts and notes, 1887-1902*, Trans. E. Mosbacher and J. Stachey, London, Imago, 1954, letter of 15 October 1897.

encourage this life and death mentality by putting forward commands which must be obeyed under threat of eternal damnation - 'I put before you this day life and death' was Aaron's word to the people of Israel.

One of the observable features of obsessional neurosis is that each individual obsessional neurotic vegetates in his own private world but believers in the same faith may well be able to communicate with one another because they share in a common world view. The problems of communication are, however, translated on to a global plane:

'It is conceivable', writes Jacques Lacan, 'that an obsessional may not be able to make the slightest sense out of the discourse of another obsessional. It might even be said that it is from this incapacity that religious wars begin'.⁸

Obsessional neurosis as a *Grenzfrage*

I am only too aware that the transition from the notion of neurosis as the common fate of men and women in their struggle to realise their own identity in interaction with a pre-existing discourse, through the plausible notion that believers too have to struggle to reach their religious identity over against a Word which is addressed to them from without, to the conclusion that this struggle results in something that can be usefully understood in terms of obsessional neurosis has not been fully argued here. Even though Freud published his original article in a Journal addressed to theologians and psychiatrists, devoted to *Grenzfragen* on the frontiers between religion and psychology, he seems to have presumed a familiarity with obsessional neurosis which can scarcely be gained without a good deal of clinical and indeed psychoanalytical experience.

To give the non-clinical reader some sense of how an obsessional neurotic may present himself I will quote a few lines from Freud's

⁸J. Lacan. Introduction to the German translation of *Ecrits*, Paris, Points, 1976.

summary description of his best known obsessional patient, the one known in the literature as the Ratman:

My patient had, as it were, disintegrated into three personalities: into one unconscious personality, that is to say, and into two preconscious ones between which his consciousness could oscillate. His unconscious comprised those of his impulses which had been suppressed at an early age and which might be described as passionate and evil impulses. In his normal state he was kind, cheerful and sensible - an enlightened and superior sort of person - while in his third psychological organisation he paid homage to superstition and asceticism. Thus he was able to have two different creeds and two different outlooks upon life.⁹

I would suspect that most self reflective religious people would recognise some of themselves in this text. Space does not permit a full analysis of the implications of this text but a first reading suggests distinct analogies with the paradoxical impression religious people sometimes make on even sympathetic outside observers, as well as with the way believers often experience the fragmentation of their own interior life. Even if we leave aside the waters of holy wars with whom one can carry on a civilised and good humoured conversation until there is question of the Jews' right to existence, or the Muslims' or the Hindus', or the Sikhs' or the Catholics', or the Protestants', what is one to make of an apparently good-natured and sophisticated Evangelical like Billy Graham who in a prime-time television interview can regretfully condemn to Hell the countless millions who have not *explicitly* accepted the message of Jesus Christ? Is a psychologist being excessive if he asks whether there is not here at least some echo of Freud's description of the obsessional neurotic who can oscillate between two preconscious personalities - the kind, cheerful, sensible,

⁹ S. Freud, *op.cit.*

enlightened and superior type of personality interchanging with the one that pays homage to superstition and asceticism? - both rooted in an earlier sense of sinfulness and guilt.

And is it not a common-place for confessors and spiritual guides to hear pious people question their own motives and wonder whether their own self-deception is not concealing from them motives and desires which they are unable to unwilling to articulate?

The picture drawn by Freud of the Ratman (with whom, incidentally, he identified in many ways) highlights the reason why this particular clinical condition is so appropriate to serve as an analogy for the religious person, especially one who finds himself within the Judaeo-Christian tradition which Freud, throughout his life, took as his frame of reference whether he was dealing with individual or group manifestations of religion.

The picture suggested is one not of degeneracy or of neuroticism in the commonly accepted sense of the words but rather of someone trying, however unsuccessfully, to be a moral and upright person. The patient had not simply given way to the passionate and evil impulses which we tolerate in young children and only condemn if they persist beyond the age of reason into adolescence and adulthood. Young children know nothing of the standards of fairness and unselfishness which we will later demand of them. The characteristic problem of the obsessional is not that he gives way to his evil impulses but that he tries to be too good. Obsessionality is a tribute which virtue pays to vice.

The one who tries to deal with childhood transgressions of the laws of the symbolic order by an over-compensatory moralism, to which no reproach can be addressed, ends up by acknowledging the truth of his history through a character structure that is particularly susceptible to superstition and asceticism, and often becomes subject to the most distressing obsessions and compulsions. This is not the place to detail the symptomatology of a full-blown obsessional neurosis with all its apprehensiveness, its shame, its guilt, its obsessional thoughts, its brooding, and its defensive rituals. Anyone who has seen the hands and arms of an obsessional rubbed raw by hours of heroic but fruitless attempts to scour away the speck of dirt which might contaminate

those with whom he comes in contact with will have some notion of how far such moralism can lead.

It remains a mystery why the attempt to compensate for the inevitable transgressions of early life by striving to be a moral person of conscientious and irreproachable character should exact such a terrible price from the individual in terms of interior suffering and social inhibition. And, by extension, why societies whose only goal has been to return to the uncompromising and untarnished ideals of Islam or Protestantism or Catholicism, seem, at different historical epochs, to have produced more global effects of a similar though less well understood type.

The dimension of moral striving cannot be ignored by the psychologist when he is considering the observable consequences of individual or group obsessiveness: but neither can the dimension of psychological inhibition and suffering be neglected by the moral theologian when he is setting forth the moral norms to be observed by individuals and societies. It is in this sense that I suggest - after Freud and Lacan - that obsessional neurosis offers a privileged field of study for those who would attempt to bridge the chasm that still separates religion and psychology - a chasm which constitutes one of the more serious obstacles to the generation of that ethics of desire required by our time.

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THEORY, CLINIC ... A QUESTION OF ETHICS?

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The ethical question of the analyst is included in the way he gives an interpretation. In this way his knowledge or better said his 'supposedly known', is inscribed in a certain relation with desire.

It is at this point of the encounter that the analyst, supposed to know and understand unconscious desire, is called upon. About this Freud is absolutely clear and tells us that ...

... we refused most emphatically to turn a patient who puts himself into our hands in search of help into our private property, to decide his fate for him, to force our own ideals upon him, and with the pride of a Creator to form him in our own image and see that it is good ... and the patient should be educated to liberate and fulfil his own nature, not to resemble ourselves.¹

Freud offers us a striking example in an article that appeared in 1928 in the magazine *Imago*, entitled *A Religious Experience*.² This text shows the extent to which it is necessary for the analyst to 'know' Freud and Freudian analysis; as we will see, this knowledge is 'already there' for Freud. But knowledge is 'already there' not because it is a non-sense to which a sense is given, but rather because Freud consistently upholds the body of knowledge already constituted by Freudian analysis, and which can be called upon in each case that he uses as demonstration of it.

Is this not the point at which there is an opposition between structure and analogy? With respect to knowledge, from the moment that interpretation is employed, from which text is it extracted? Is it a text to be found, or a text to be invented?

¹ S. Freud. S.E., XVII, pp. 164-165.

² S. Freud. *A Religious Experience*. S.E., XII, p. 168.