Freud and the consolations of religion

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The history of an illusion
Freud believed that the findings of psychoanalysis applied not only to the study of the neuroses, but to the history of civilization, mythology, and religion (Freud, 1916/1973, p. 436-437). Freud wrote increasingly on matters of religion and society as he aged. Though the objects of psychoanalytic inquiry were often obscure, if not nonsensical – dreams, slips of the tongue, hysterical symptoms, the ‘occult’ – psychoanalytic inquiry itself was pursued from the vantage point of science. From this perspective, Freud’s attitude to religion was not conciliatory. In Moses and Monotheism, for instance, in a passage on ‘What is true in religion’, Freud wrote:

How enviable, to those of us who are poor in faith, do those inquirers seem who are convinced of the existence of a Supreme Being! To that great Spirit the world offers no problems, for he himself created all its institutions. How comprehensive, how exhaustive and how definitive are the doctrines of believers compared with the laborious, paltry and fragmentary attempts at explanation which are the most we are able to achieve! The divine Spirit, which is itself the ideal of ethical perfection, has planted in men the knowledge of that ideal and, at the same time, the urge to assimilate their own nature to it. They perceive directly what is higher and nobler and what is lower and more base. Their affective life is regulated in accordance with their distance from the ideal at any moment.

Freud, 1939/1985, 370

Note the marked contrast between reason and the ‘divine Spirit’. It is as if religion is a particularly stupefying opium, imposing itself on the ethical beliefs of its adherents, and working its way into their ‘affective life’.

I turn now to a reading of The Future of an Illusion (Freud, 1927/1985), published in 1927, about halfway between the Wolfman’s blasphemies, and Freud’s dismissal of religion in his last major work. By the time of writing The Future of an Illusion, Freud had developed his theory of the death instinct, and of group psychology. Freud insists that, unlike Totem and Taboo, this work is concerned more with the functions of religion than its origins. Much of the text is written in the form of a dialogue, in which an imaginary interlocutor takes Freud to task for his assessment of religious belief. The work also contains several allusions to contemporary political and ideological controversies.

Freud begins by noting two ‘trends’ in civilization. On the one had there is ‘all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs’ (p. 184). On the other hand, there are the ‘regulations’ that govern the distribution of this wealth. Freud indicates that
these two trends are not mutually exclusive for a number of reasons, chief among them being that political economy is inextricable from libidinal economy, of ‘instinctual satisfaction’.

Social life therefore regulates that which Strachey translates as ‘instincts’. When an instinct cannot be satisfied, the result is ‘frustration’. A regulation that provokes frustration is a ‘prohibition’, and prohibition produces ‘privation’ (p. 189). Not all privations and prohibitions affect everybody equally, and even the instinctual wishes that are subject to prohibition – such as incest, cannibalism, and ‘lust for killing’ – are frustrated to greatly differing degrees, depending on the context. Nonetheless, Freud believes that, over the course of human history, the ‘external coercion’ occasioned by regulation and prohibition has become increasingly ‘internalised’, in the form of a super-ego (p. 190). Freud calls the super-ego ‘a most precious cultural asset’, as it mediates between the moral demands and regulations of a society and the instinctual wishes of the individual.

Society’s precepts are not merely negative, however, as they also give rise to ‘cultural ideals’ and ‘artistic creations’. Cultural ideals provide ‘narcissistic satisfaction’, and this tends to mitigate the individual’s hostility to culture (p. 192-193). Freud cites the example of a plebeian in ancient Rome: to be sure, the plebeian is ‘wretched’, and compelled into military service, but, as a consolation, he is a Roman citizen. The oppressed class may feel hostility towards its exploiters, but nonetheless identify with the latter’s ideals. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the ideas of the ruling classes can also be the ruling ideas, at least for the purposes of ‘narcissistic satisfaction’. The transmission of ideals through identification is the first of the three means by which satisfaction is apportioned through culture. The other two means are art, and religion.

For Freud, ‘the principal task of civilization…is to defend us against nature’ (p. 194). Nature ‘rises up against us’, and is ‘majestic, cruel, and inexorable…she brings to mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization’ (p. 195). Nature and its onslaughts injure man’s narcissism, his self-regard, the more so since the situation is ‘nothing new’ (p. 196), and is a recapitulation of an infantile prototype, specifically, the state of comparable helplessness felt by an infant in relation to its parents. Man may fear his father, but, according to Freud, he can always count on him for protection against dangers. The consolation of religion lies precisely in its transmogrification of the longed-for father into gods.

The purpose of the gods is threefold: ‘they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life has imposed on them’ (p. 197). Religion gives life a ‘higher purpose’ (p. 198), and prevents death from being an end-point. Moreover, religion assures the believer that he or she is not a mere
plaything of the ‘pitiless forces of nature’, and, moreover, assures adherents that the moral laws of a civilization govern the entire universe as well.

Freud indicates that monotheism is a decisive point in the formation of the religious illusion. Once God was reduced to the single entity of the Abrahamic religions, ‘man’s relations to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child’s relation to his father.’ (p. 199). The trade-off is that believers seek a reward from this paternal deity, namely, to be his ‘only beloved child’, his ‘Chosen People’. Ultimately, however, the construction of God the father is motivated by fear: man’s ‘longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of human weakness’ (p. 204). Freud asserts, in passing, that the mother’s role as protector is eventually and permanently replaced by that of the father.

Freud goes on to reject a number of bases for religious belief, such as arguments for belief based on tradition, or based on ‘as if’ suppositions. Freud then turns to the psychical origin of religious ideas. Freud is quite clear on this point: the origin of religious belief is the same as that of all illusions, that is, they are derived from ‘human wishes’ (p. 213). We might expect that Freud would compare such wishes to those of dreams and parapraxes, but Freud instead said that ‘they come near to psychiatric delusions’, without, however, necessarily being false, or unrealizable in ‘reality’ (p. 213). An illusion is not a mere error. ‘[W]e call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doping so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification’ (p. 213).

Freud dismisses revelation as illegitimate vis-à-vis knowledge: ‘scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves’. ‘Intuition and introspection’ lead only to illusion (p. 214). Freud also dismisses, though without mentioning any names, the God of the philosophers, whose God is ‘nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines’. (p. 215). The God of the ontological argument is presumably lacking in paternal characteristics.

Freud denies that religion substantially makes anybody happy, but does say that religion makes a few ‘concessions to the instinctual nature of man’. By way of example, Freud cites the cycle of sin and penitence, noting that in some instances, ‘sin is indispensable for the enjoyment of all the blessings of divine grace, so that, at bottom, sin is pleasing to God.’ (p. 220). The potential for sin is therefore not the least of religion’s charms.

Freud suggests that the wish-fulfillment characteristic of religious illusions involves a ‘disavowal’ or Verleugnung of reality. By way of analogy, this implies that religious belief is something like a fetish, or, perhaps akin to a psychotic delusion. This point remains undeveloped in the text. Thinking of prohibition in the US in the 1920s, Freud posits religious piety as a ‘compensation’ for those deprived of other, more tangible
stimulants. Freud continues at length in a somewhat Nietzschean fashion – religion is a bittersweet ‘poison’ which keeps men in a childish state, except for those who escape its neurotic powers, and have the strength to face ‘hostile life’ (p. 233).

In summary, then, religion is an illusion based on wish-fulfillment. It is also a disavowal of harsh reality, and one that recapitulates the infantile relationship between the child and the father-protector. From this wish-fulfillment are derived the moral systems of religion, which complement and partly constitute religion’s consolatory powers. As Freud shows in the case of the Wolfman, the relation of the believer-child and father-God can become derailed in the course of a neurosis (Freud 1918/1979, p. 358-360). Nonetheless, religion is itself a kind of neurosis, if not a delusion, and can only be healed through the curative work of science, the framework of which is held by Freud to be the Weltanschauung proper to psychoanalysis (Freud, 1933/1973).

The Other Side of Religion
Freud’s curt dismissal of religious belief, and his relegation of religious ideology to a childlike Wunsch is reminiscent of today’s so-called New Atheists, particularly in so far as religion is contrasted with science, reason, and rational life. Yet even on its own terms, Freud’s paper is neither straightforward, nor satisfactory. Freud does not hint at how the non-Abrahamic religions might fit into his theory. Freud’s use of dialogue to expose the non-ratinal basis of religion harks back to a similar dialogue by Schopenhauer (1851/1970, p. 95), and insofar as Freud is seeking to expose the enjoyment, compensations, and ressentiment underpinning religious belief, his precursor is Nietzsche. It is true that it is not difficult to see the link between illusion and consolation in some aspects of religious belief. Literature on the Apocalypse, for instance, in both its Christian (i.e. the Revelation of St John) or Jewish (i.e. the second book of Esdras) iterations tends to fit Freud’s formulations. Persecution and distress in the present is mitigated by future compensation, in which the wicked are punished, and the righteous few are saved. As Freud points out elsewhere, this deferral of enjoyment through religion does not escape the functioning of the pleasure principle (see Freud, 1911/1984, p. 41)

Nonetheless, many aspects of religious belief seem to problematise Freud’s diagnosis. Gratitude as a basis of religious belief confounds the notion of ‘illusion’, and Old Testament books such as Job, Ecclesiastes and the Songs of Solomon each, in their own ways, undermine any claims of religion to soporific solace. Even if we follow Freud in Civilisation and its Discontents and deny religion its ‘oceanic feeling’, these texts seem to offer depictions – of earthly love, earthly suffering, and earthly ‘vanity’ – that point to something beyond delusional artifice. Or, to put it differently, whilst religious ideas may very well be a wish-based illusion, they are not reducible to this. To discuss this point, I shall have recourse to some Lacanian texts, particularly Seminar XVII.
Whilst Seminar XVII is typically read as one of Lacan’s most political seminars, written after the turmoil of May 1968, such readings of Freud are rarer. Yet The Future of an Illusion is every bit as political, and written in the context of an even greater tumult. Freud litters his text with disparaging allusions to the Bolshevik revolution, to American ‘piety’ and anti-evolutionism, and to ‘certain nationalists’ promoting the ‘Indo-Germanic race’. Whilst Freud had always used economic metaphors in his theory – such as the term Besetzung. (translated into the Greek ‘cathexis’ by Strachey), or the phrase ‘libidinal economy’ itself – in this paper, the economic is no longer a mere metaphor. Political economy – that is, the distribution of available wealth, and libidinal economy – that is, the distribution of instinctual satisfaction – are not independent of one another, but are in fact coextensive (p. 184). Some enjoyment is renounced, or barred, only to be recouped via other means. On this basis, one can see how Lacan’s plus-de-jouir might emerge on the model of surplus value, since both the political and the libidinal must find satisfaction through the detours of ‘civilisation’. This latter term (Kultur) is always pitted by Freud against a nature that is as terrifying as it is capricious, and it is this ‘cruel’ nature that necessitates the protective figure of the father-God. A prodigal and benevolent nature, or a nature that is not diametrically opposed to culture, is entirely absent from Freud’s theory.

Then there is the question of wish-fulfillment, or, to give it its Lacanian name, desire. Freud appears to inhabit the same ethical landscape as Dostoevsky, whose Ivan (in The Brothers Karamazov) said that if there is no god, then everything is permitted. For Freud, desire is subject to prohibition, and religion’s consolations lie partly in compensation for the frustration of this prohibition. All the while, religion is providing an authoritarian prop for the prohibitions in the first place. For Lacan, religion qua law is still on the side of prohibition, but it is also on the same side as desire. As he puts it in Seminar VII, citing Paul’s letter to the Romans, the law causes sin. (Lacan, 1986, p. 170). Transgression of the law brings jouissance (p. 177). Consequently, if God is dead, ‘nothing is permitted anymore’, (Lacan, 2006, p. 106) since both desire and jouissance are dependent upon the law. Lacan frequently amended his theories of jouissance, but in both Seminar VII, and Seminar XVII, jouissance is linked to something impassable, a limit. Hence, the aim of religion may very well be to produce consolatory illusions, but the product of religion is jouissance. Freud seems to concede as much when he says of the suffering believer that a ‘last possible consolation and source of pleasure in his suffering is an unconditional submission’ (Freud, 1930/1985, p. 273).

In this vein, religion can be understood as a kind of master’s discourse, in which religion plays the role of S1:
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Understood in terms of Lacan’s theory of discourse, religion would mask the barred subject, grappling with unconscious desire, and address itself to culture and civilization. This is its consolatory aspect. Inadvertently, but of necessity, the byproduct of this would be jouissance, not consolation. Enjoyment accrues through the renunciation and transgression necessitated by religious belief.

Freud’s response to this situation is to juxtapose the discourse of religion with the discourse of science, of which he believes psychoanalysis to be a subset. The role of science, including science qua psychoanalysis, is to colonise and transform the territory formerly held by religion. There are two clear Lacanian objections to this maneuver, both of which can be found in Seminar XVII. Both relate to the epistemological status of psychoanalysis, and both can be understood as a response to the rise of scientism, including, perhaps, Freud’s own.

The first objection is that the discourse proposed by Freud effects a quarter turn of the master’s discourse, giving us the discourse of the university:

According to Freud, this turn to reason ought to dispel the wish-fulfilling properties of religious belief. Knowledge addresses itself to the consolations, and, concomitantly, to the jouissance of religion. In Lacan’s algebra, however, the S2 – or, to give it its pejorative name, ‘blah blah’ – disguises and presupposes a master, the S1. The end result of this discourse is the production of barred subjects, who are no less divided for their knowledge. The discourse of the university, when viewed from this perspective, is synonymous with bureaucracy, and, more insidiously, produces ‘discipline’ by way of knowledge-power, à la Foucault. Freud seemed vaguely aware of this problem in The Future of an Illusion, as can be seen in his asides on the USSR. He assures the reader that he has ‘not the least intention of making judgements on the great experiment in civilization that is now in progress in the vast country that stretches between Europe and Asia.’ (p. 188). Lacan is not so reticent: for him, ‘what reigns in what is commonly called the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics is the university’, the place where ‘knowledge is

Power is all the more effective in its dispersed and disavowed form as knowledge, and it is the student who occupies the position of the a. The a cannot be harmlessly assimilated into the university discourse, or any other discourse, for that matter, as the a is always that which resists integration, or which persists following colonization. Hence the outcome of this discourse is not a dispelling of illusions, but rather, another, more radical level of alienation and destabilising of the subject, the effects of which have been seen in Paris in 1968, in the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s, and in the Maghreb, only this month.

‘Illusions’ are not only manifest in the political realm, but also in the clinic. For instance, one of the classic forms of hysteria in the classical era of psychoanalysis were the impossible paralyses; hysterical anesthesia’s that are anatomically impossible, for instance, covering the head, or occurring in the shape of a glove. These types of symptoms (now termed ‘conversion disorders’) have been in steady decline in the industrialized world, and tend to be more common among individuals from rural areas, of lower socioeconomic status, and with less knowledge about medicine and psychiatry (Davison & Neale, 1998, p.165). On the other hand, as knowledge increases, hysterical symptoms become all the more subtle and insidious – note the rapid increase in diagnoses of chronic fatigue, vague neuralgias, and irritable bowel syndrome, and their attendant specialists, treatments, and support groups. This is the first objection to Freud’s notion that knowledge is somehow curative of illusion, when in fact it merely transforms rather than dispels it.

The second objection concerns the epistemological status of psychoanalysis. Freud believed that psychoanalysis was a science, and at times it appears that he is working hard to give his discipline a veneer of academic respectability. Lacan, friend of the surrealists, had no such scruples, and tended to emphasise the eccentricity of psychoanalysis with respect to other discourses. Lacan may have been at his most candid on the relation of science to psychoanalysis late in 1975 when, in between RSI and Le Sinthome, he embarked on a tour of North American Universities. To the students of Columbia, Lacan said that ‘the discourse one calls academic and the discourse one calls scientific… are not the same thing (qui ne se confondent pas), contrary to what one imagines.’ (Lacan, 1975a). This is an important distinction, and goes some way to rebuke those who mistake Lacan’s teaching for scientific nihilism.

Lacan is equally clear, however, that psychoanalysis is not, or, at least, is not yet a science, but rather, ‘a practice’ (Lacan, 1975b). ‘The strange thing’, Lacan says, ‘is that Freud thought he did science. He didn’t do science; he was in the process of producing a certain practice that can be characterized as the last flower of medicine’ (Lacan, 1975c). Psychoanalysis is not, therefore, a science – at most it might be considered a science of a subject taken strictly one at a time. The upshot of this is that even if science could properly be counterposed to religion, as Freud seems to wish, psychoanalysis would by
no means play a role in this opposition. Psychoanalytic discourse can occupy neither the position of the master, nor that of the knowledgeable bureaucrat. The hysterical can undermine religion in her own way, as she looks for and castrates a master. Yet the discourse of the analyst is, as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XVII*, one of displacement, not education. Rather than disabusing the subject of his or her illusions, the analyst hystericalises, which is to say, the analyst produces a question where formerly there was merely an (illusory) answer.

Psychoanalysis, as Lacan has it, is then situated at a different level to Freud’s ‘reason’. Lacan agrees with Freud that religion delivers a ‘higher purpose’, and, in ‘Science and truth’, identifies religion with Aristotle’s ‘final cause’ (Lacan, 2006, p. 735). Religion can integrate one’s experience into a teleology, and this teleology can be dismissed as an illusion. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis is elsewhere, coinciding with Aristotle’s material cause, the material being language. To wield psychoanalysis against the illusions of religion is, at least in part, to miss the point, at least as far as jouissance is concerned. This is because, as Lacan defines it in *Seminar XX*, ‘[j]ouissance is what serves no purpose’ (Lacan, 1999, p3). It cannot be incorporated into the teleological machinery of religion. It is true, at least, at this late point in Lacan’s teaching, that the subject can obtain phallic jouissance with religious means being among the highways and byways to this end. Nonetheless, in this instance, one is dealing with fantasy and law, not ‘illusion’. Of course, religion also provides the means to an Other jouissance, but of this, according to Lacan, we can say nothing.

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References


