

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM FREUD'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION ?

by

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This paper was given at the conference in All Hallows on 10 June 2011.¹ It deals with the influences on Freud's often neglected religious formation and his own subjective tendency towards religious superstition. This forms the background to his seminal 1907 analogy of obsessional neurosis as a private religion and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis.

Keywords: Freud's rabbinical family tradition; Charcot on hysteria and medieval witch trials; obsessional neurosis; superstition; spiritualism and the occult.

'It is conceivable 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.'²

Introduction

The revelations in the recent Ferns, Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne reports³ of widespread cruelty and sexual perversity in religious institutions caring for young people, and among individual priests, nuns and brothers, has shaken our complacency about the positive psychological benefits of religion and invites us to a reconsideration of Sigmund Freud's more critical assessment of religious subjectivity and in particular his analogy between religion and obsessional neurosis.

¹ The proceedings of *Mental Health, Practical Theology and Spirituality* are due to be published in 2012.

² Introduction to the German edition of *Ecrits in www.ecole-lacanienne.net* Pas-tout Lacan 1973.

³ *In Plain Sight*, Amnesty International Ireland's devastating report on these findings is reviewed in *The Irish Times*, 27 September 2011.

Although this analogy has been characterised as ‘pseudo-scientific mudslinging’ and obsessional neurosis was first isolated by him as a crippling mental illness akin to the extreme scrupulosity familiar to confessors, Freud also insisted that obsessionals – among whose number he counted himself - could transform the guilt and anxiety, resulting from the memory of a childhood experience of traumatic sexual aggression, into remarkable productivity and creativity, even in the field of religion..

Over against Carl Gustave Jung, William James and many contemporary American psychologists, Freud is often characterised as someone who had no experience of religion and who because of his Jewish background was innately hostile to Christianity.

I will attempt to show in this brief paper that far from this common view, and indeed from the official picture given by his biographer Ernest Jones of a man who "went though this life from beginning to end as a natural atheist"⁴, it is easy to underestimate the influence that religious people had on Freud, the familiarity that he had with religious doctrines and practices and indeed his own subjective disposition to both religious superstition and obsessional neurosis. In fact, as we shall see, it was originally religion and religious experience that he saw as throwing light on neurosis and it was only in 1907 when he was 51 years old and had already laid a solid basis for psychoanalytic theory and practice that the analogies between the two became reciprocal: obsessional neurosis as a private religion and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis.

Here we will limit ourselves to the steps that lead to this 1907 study which Freud saw as the beginning of his formal treatment of religion and the basis of his better-known works: *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13); *The Future of an Illusion* (1927); *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1934-38).

In his autobiographical study of 1923, after remarking on the applications of psychoanalysis – which has quite simply entered into the common consciousness of major 20th century literary and artistic figures though not of political or religious leaders - he goes on:

I myself set a higher value on my contributions to religion, which began with the establishment of a remarkable similarity between obsessive actions and religious practices or ritual.

⁴ E. Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and work*, volume III, Hogarth Press, London, 1972, p 376.

Without as yet understanding the deeper connections I described the obsessional neurosis as a distorted private religion and religion as a kind of universal obsessional neurosis.⁵

Let us briefly explore the sources that led to this historically unprecedented assertion by first looking at Freud's personal experience of religion and then at his discovery of psychoanalysis and the role played in this by his own self-analysis.

Freud's religious formation

Family influences

A first indication of the respect for religion in which the young Sigmund was raised can be seen in the dedication his father, Jacob, wrote in Hebrew on the frontispiece of the family Bible as he passed it on to him on his 35th birthday. Jacob was not an orthodox Jew but 'he spent considerable time reading the Talmud and the Torah in the original ...and presided over a household in which the major Jewish festivals were celebrated'⁶:

My dear Son,

It was in the seventh year of your age that the spirit of God began to move you to learning. I would say the spirit of God speaks to you: "Read in My book; there will be opened to you sources of knowledge of the intellect." It is the Book of Books; it is the well that wise men have dug and from which law-givers have drawn the waters of their knowledge.

You have seen in his Book the vision of the Almighty, you have heard willingly, and have tried to fly high upon the wings of the Holy Spirit. Since then I have preserved the same Bible. Now, on your thirty-fifth birthday I have brought it out from its retirement and I send it to you as a token of love from your old father.⁷

⁵ S Freud. *An Autobiographical Study*, Standard Edition XX, Hogarth, London, p 66.

⁶ R M Rainey. *Freud as a student of religion: perspectives on the background and development of his thought*, American Academy of Religion, University of Montana, 1975, p 12.

⁷ E. Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and work*, volume I, Hogarth Press, London, 1972, pp 21-22.

It is worth noting that Ernest Jones, who appears to have been a much more natural atheist than Freud, doctors some of this text and omits the father's signature: 'Jacob, son of Rabbi Shlomo Freud'⁸, which sets Sigmund in a very explicitly rabbinical family tradition.

Primary and secondary school

Freud, for a period of 8 or more years in the 1860's, was steeped in Hebrew language and religion and in the study of extensive portions of the Bible in the original Hebrew. Reuben Rainey has listed out in great detail the elaborate curriculum of religious instruction he followed in both primary and secondary school and it makes it very difficult to sustain that he was religiously illiterate.⁹

Perhaps the best evidence of the impact these studies had on him was his lasting admiration for one of his teacher's, Samuel Hammerschlag. In an obituary written after his death in 1904 Freud says that Hammerschlag was:

'... one of those teachers who possess the gift of leaving ineradicable impressions on the development of their pupils. A part from the same fire which animated the great Jewish seers and prophets burned in him ...'¹⁰

Hammerschlag looked on Freud as a son, and Freud could write that 'there is such a secret sympathy between us that we can talk intimately together.' And of Hammerschlag and his wife: 'I do not know any people kinder, more humane, further removed from any ignoble motives'¹¹. His continued feelings of solidarity with Hammerschlag appears from the naming of his fifth and sixth children, Sophie and Anna, after Hammerschlag's niece and daughter.

Freud too felt himself animated by the spirit of ancient Jewry:

⁸R M Rainey, *ibid.*

⁹ Op.cit., pp 40-45.

¹⁰ S Freud. *Obituary of Professor S Hammerschlag*, Standard Edition IX, Hogarth, London, p 255.

¹¹ S Freud. *Letters 1873-1939*, Hogarth, London, 1970, p. 102

‘I have often felt as though I had inherited all the defiance and all the passions with which our ancestors defended their temple.’¹²

But he was soon to be inspired by a teacher from a very different religious tradition.

University

In his first years at the University of Vienna Freud’s imagination was fired by Franz Brentano, a liberal Catholic ex-priest and author of the epoch-making *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*. Published in 1874, this work, with its stress on human intentionality, laid the basis for phenomenological psychology which, though popular on the continent, has had little influence in the English-speaking world. Brentano had come from Prague to Vienna to teach at the Faculty of Philosophy and his lectures captivated Freud. In November 1874, he wrote to his friend Eduard Silberstein:

I should be very sorry if you, studying law, entirely neglected philosophy while I, the godless empirical man of medicine, attended two philosophy courses with Paneth and read Feuerbach...One of the courses...deals with existence of God, and Professor Brentano, who lectures on it, is a marvellous person. Scientist and philosopher though he is, he deems it necessary to support his expositions with this airy existence of a divinity...

A few months later in March 1875 he tells of an ongoing debate with Brentano and how far he is drawn to model himself on him:

I shall personally tell you more about this peculiar and, in many respects, ideal man, a teleologist, a Darwinian and altogether a darned clever fellow, a genius in fact. For the moment

¹² Ibid. p.215.

*I will say only this: under Brentano's influence I have decided to take my PhD in philosophy and zoology.*¹³

In fact Freud did continue with his original intention of studying medicine and in particular the neuro-anatomy of Ernest Brücke which was then promising – as it still does today¹⁴ - to replace the traditional metaphysical understanding of human psychology with the knowledge derived from laboratory-based experiments.

Religion in the origins of psychoanalysis

Charcot and the magic of hypnosis

There seems little doubt that what I have called Freud's 'religious formation', by family and teachers, from childhood to university, played a major role in the particular stance he took up with regard to mental illness and eventually led him to the discovery of psychoanalysis. Although he made a detour through neurology in his twenties and early thirties and made major contributions especially to the understanding of children's paralyses he never fell completely under the influence of the investigations of Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of experimental psychology, and his contemporary Emil Kraepelin who laid the basis for the scientific psychiatry that still dominates that field today. Many years later Freud was to write about his most important book:

'The author of the *Interpretation of Dreams* has ventured in the face of the reproaches of strict science to become a partisan of antiquity and superstition.'¹⁵

But it was his success as a neurologist that offered him the opportunity to study with Jean-Martin Charcot, one of the great experts in the field of neuro-anatomy, and introduced him to a different

¹³ R. Clarke. *Freud: The Man and the Cause*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1980, p35.

¹⁴ For a blistering attack by an eminent neurologist on the contemporary attempts to reduce human thought and affect to 'brain-talk' see R. Tallis. *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity*, Durham. Acumen. 2011

¹⁵ S. Freud. (1907). *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, Standard Edition IX, Hogarth, London, p7.

scientific approach that was to radically change his life. By the time Freud reached Paris in 1885, Charcot had already declared that brain anatomy had gone as far as it could go and was beginning to explore hysteria using hypnosis, a method that had long been discredited by serious scientific workers in the field. Freud's fascination with Charcot's case presentations and his temporary conversion to hypnosis has been frequently discussed. But it is striking that rather than simply adopting the technique he was led to speculate on its parallels with 'antiquity and superstition'

In an article on hypnosis written in 1890 the starting point is Freud's assertion that the therapeutic method that he had learned from Charcot, and was beginning to use, depended on a rediscovery of therapeutic methods long associated with religion and on the ability to work magic with words.

*A layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and mind can be eliminated by 'mere' words. He will feel that he is being asked to believe in magic. And he will not be so very wrong, for the words which we use in our everyday speech are nothing other than watered-down magic ...*¹⁶

In this article, contemporaneous with his neurological work on aphasia, Freud argues that miracles do happen, and have always happened in religious settings in every period of history. They are not to be dismissed as the product of 'pious fraud and inaccurate observation'¹⁷ but on the contrary they show the power of mental forces over the organic. The believer's mental state of expectation whether fearful or hopeful can affect his body. It is the task of the therapist, Freud says, to induce attitudes of faith and hope in the patient which will open him to the magical effect of healing words. The doctor cannot produce positive expectations by a display of scientific expertise. People distrust the rigorousness of science. The doctor can no longer model himself on the detached objectivity of the laboratory scientist.

In antiquity the physician's curative powers derived directly from his ability to invoke divine power, since in its beginnings 'the art of healing lay in the hands of priests'¹⁸. The new healer must therefore find ways to convince his patient that his power is on a par with what believers have traditionally attributed to the priest. The techniques of hypnotism, replacing religious rituals

¹⁶ S Freud. (1890). *Psychical Treatment*, Standard Edition VII, Hogarth, London, p 283. Note that *Seelenbehandlung* [Soul treatment] has been omitted from the English translation of this article. See footnote 22 and Bruno Bettelheim *Freud and Man's Soul*, Knopf, 1983.

¹⁷ Op.cit. p 290.

¹⁸ Ibid.. p.292.

like purificatory baths, pilgrimages to holy places, and so on, make the hypnotist a sort of super-priest, possibly far more powerful than his historic prototype:

Hypnosis would then seem pre-ordained to fulfill all the physician's requirements, in so far as he seeks to act towards the patient as a "mind-doctor." Hypnosis endows the physician with an authority such as was probably never possessed by the priest or the miracle man, since it concentrates the subject's whole interest upon the figure of the physician; it does away with the autocratic power of the patient's mind which, as we have seen, interferes so capriciously with the influence of the mind over the body, it automatically produces an increase of the mind's control over the body, such as is normally to be observed only as an effect of the most powerful emotions; and, owing to the possibility of arranging that the instructions given to the patient during hypnosis shall only become manifest subsequently, in his normal state — owing, that is, to post-hypnotic suggestion — hypnosis enables the physician to use the great power he wields during the hypnosis in order to bring about changes in the patient in his waking condition.¹⁹

What Freud seems to envisage, in his still undiminished enthusiasm for hypnotism, is nothing less than the application of older religious methods in a modern secular setting. His analogies with religion are extensive. The doctor, assuming a pseudo-divine power, plays the part of the priest and pronounces healing words as if they came from God; the patient is a kind of believer who has been helped to cultivate virtues of faith and hope by appropriately ritualistic methods; the therapeutic methods themselves are quasi-sacral supports for the production of magical results.

Freud of course would argue that neither in the old, nor the new, magic is there any need to invoke the supernatural! *Es geht alles natürlich zu*²⁰. But the analogies he draws, in particular his choice of priest rather than scientist as identificatory model for the therapist, show the extent to which his dialogue with religion was already engaged in 1890. In this period, Freud does not seem to see himself as simply interested in developing new procedures for treating certain forms of mental disease. He also appears to realise he is entering a domain that had been most thoroughly explored not by philosophy or science but by religion.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.298

²⁰ S. Freud, *Psychische Behandlung (Seelenbehandlung)*, **Gesammelte Werke V, p 299.**

Charcot and diabolical possession

But there is another less well-known aspect of Charcot's thinking which led Freud to an interest in mediaeval theories of diabolical possession and was to play a vital role in the early development of psychoanalysis.

In chronic hysterics Charcot had often noticed the presence of anaesthetic areas of the skin — impervious to pain, pressure, temperature, and so on — and which in addition were frequently characterised by local anaemia and so did not bleed when pricked with a pin. This put him on the track of the idea that the symptomatology he was so laboriously drawing up had already been established centuries before and directed his attention to the medieval theories of demonic possession. In his obituary of Charcot in 1893, shortly before he began to develop his own ideas on the role of repressed memories as the origin of neurosis, Freud wrote:

No one should object that the theory of a splitting of consciousness as a solution to the riddle of hysteria is much too remote to impress an unbiased and untrained observer. For, by pronouncing possession by a demon to be the cause of hysterical phenomena, the Middle Ages in fact chose this solution. ... It would only be a matter of exchanging the religious terminology of that dark and superstitious age for the scientific language of today.

And of Charcot himself for whom Freud had an unbounded admiration:

‘He drew copiously upon the surviving reports of witch trials and of possession, in order to show that the manifestations of the neurosis were the same in those days as they are today.’²¹

The instruction to the ecclesiastical judges, for example, to search for the *stigmata diaboli* showed an awareness of those anaesthetic areas of skin that Charcot had discovered - something that had been lost to psychiatry in the intervening years. His discovery of this analogy between the medieval criteria for detecting possession and his own criteria for diagnosing hysteria seems

²¹ S. Freud. (1893). *Charcot*. Standard Edition III, Hogarth, London, p20.

to have exhausted Charcot's interest in the connection. But it was to have important ramifications for Freud's future work.

Obsessional neurosis and the origins of psychoanalysis

Free association and primal guilt

We shall now give a very brief account of Freud's discovery of the theory and technique of psychoanalysis. This is a vast field that has been covered by many weighty tomes, innumerable doctoral studies, and a host of learned articles. But some knowledge of it is essential if the import of Freud's critique of religion is to be appreciated and in particular his justification of its analogy to obsessional neurosis.

In what follows I will try as far as possible to allow Freud speak for himself in a number of innovatory papers and also in his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess who was his only serious confidant in those years. Indeed it has been suggested that Fliess, by offering a sympathetic ear to ideas that were being rejected out of hand by Freud's Viennese colleagues played the role of psychoanalyst for Freud throughout the 1890's.

But first, to describe the new method for exploring human subjectivity he had discovered, I can do no better than quote some lines from WH Auden's poem written shortly after Freud's death:

He wasn't clever at all: he merely told
The unhappy Present to recite the Past
Like a poetry lesson till sooner
Or later it faltered at the line where

Long ago the accusations had begun,

And suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
How rich life had been and how silly,
And was life-forgiven and more humble.²²

This search for the childhood trauma – Auden’s ‘by whom it had been judged’ - at the origin of neurotic symptoms had first been pursued by Freud through hypnosis. But with his discovery of free association, inviting the patient to speak in an uncensored and unsystematic way rather than being questioned according to pre-established psychological or psychiatric theories he was beginning to revolutionise our understanding of the mysterious mental processes that unwittingly guide our lives. In 1895 he wrote to Fliess:

*Have I revealed the great clinical secret to you, either in writing or by word of mouth? Hysteria is the consequence of a presexual sexual shock. Obsessional neurosis is the consequence of presexual sexual pleasure later transformed into guilt. "Presexual" means before puberty, before the production of the sexual substance; the relevant events become effective only as memories.*²³

These conclusions were drawn on the basis of his work with patients as they were encouraged to look for the origin of their current symptoms in their childhood experiences. The religious fears and scruples that some of his patient’s presented with are therefore not primarily concerned with the notion that their sins will be punished by a vengeful God in this life or the next – a notion that Freud was very familiar with from his family background and from his assiduous study of the Bible. The secret source of these anxieties is to be found not in the future but is ultimately rooted in an early guilt which contemporary events have reawakened in consciousness.

Superstition and protective measures

²² W. H Auden. ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’, *Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944*, Faber. London, *mcml*, p. 171-175.

²³ S. Freud. (1954). *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*. Imago, London, p.127.

Freud does not exempt himself from the experiences of the patients he is treating. He may have given his own obsessional neurosis and superstition their deepest explanation in some private notes interleaved into his copy of the 1901 edition of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

Rage, anger and consequently a murderous impulse is the source of superstition in obsessional neurotics: a sadistic component, which is attached to love and is therefore directed against the loved person and repressed precisely because of this link and because of its intensity.

*My own superstition has its roots in suppressed ambition (immortality) and in my case takes the place of that anxiety about death which springs from the normal uncertainty of life . . .*²⁴

But where the analogy with religious practices comes more clearly into focus is in the measures an obsessional tries to ward off guilty thoughts and feelings:

The obsessional neurosis constructs a set of further symptoms, whose origin is quite different. For the ego seeks to fend off the derivatives of the initially repressed memory, and in this defensive struggle it creates symptoms which might be classed together as "secondary defence."

These are all of them "protective measures," which have already done good service in the fight against obsessional ideas and obsessional affects.

If these aids in the defensive struggle genuinely succeed in once more repressing the symptoms of the return [of the repressed] which have forced themselves on the ego, then the obsession is transferred to the protective measures themselves and creates a third form of "obsessional neurosis" - obsessional actions ...

*A psychical analysis of them shows that, in spite of their peculiarity, they can always be fully explained by being traced back to the obsessional memories they are fighting against.*²⁵

It is these secondary obsessional defences that will later provide the clearest analogy with the rituals of the Jewish Sabbath – which he completely abandoned after his father's death - designed to recall God's mercy to his chosen people and to stave off his punishment despite their past and

²⁴ S. Freud. (1901) *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* .Standard Edition VI, Hogarth, London, p.260n3.

²⁵ S Freud. (1896). *Further Remarks On The Neuro-psychoses Of Defence*. Standard Edition, III, p. 172.

present sins. But living in Catholic Vienna and surrounded by churches he would have found it difficult to ignore the Masses and other services that permeated every aspect of public life.

Back to diabolical possession

It was with these clinical discoveries under his belt that Freud once again seems to have remembered Charcot's observations on the medieval criteria for verifying the presence of possession. In early 1897 he writes to Fliess:

By the way, what have you got to say to the suggestion that the whole of my brand-new theory of the primary origins of hysteria is already familiar and has been published a hundred times over, though several centuries ago? Do you remember my always saying that the medieval theory of possession held by the ecclesiastical courts, was identical with our theory of a foreign body and the splitting of consciousness? But why did the devil who took possession of the poor victims invariably commit mis-conduct with them, and in such horrible ways? Why were the confessions extracted under torture so very like what my patients tell me under psychological treatment? I must delve into the literature of the subject.²⁶

If the medieval witch-stories can throw light on the psychology of neurotics, then the psychology of neurotics can also throw light on the development of medieval "clerical phantasy". Freud noted that in the trials and inquisitions of the ecclesiastical courts, "both victim and torturer alike recall their earliest youth"²⁷; so the theological justification and practical directives for interrogating and punishing witches found in such works as the *Malleus Maleficarum*²⁸ reflect, like the witch stories themselves, infantile material.

He offers to explain to Fliess some of the doctrines central to the Judaeo-Christian traditions:

. . . Can you imagine what "endopsychic myths" are? They're the latest product of my mental labour. The dim inner perception of one's own psychical apparatus stimulates illusions, which

²⁶Op. Cit. *Origins*, 17.1.97, pp.187-88.

²⁷*Ibid.* p.188.

²⁸*The Malleus Maleficarum, The Hammer of Witches*, by two German inquisitors was first published in 1487 and went through 36 editions up to 1669. For further information Google *Malleus maleficarum* .

*are naturally projected outwards, and characteristically into the future and a world beyond. Immortality, retribution, the world after death, are all reflections of our inner psyche psycho-mythology.*²⁹

These ideas will be subsequently developed by Freud in his later works on religion but meanwhile there is another strand to his explorations which has already been hinted at above: the attempt to discover the roots of the neurotic and superstitious traits that he was beginning to acknowledge in himself.

Self-analysis

Neurotic symptoms

What has long been described as Freud's 'self-analysis' was largely recorded in his decade-long correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess. Although we know that he had been analysing his dreams since at least 1895, this self-analysis which he described as 'harder than any other' appears to have begun to take centre-stage in mid-1897 when he wrote:

*Incidentally, I have been through some kind of neurotic experience, with odd states of mind not intelligible to consciousness – cloudy thoughts and veiled doubts, with barely here and there a ray of light...I still do not know what has been happening to me. Something from the deepest depths of my own neurosis has ranged itself against my taking a further step in understanding neurosis, and you have somehow been involved.*³⁰

Two of his neurotic symptoms were particularly bothersome at this juncture. He describes one of them in a letter written just before setting off for Italy with his wife:

Martha is looking forward to the journey, though the daily reports of train accidents do not make the father and mother of a family look forward to travelling with any pleasure. You will laugh—

²⁹ S Freud. *The Origins Of Psychoanalysis*, Imago, London, 1954, 12.12.97, p. 237.

³⁰ *Op.cit.* 12.6.97 and 7.7.97 , pp.210-12.

and rightly—but I must confess to new anxieties, which come and go but last for half a day at a time. Fear of a railway accident *deserted* me half an hour ago, when it occurred to me that Wilhelm and Ida [Fliess] were also on their way. That ended the idiocy. This must remain strictly between us.³¹

This travel-phobia is mentioned often in the letters but it is hard to estimate the severity of this symptom; even at its height it does not seem to have prevented travel being one of Freud's greatest pleasures.

The second neurotic symptom took up a much larger share of his attention. He had long been confiding to Fliess his fear of an early death and his ruminations on its date. Many relevant references were originally omitted from the published letters; for example in June 1894, shortly after his thirty-eighth birthday, a new edition shows that he had written:

*...anyone who could guarantee me the thirteen years until my fifty-first birthday would not have spoiled my pleasure in cigars. My compromise opinion, for which I have no scientific basis, is that I shall suffer from four to five to eight years from various complaints, have good and bad periods and then between forty and fifty shall perish nicely and suddenly from a rupture of the heart; if it is not too close to forty, it is not so bad at all.*³²

Freud did not die on his fifty-first birthday, but we will later see that it was, curiously, in that year of 1907 that he published his first study on religion.

God and hellfire

He was also now beginning to discover a series of infantile and childhood memories which had profoundly influenced his adult superstitions. Many of these discoveries revealed a close relationship between the origins of his own obsessions and the religious influences he had been subjected to in his earliest years. Once again Fliess is his confidant as he attempts to follow where his dreams are leading him. Briefly, he reveals:

³¹ Op.cit. 18.8.97, p.214.

³² J M Masson. *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*. The Belknap Press, Harvard and London, 22.6.94, p.85.

...that my 'primary originator' [of neurosis] was an ugly, elderly but clever woman who told me a great deal about God and hell, and gave me a high opinion of my own capacities" ³³

He asked his mother if she remembered the nurse: "Of course," his mother said. 'She was an elderly woman, very shrewd indeed. She was always taking you to church. When you came home you used to preach, and tell us all about how God conducted His affairs"³⁴. How much his exposure to his nurse's Catholic beliefs had marked the young Freud can be seen from a letter written shortly before his discovery of endopsychic myths:

At the age of three I passed through the station [at Breslau] when we moved from Freiberg to Leipzig, and the gas jets, which were the first I had seen, reminded me of souls burning in hell.'³⁵

When the Freuds left Freiberg in Moravia, Freud left his nurse. But the first three years' lessons on God and hell had left their permanent mark.

The longing for Rome

The correspondence with Fliess gives repeated expression to a curious aspect of Freud's mental life – his longing to visit Rome and his puzzling incapacity to do so for many years. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* he recounts a series of dreams relating to this inhibition and concludes that '...the wish to go to Rome had become in my dream-life a cloak and symbol for a number of other passionate wishes.'³⁶ After one dream in which he found that he had been identifying himself with Hannibal who had also failed to reach Rome he goes on:

³³ S. Freud, *op.cit.* 3.10.97, p.219.

³⁴ *Op.cit.* 15.10.97, p. 221.

³⁵ *Op.cit.* 3.12.97, p.237.

³⁶ S Freud. (1900). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. SE IV, p196-7.

At that point I was brought up against the event in my youth whose power was still being shown in all these emotions and dreams. I may have been ten or twelve years old, when my father began to take me with him on his walks and reveal to me in his talk his views upon things in the world we live in. Thus it was, on one such occasion, that he told me a story to show me how much better things were now than they had been in his days.

"When I was a young man." he said, "I went for a walk one Saturday in the streets of your birthplace; I was well dressed, and had a new fur cap on my head. A Christian came up to me and with a single blow knocked off my cap into the mud and shouted: "Jew! Get off the pavement!"

"And what did you do?" I asked. "I went: into the roadway and picked up my cap," was his quiet reply.

This struck me as unheroic conduct on the part of the big, strong man who was holding the little boy by the hand. I contrasted this situation with another which fitted my feelings better: the scene in which Hannibal's father, Hamilcar Barca, made his boy swear before the household altar to take vengeance on the Romans. Ever since that time Hannibal had had a place in my phantasies.³⁷

The recovery of this memory of the brutal anti-Semitism his father had been subjected to and his passive acceptance of it is thus reveals one of the fundamental grounds for Freud's anti-Catholic and by extension anti-religious position in his adult life. 'To my youthful mind', he writes, 'Hannibal and Rome symbolized the conflict between the tenacity of Jewry and the organization of the Catholic Church.'³⁸ And he was to use the discoveries of psychoanalysis to exact his own form of vengeance on the doctrines that until very recently, in our own day, nourished anti-Semitism and spoke of 'the perfidious Jews' in the Good Friday liturgy.

When Freud finally plucked up the courage to visit 'the eternal city' in 1901, he spoke of it as 'an overwhelming experience' and 'a high-spot in my life'. He struggled to put into words his conflicting emotions:

'... while I contemplated ancient Rome undisturbed (I could have worshipped the humble and mutilated remnant of the Temple of Minerva near the forum of Nerva), I found I could not freely enjoy the second Rome; I was disturbed by its meaning, and, being incapable of putting out of my

³⁷ *Ibid.* p.197

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 196

mind my own misery and all the other misery which I know to exist, I found almost intolerable the lie of the salvation of mankind which rears its head so proudly to heaven.³⁹

Curiously his visit to Rome seems to have allowed Freud to overcome other inhibitions and to take the necessary political steps to be appointed professor. It also foreshadowed the end of his relationship to Fliess and the formal end of his self-analysis. He was now entering on a new phase in his life where this academic prestige and the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) brought increasing public attention to his views.

Obsessive actions and religious practices

Spiritualism and the occult

It may have been the inclusion in the latter work of a chapter entitled ‘Determinism, belief in chance and superstition – some points of view’, in which he unveiled his theory of endopsychic myths, that alerted the wider public to the possible applications of psychoanalysis to religion. Despite his negative reaction to Catholicism, he shows that he is far from closed to theosophy, spiritualism and the occult which at the end of the 19th century was embraced by figures as diverse as William James, Carl Gustave Jung and our own WB Yeats:

...we shall at least have to touch on the question of whether we are to deny entirely that superstition has any real roots: whether there are definitely no such things as true presentiments, prophetic dreams, telepathic experiences, manifestations of supernatural forces and the like. I am far from meaning to pass so sweeping a condemnation of these phenomena, of which so many detailed observations have been made even by men of outstanding intellect, and which it would be best to make the subject of further investigations... If the existence of still other phenomena — those, for example, claimed by spiritualists — were to be established, we should merely set about modifying our "laws" in the way demanded by the new discovery, without being shaken in our believe in the coherence of things in the world.⁴⁰

³⁹S Freud. *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, Imago, London, 1954, **19.9.01, p335-336.**

⁴⁰S Freud. (1901). *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, SE VI, pp **260-61.**

Jung was particularly taken by Freud's theories and methods and in his doctoral thesis, *The Psychology and Pathology of So-called Occult Phenomena* (1902), there were several references to *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This work was largely based on observations of his own cousin Helene Preiswerk who, like some other members of the Jung family, enjoyed a reputation as a medium. Freud's interest in telepathy and spiritualism, later an embarrassment to his more positivistic supporters, is sometimes traced back to Jung. But in 1900, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud had already shown his openness on the matter:

*Nor are discussions of the premonitory character of dreams and their power to foretell the future at an end. For attempts at giving a psychological explanation have been inadequate to cover the material collected, however decidedly the sympathies of those of a scientific cast of mind may incline against accepting any such beliefs.*⁴¹

Freud's reference to 'the material collected' might lead us to the conclusion that his refusal to reject manifestations of the supernatural was based on his study of observations made 'by men of outstanding intellect'. But he was also relying on his own personal experiences. The clearest evidence of this comes in a study of a novel he published in 1906 and it is worth quoting at length:

*It must be remembered, too, that the belief in spirits and ghosts and the return of the dead, which finds so much support in the religions to which we have all been attached, at least in our childhood, is far from having disappeared among educated people, and that many who are sensible in other respects find it possible to combine spiritualism with reason. A man who has grown rational and skeptical, even, may be ashamed to discover how easily he may for a moment return to a belief in spirits under the combined impact of strong emotion and perplexity. ...I know of a doctor who had once lost one of his women patients suffering from Grave's disease, and who could not get rid of a faint suspicion that he might perhaps have contributed to the unhappy outcome by a thoughtless prescription. One day, several years later, a girl entered his consulting-room, who, in spite of all his efforts, he could not help recognizing as the dead one. He could frame only a single thought: "So after all it's true that the dead can come back to life".*⁴²

⁴¹ S Freud. (19001). *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE IV, p.5

⁴² S Freud. (1907). 'Delusions and dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*', SE IX, p.71

The doctor, Freud confesses, was himself and he was only able to overcome his ‘dread’ when the girl introduced herself as the sister of the dead patient. This episode shows once again the power of his early childhood experiences and the religious education which included a belief in the resurrection of the dead.

People struggling with compulsions, as he was, are especially vulnerable to the age-old deceptions of religion. In its response to human desires, religion appeals to the hostile and egoistic drives by promising immortality and a settling of accounts with one's enemies in a future life. The attraction of such motives is powerful, if the contradictions in the doctrines themselves are skilfully concealed.

Obsessive actions and religious practices

In view of the increasing references to religion and spirituality in his published work, it should perhaps not come as a surprise to find Freud announcing to his Wednesday group on February 27, 1907 that he had accepted an invitation to become a co-editor of a new interdisciplinary review, *Theologisch-psychiatrische Grenzfragen*, founded by ‘chief physician’ Dr Johannes Bresler to deal with questions of mutual concern to theologians and psychiatrists.⁴³ By the time it appeared in April the review was called, more inclusively, *Zeitschrift für Religions-psychologie*. The prospect of a theologically literate readership open to psychoanalysis may have determined the theme of Freud's article in the first number— ‘Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen’ — i.e. "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907b).

This, as we have previously seen, was later considered by Freud as his first formal treatment of the subjectivity of the religious believer. It has often been overlooked in discussions on religion and psychoanalysis as facile and simplistic as compared to the later polemical texts. But it is in fact an extraordinarily dense and complex exposition based, as we have seen, on many years of reflection and analysis – including a difficult and painful self-analysis.

As such its ten pages deserve a line-by-line commentary of the type that allowed Jacques Lacan to introduce his revolutionary reading of Freud's work. Here however we will simply touch on

⁴³ H Nunberg and E Federn (eds.), *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Vol. I: 1906-1908*, International Universities Press, New York, 1962, p. 128

some of the main points that Freud makes and rely on the account we have already given of its long evolution to put flesh on this skeleton.

The article does mark a new beginning in that Freud, for the first time, explicitly situates in relation to one another two apparently disparate phenomena — the experience and behaviour of seriously ill obsessional neurotics and the subjectivity and practices of religious believers who, for the most part, lead normal productive lives. The first phenomenon represents his most valued contribution to the domain of clinical psychopathology; the other is the phenomenon he would later call ‘perhaps the most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization’⁴⁴. Freud would come to see, in books such as *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, that the struggle of humanity to deal with its unconscious primal guilt is the key to the achievements and discontents of civilization. But these massive contributions to the understanding of the Judaeo-Christian world in particular have their origin in this deceptively simple paper.

Two clinical examples can be seen as constituting its core. The first concerns the bed ceremonial of an 11-year old boy who had been sexually abused by his nurse and was symbolically re-enacting a series of protective measures. Here is how Freud describes it:

*The performance of a ceremonial can be described by replacing it, as it were, by a series of unwritten laws. For instance, to take the case of the bed ceremonial: the chair must stand in a particular place beside the bed; the clothes must lie upon it folded in a particular order; the blanket must be tucked in at the bottom and the sheet smoothed out; the pillows must be arranged in such and such a manner, and the subject's own body must lie in a precisely defined position. Only after all this may he go to sleep. Thus in slight cases the ceremonial seems to be no more than an exaggeration of an orderly procedure that is customary and justifiable; but the special conscientiousness with which it is carried out and the anxiety which follows upon its neglect stamp the ceremonial as a 'sacred act'. Any interruption of it is for the most part badly tolerated, and the presence of other people during its performance is almost always ruled out.*⁴⁵

The second example is of a woman who had been separated from her husband and was under a compulsion to repeat a series of apparently senseless acts. These are too long to be detailed here

⁴⁴ S Freud. (1927). *The Future of an Illusion*, SE XXI, p.14

⁴⁵ S Freud. (1907), ‘Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices, SE IX, p.118.

but it is fascinating to see the way Freud refers to her some ten years later when he describes her as lodged in her illness:

...in the sort of way in which in earlier days people retreated into a monastery in order to bear the burdens there of their ill-fated lives.⁴⁶

The analogy between religious practices and obsessional ceremonials of the type described in this paper may seem, at first sight, to offer a very fragile foundation stone on which to construct the psychoanalytic edifice that claims to articulate the structure of religious subjectivity. Freud deals quite explicitly with those who might dismiss it out of hand as a blasphemous caricature:

*It is easy to see where the resemblances lie between neurotic ceremonials and the sacred acts of religious ritual: in the qualms of conscience brought on by their neglect, in their complete isolation from all other actions (shown in the prohibition against interruption) and in the conscientiousness with which they are carried out in every detail.*⁴⁷

You have perhaps to be a certain age to remember the agonies felt by certain priests as they repeated the words of consecration again and again or even more bizarrely the scrupulous preoccupation with the percentage of beeswax in the candles used during the celebration of Mass. But I think it is fair to assume that the practices Freud would have observed in Catholic and Jewish ceremonials at the beginning of the 20th century gave plenty evidence for affirming the resemblances he is noting. And what has certainly not changed since his time are the features of the behaviour of obsessional patients as he describes it – they have indeed all the qualities of a ‘sacred act’ and Freud’s primary purpose seems to be to restore a certain dignity to what appears to the patient and to many observers to be simply ridiculous.

But the differences are equally obvious, and a few of them are so glaring that they make the comparison a sacrilege: the greater individual variability of [neurotic] ceremonial actions in contrast to the stereotyped character of rituals (prayer, turning to the East, etc.), their private nature as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances, above all,

⁴⁶ S Freud. (1916-17). *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. SE XVI, p.273.

⁴⁷ Op. cit. ‘Obsessive actions...’, p. 119

*however, the fact that, while the minutiae of religious ceremonial are full of significance and have a symbolic meaning, those of neurotics seem foolish and senseless. In this respect an obsessional neurosis presents a travesty, half comic and half tragic, of a private religion. But it is precisely this sharpest difference between neurotic and religious ceremonial which disappears when, with the help of the psycho-analytic technique of investigation, one penetrates to the true meaning of obsessive actions.*⁴⁸

There is no need to rehearse here what Freud had described many years before as ‘the great clinical secret’ – obsessive actions that emerge in adult life are the symbolic product of traumatic sexual events in childhood. So in that sense they are full of meaning and that meaning can be unveiled by psychoanalytic exploration. But there is a crucial distinction between obsessional actions and religious practices and the explanation for this will involve a very brief excursion into an aspect of psychoanalytic theory that remains obscure to this day.

Sex and egoism

From very early on in his investigations Freud had gravitated to a remark of Schiller’s that ‘love and hunger ruled the world’. So far from thinking of sex as the only instinctual force guiding behavior, Freud strove throughout his life to give its place to another drive which he named variously as egoism, hostility, aggression and eventually in his last great synthesis as the death drive. From the 1920’s on this dyad took its final expression in the Greek words of Eros and Thanatos.

This is not the place for a disquisition on the theory of drives – *Triebe* – or instincts as they have been unfortunately translated in English. Suffice it to say that in this article Freud distinguished religion from neurosis by arguing that whereas the latter resulted from a repression of sexuality, the former was, from an analytic perspective, the result of the repression of selfish, hostile and egoistic drives.

The fundamental reference point is what happens in the repression of sexuality:

In the course of the repression of this instinct a special conscientiousness is created which is directed against the instinct's aims; but which is lurking in the unconscious. The influence of the repressed instinct is felt as a temptation, and during the process of repression itself anxiety is generated, which gains control over the future in the form of expectant anxiety. The process of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20

*repression which leads to obsessional neurosis must be considered as one which is only partly successful and which increasingly threatens to fail. It may thus be compared to an unending conflict; fresh psychical efforts are continually required to counterbalance the forward pressure of the instinct.*⁴⁹

In this description of obsession neurosis the analogy to religion is striking. Religious fear of divine punishment, for example, is a familiar form of expectant anxiety, while scrupulosity and conscientiousness were recognized in religious psychology long before Freud identified them as an obsessional reaction-formation. The idea of an unending spiritual combat, of a struggle against temptation, always a theme of spiritual writers, finds its secular counterpart in the obsessional conflict.

But religion is associated much more explicitly with the second of the great instinctual drives:

*A progressive renunciation of constitutional instincts, whose activation might afford the ego primary pleasure, appears to be one of the foundations of the development of human civilization. Some part of this instinctual repression is effected by its religions, in that they require the individual to sacrifice his instinctual pleasure to the Deity: "Vengeance in mine, saith the Lord."*⁵⁰

Religion therefore shares in the great work of civilization. But the repression of socially harmful drives does not mean their abolition. They continue to lurk in the unconscious, and their expression is permitted subject to God's law: a man can be hostile even after surrendering his hostility to the Deity, if he makes himself an agent of that Deity's vengeance against witches or other evil people. The crusaders' *Dieu le veut* permits cruelty on any scale and the religious wars that defaced Christian Europe for centuries and the merciless struggles between non-Christian religions that still rage today demonstrate the violence that can be permitted with a good conscience in God's name.

Conclusion

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.124.

⁵⁰ Ibid p.127.

This brings us back to our starting point and in particular to Amnesty's analysis of the recent reports on child abuse in religious institutions in Ireland. One of the most horrifying aspects of the *Irish Times* review is the listing of the implements used to punish children: '...the leather containing coins ..the cat o'nine tails...hay forks...pikes,,,rosaries... crucifixes, etc.,etc' And the resultant injuries: 'Breaks to ribs, noses, wrists, arms...injuries to genitalia..burns, dog bites...' and so on. The mental havoc wreaked is not detailed.

All of this seems to justify the conclusion that abuse in institutions amounted to 'torture' and one of the most disturbing aspects of the whole sorry affair is that this torture was carried out in many instances by religious people.

An optimist might say that such abuse was a deviation from the norm and that over-all the contribution of religious institutions and individuals is guided by love and compassion. And Freud's early admiration for Samuel Hammerschlag and Franz Brentano and his thirty year friendship with the Lutheran pastor Oskar Pfister which began shortly after the publication of this article had given him personal experience of the fact that there are many fine religious people.

But his analysis of religion as based on the repression of hostile and egoistic drives and his contention that such drives are never abolished and are continually striving for expression seems to find confirmation in recent Irish experience and is well deserving of consideration over against other less critical psychological theories of religious subjectivity.

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