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Religion as 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity'? Re-reading Freud on religion

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In his writings on culture, Freud stipulates a close relation between religion and psychopathology, and obsessional neurosis in particular. In this article, I would like to explore the nature of that relation. How is it articulated, and how is it transformed in the course of Freud's work over four decades, between 1894 and 1939? (How) can cultural (i.e. by definition, collective) phenomena be understood on the basis of symptoms described for individual psychology? On what basis can categories of individual psychology be extended to the analysis and history of cultural and societal formations? What perspectives can psychopathology open up for the analysis of culture? Is religion 'the cure', or 'the symptom'? Or are there grounds for breaking open the relation between psychopathology and religion as it has increasingly solidified in the course of Freud's work, and has been hotly contested ever since? This article works its way through these questions, and proposes to open some paths of investigation on the subject that are inherent in psychoanalytic theory, but have been prematurely closed off by Freud himself, as well as his adepts and critics.

Contribution: This article critically engages with Freud's most (in)famous statements on the relation between psychopathology and religion through an exposition of the articulations of this relation, as they change with the introduction of particular concepts and theories.

Keywords: obsessional neurosis; religion; magic ceremonial; religious ritual; social/cultural evolutionism; developmentalist model; Oedipus complex; analogy; resemblance; comparison.

Freud's 'evolutionist' history of religion

In one of his boldest statements on the subject of religion, Freud suggests that in his scheme of psychic development, intersecting with a universal history of cultural-societal history, religion occupies the place of the 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity' (1927c:*SE* XXI:43). This statement seems to echo an earlier supposition of Freud's stating that 'obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion'[1] (1912–13a:*SE* XIII:73), which appears in a controversial study of the relation between prohibitions relating to 'taboo' and obsessional neurosis, published under the (translated) title *Totem and Taboo. Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* some 14 years earlier.

Both statements are embedded in a number of propositions demonstrating the connections to fields drawn into psychoanalytic theory from 19th century philosophy of history, cultural anthropology and history of religion. Indeed, as Celia Brickman has shown, tracking the references, Freud relied on 19th-century social-evolutionist ethnographies for his accounts of the formations of psyche and society: from Edward Burnett Tylor, he drew a stagist account based on the distinction between animism and religion; from James Frazer's work, he gleaned the notion of the evolution of human thought from magic through religion to science, and the elaboration of the relation between totemism and exogamy; and from William Robertson Smith, he adopted the notion of animism as evolutionary stage of religion, and the ideas of the totem sacrifice and meal as first religious act constitutive of primitive group membership. Freud gathered the findings of these and related sources in an attempt to explain how cultural phenomena evolved by linking them to biological theories of evolution, in particular to Herbert Spencer's interpretation of Darwin, to Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and to Haeckel's genetic recapitulation thesis (Brickman 2018:60–69, 72–73, 76).

1. Freud compares psychopathological structures with cultural institutions or systems, based on 'points of agreement' that he finds in distortions of the latter. In its full formulation, the supposition of the comparison reads: 'It might be maintained that a case of hysteria is a caricature of a work of art, that an obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion and that a paranoic delusion is a caricature of a philosophical system' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:73).

Note: Special Collection: Re-readings of Major Theorists of Religion: Continuities and Discontinuities, sub-edited by Mohammed (Auwais) Rafudeen (University of South Africa).

The evolution of Freud's thought on religion

While taking note of the socio-cultural evolutionist castings of Freud's thought on culture and religion, with the attendant ethnocentrism and racialism, the aim of this article is a less ambitious one. Upon a re-reading of Freud on religion, it turns out that it would be difficult to pin one particular, consistent and coherent view of religion on his conceptualisations. Instead, I would like to show how Freud's ideas on religion themselves 'evolved', understanding this 'evolving' not in terms of stages, or 'development' or 'teleology', but in terms of conceptual and theoretical formations, deformations and transformations that do not preclude reversals, ruptures, contradictions, impasses and bypasses. In the process, I would like to re-open the question of the relation between individual psychological structures and collective formations such as societal and cultural institutions. Instead of presenting an argument on whether or not religion can justifiably be considered as obsessional neurosis, I would like to investigate how 'religion' enters the psychoanalytic terrain of neurosis, and of obsessional neurosis in particular. And in embarking on an analysis of the conceptual and theoretical formations, deformations and transformations of Freud's thought on religion, I would like to keep an eye out for elements and tracks in psychoanalytic theory itself, which could allow for a move away from the predominant view on 'psychoanalysis and religion', namely the view relying on the developmental model and the Oedipus complex in its original formulations and in its critical assessments. In other words, I will consider whether and how the relation between psychic structures and religious beliefs and practices can be thought differently from within psychoanalytic theory itself.

In order to show the formations, deformations and transformations, I will, as a first step, provide a chronologically ordered exposition of Freud's writings on obsessional neurosis – which does not imply a developmentalist approach, though (in fact, quite the contrary, as I hope will become clear). In a second step, I will analyse the kinds of comparisons between obsessional neurosis and religion, and assess their role in Freud's later theory formations.

The relation of 'obsessional neurosis' and 'religion' – A history of concept and theory formation

Freud's initial considerations of 'obsessional ideas' (1894a – at that stage not yet designated as 'obsessional neuroses'[2]) were formulated under the heading of 'The Neuro-psychoses of Defence' (1894a).[3] The 'defence mechanism' here entails the separation of idea and affect: an unbearable sexual idea retains 'its' affect, but the idea is suppressed, whereupon the affect connects with ideas substituted for the initial unbearable one(s). Such 'false connections' would account for obsessive ideation (including fear of animals, thunderstorms, darkness, urination, defecation and contamination or infection) that typically arises once repression has been achieved (see Freud 1894a; also 1896b).[4] This explanation is part of a dynamic account, firmly within the ambit of the drive theory, involving sources and transpositions of drive forces or energies. The focus is entirely on individual psychopathology without any reference to religion.

Religion comes into the picture of obsessionality for the first time in the 1896 sequel[5] to 'The Neuro-psychoses of Defence'. In his 'Further Remarks on The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1896b), Freud notes that it is not the contents of the repressed idea, but the repressing reproaches that create the affective force of obsession. Impelled by failures of repression, obsessional defences consist of ever-renewed self-reproaches for recurring reminiscences of sexual activity during childhood, which are transformed into shame, social anxiety, *religious anxiety*, delusions of betraying one's thoughts to others, and so on (1896b:440). But the obsessional defences are not limited to obsessional thoughts; they include compulsive preventive measures (including phobias, 'superstition', pedantic actions and attentions and heightened conscientiousness) and fixed *ceremonial actions* (1896b:441). Still, the vague references to 'religious anxiety' and religious ceremonial remain within the early formulations of the drive theory pertaining to the individual psychopathology of neurosis.

Ceremonial acts are the focus of the next article to explicitly address 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907b), which presents the first systematic comparison between obsessional neurosis and religion. The article notes a close 'resemblance' between 'neurotic ceremonials' and 'sacred acts of religious ritual' (1907b:*SE* IX:120). 'Neurotic ceremonials', consisting of small, apparently insignificant adjustments to particular everyday actions, methodically and diligently carried out, are associated, by similarity, with 'sacred act[s]', neglecting which incurs qualms of conscience. 'Neurotic ceremonials' and 'religious rituals' share a common function as protective or defensive measures (Freud 1907b *SE* IX:118–120, 122);[6] even 'religious practice' is said to elevate 'petty ceremonials' over values and thoughts.

2.'Obsessional neuroses' only start featuring in Freud's writings of 1895 and 1896, as distinct from neurasthenia, hysteria and psychosis.

3.In the German original title: 'Die Abwehr-Neuropsychosen. Versuch einer psychologischen Theorie der acquirierten Hysterie, vieler Phobien und Zwangsvorstellungen und gewisser hallucinatorischer Psychosen'.

4.See also the case of the 'Wolf Man'. At the beginning of chapter VI on 'The Obsessional Neurosis', Freud remarks on the 'phases' of the development of the analysand's obsessional neurosis: 'his initiation into religion brought the previous phase [marked by the animal phobia] to an end, but at the same time it led to the anxiety symptoms being replaced by obsessional symptoms' (1918b:*SE* XVII: 61).

5.This sequel is entitled 'Weitere Bemerkungen über die Abwehr-Neuropsychosen' (1896b), translated as 'Further Remarks On The Neuro-Psychoses Of Defence'.

6.The closest approximation between religious 'pious ritual' and obsessional ceremonial is probably to be found in the case of the Wolf Man in those instances where he is said 'to kiss all the holy pictures in his room, to recite prayers, and to make innumerable signs of the cross upon himself and upon his bed' (1918b:*SE* XVII: 61). In another instance, a 'pious *ritual*' consists of 'aton[ing] for his blasphemies' through 'the command to breathe in a *ceremonious* manner under certain conditions. Each time he made the sign of the cross he was obliged to breathe in deeply or to exhale forcibly. … He was obliged to breathe in the Holy Spirit, or to breathe out the evil spirits …'. (Freud 1918b:*SE* XVII: 67; emphasis added). Freud's own rendition of this case seems to be strenuously intent on stating the 'resemblances' that he had noted between obsessional neurotic ideas or practices and religious beliefs or rituals in 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907b), in the form of *analogies* in the Wolf Man case study published some 10 years later (see, e.g. 1918b:*SE* XVII: 66–67).

While highlighting the close 'resemblance' between 'neurotic ceremonial' and 'religious ritual', Freud does point out some differences: in comparison with the stereotypical character of 'rituals', 'neurotic ceremonial' actions show greater variability; in comparison with the apparent senselessness of 'neurotic ceremonial' (explicable only to, by and through psychoanalysis), 'religious ritual' is imbued with symbolic meaning. In comparison with religious ritual, which is mostly publicly and collectively performed, 'neurotic ceremonials' are carried out privately, away from others; and as such, they remain concealed for a long time. In comparison with obsessional actions, which express unconscious motives and ideas, ordinary pious believers also perform rituals without full awareness of their significance, but knowledge of the meaning of religious rituals, being delegated to religious functionaries, is available through institutionalised accession to it (Freud 1907b:*SE* IX:120, 122). In both religion and obsessional neurosis, Freud observes a suppression or renunciation of certain drive impulses; and in both religion and obsessional neurosis, the suppression of drive components is an inadequate and interminable process, continuously calling forth renewed defensive and protective measures; but in contrast to obsessional neurosis, the drive components operating in religion are not exclusively sexual (1907b:*SE* IX:124–125).

The latter is an important distinction, but Freud does not accord it salience in his attribution of a sense of guilt to both obsessional neurosis and what he subsumes under 'religion' – namely non-theistic rituals (which he specifies in *Totem and Taboo* [1912–1913a] as taboo prohibitions and ceremonials of magic). In the short paper, 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907b), the sense of guilt appears for the first time, as a common denominator of religious ritual and obsessional neurotic 'ceremonial'; in both cases, the sense of guilt gives rise to anxiety in the form of fear of divine punishment, and to acts of penance (1907b *SE* IX:126). The sense of guilt will be taken up by Freud again, in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913a), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927c) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939a); for now, it is instructive to note that 'obsessive acts and religious practices' are drawn together.

Freud's most famous case study of obsessional neurosis, dubbed 'The Rat Man', was published under the title 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' (1909d). In this study, Freud takes up some of the findings on obsessional neurosis announced earlier, in his article 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907b), especially the defensive and protective function of obsessional actions to ward off perceived 'evil' (1909d:*SE* X:163), in an interminable process. Uncertainty remains hanging over the protective measures adopted, impelling a continual repetition of these measures (Freud 1909d:*SE* X:242). The doubt and uncertainty observed in obsessional neurosis stand in marked contrast to the omnipotence of thought and wishes carried over from infancy (see also Freud 1939a:*SE* XXIII:113), which are being mobilised in protective measures such as formulaic recitals, prayer, 'superstition' and 'magic' pitted against evil (Freud 1909d:*SE* X:163, 226, 234, 235). The link with religious ritual is drawn here from the vantage point of individual psychology, from a broadly formulated developmental perspective: obsessional ideas and the notion of omnipotence of thoughts are rooted in early childhood; and where actions based on the notion of the omnipotence of thought recur in later life, they indicate a regression from acting to thinking (Freud 1909d:*SE* X:244–246).[7]

The developmental-stagist model in individual psychology becomes central,[8] and is being radicalised, in Freud's article on 'The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis' (1913i). Under the sway of the first formulation of the drive theory that revolves around the conflict between self-preservative (ego) and sexual (libidinal) drives, Freud considers the 'disposition to obsessional neurosis' in a scenario where the choice of an object takes place:

> ... under the influence of the ego-instincts, at a time at which the sexual instincts had not yet assumed their final shape, and a fixation at the stage of the pregenital sexual organization would be left. (1913i:*SE* XII:325)

Any reference to religion in connection with obsessional neurosis is eclipsed in this article. Instead, the choice of an object, and relation of the ego to an object (understood in their totality, as persons), and more generally, the notions of 'object love' and 'hate' – and with them, ambivalence – are introduced.

A bold extension of the developmental model, from individual psychology to societal and cultural formations, and from explanations of psychic-ontogenetic to social-phylogenetic lineages and their intersections, comes with the publication of the study on *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13a), and is taken up again in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927c). This work introduces elements of previous lines of thought into a schema, arriving at a set of new interpretations. There are four major looping conduits for these new theoretical orientations opening psychoanalytic theory to the investigation of social and cultural formations: the study of obsessional neurosis in relation to religion, group psychology, the introduction of the Oedipus complex and the re-conceptualisation of the structure and interrelation of the psychic agencies in Freud's second topography of the psychic apparatus. In the process of this theoretical reconfiguration, the study of obsessional neurosis is largely re-routed from the drive theory to topographical explanations of inter-agency (id–ego–super-ego) conflict, and religion is treated mainly in terms of ideation and representations.

I would like to consider the first three of these conduits in particular, in order then to investigate and assess the overarching ontogenetic-phylogenetic developmental model. In an attempt to explain 'the psychical origin of religious

7.Freud elaborates the 'symptoms in the mental sphere', involving 'strenuous mental activity' and 'doubt ... in the intellectual field', in the 17th of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916–17a) as a criterion that distinguishes obsessional neurosis from the somatoform symptoms of (conversion) hysteria (see 1916–17a:*SE* XVI:258, 259).

8.Freud draws on Ferenczi's stages of ego-development (see Freud 1913i:325).

ideas', Freud models one of the functions of (monotheistic) religion on the role of the father: in its state of helplessness and need for protection, the child relies on the role of the father, whose power is potentiated in the figures of divine providence persisting throughout a person's life (see Freud 1927c:*SE* XXI:30; see also Freud 1933a:*SE* XXII:164, 167; Freud 1939a:*SE* XXIII:110, 130). The son's relation to the father is above all characterised by ambivalence – a combination of admiration and unconscious hostility, love and hate – which is heightened in obsessional neurosis.[9] The same ambivalence is transferred to other figures of authority and to God.[10] In small-scale polities, the ambivalent attitude to the rulers, in Freud's account, tends to be marked by ambivalence, which gives rise to a sense of guilt, and to the prohibitions of taboo (see 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:61, 67). The sense of guilt and the prohibitions of taboo are combined in the figure of totemism – the prohibition on the killing of the totem animal (as a substitute for the figure of the father), the sacrificial killing of the totem animal and the communal feast of the sacrificial meal under the sign of a shared sense of guilt. In the emotional ambivalence, the prohibitions, the (wishful) violation of the prohibition under ritualised conditions and the attendant guilt that prompts obsessionally defensive, protective, expiatory or purgatory ideas and acts, Freud finds the basis of many cultural institutions (see 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:156). On a theoretical level, these explanations form the basis of Freud's comparison (in the broadest sense) between children, 'primitives' (in Freud's terms) and (obsessional) neurotics.

With the more systematic theoretical instantiation of the Oedipus complex, and a more firm role of the object in the theory of the drives, the topographical model of the psychic apparatus changes in *The Ego and the Id* (1923b), to accord distinct definitions and roles to the agencies of the id, the ego and the super-ego. As 'successor and representative of the individual's parents (and educators)' and 'carrying on their functions almost unchanged' (Freud 1939a:*SE* XXIII:116), the super-ego is the heir-designate of the Oedipus complex. In this new configuration, obsessional neurosis is explained in terms of a heightened conflict between the super-ego and the id, with the ego having to ward off the intrusion of unconscious phantasies 'while remaining fully accessible to the influence of the super-ego'; thus, in obsessional neurosis, the ego becomes the scene of action of symptom formation (Freud 1926d:*SE* XX:119). In this role, it employs two techniques – firstly, the technique of what Freud calls 'negative magic' with the aim of undoing what has been performed (ibid.); and secondly, the technique of magic involving ceremonials with compulsive character, aimed at isolating an experience from its associative connections (1926d:*SE* XX:119–120).

This sketchy exposition of Freud's thought on the relation between psychopathology and religion, and more particularly, between obsessional neurosis and religion, would have shown up the vagaries of this relation – shifting between an insignificant role to a central role in the pathoanalysis of culture and society. But more important for my argument here are the particular articulations of this relation, to which I would now like to turn. Ostensibly, these can be broadly described as terms of comparison. But this description obscures some of the theoretical and conceptual moves involved in establishing the relation between religion and psychopathology. In scrutinising the terms of comparison more closely, we can discern different lines of argumentation that are indicative of theoretical formations and transformations.

Similarities and differences

In his first systematic comparison undertaken in his article 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907b), Freud draws the characterisations of psychopathology and those of religion together, despite the differences noted by him, in their sources, their form, their background conditions, their functions and their modes of enactment. A close 'resemblance' is established between 'neurotic *ceremonials*' (akin to the ceremonials of 'magic') and 'religious *ritual*', despite a terminologically clearly marked differentiation (1907b:*SE* IX:120). The Rat Man case study (published under the title 'Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' [1909d]), likewise, assimilates 'neurotic ceremonial' to 'magic ceremonial',[11] and both of them to religious ritual.

All the more incongruous, it would seem, is the turn taken in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13a), which marks a clear distinction between 'taboo restrictions' and corresponding defensive/expiatory/protective actions (to which the symptoms of obsessional neurosis are conditionally[12] likened – see Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:28–29), on the one hand, and religious observances on the other. Freud emphatically states:

> *Taboo restrictions are distinct from religious or moral prohibitions*. They are not based upon any divine ordinance, but they may be said to impose themselves on their own account. They differ from moral prohibitions in that they fall into no system that declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity. Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin. Though they are unintelligible to *us*, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course. (1912–13a:*SE* XIII:18; emphasis added)

Secondly, despite all the statements linking obsessional acts and acts related to taboo prohibitions through 'parallelism' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:25, 35), 'equivalence' (35, 50), 'similarity' (25), 'agreement' (7, 26, 29) and 'analogy' (50, 160), Freud re-iterates the difference between taboo as social or cultural institution, and obsessional neurosis as individual psychopathology (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:71).

9. Thus, obsessional neurosis is grounded no longer in the drive theory, but in the problematics of the Oedipus complex and consequent inter-agency conflict conceptualised with the introduction of the second topography of the psychic apparatus (in *The Ego and the Id* [1923b]).

10. Freud sees the ambivalent feelings towards the father ('which are an underlying factor in all religions' – 1918b:*SE* XVII:65) demonstrated in the Wolf Man's obsessional neurosis. The Wolf Man is said to draw the analogy directly: 'If he was Christ, then his father was God' (1918b:*SE* XVII:65).

11. Freud draws together the 'principle of the "omnipotence of thought"' that is said to govern magic, and 'the technique of the animistic mode of thinking' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:86). Both the principle and the technique are said to characterise a 'primitive mode of thinking' whose 'perpetuation' or 'survival' Freud finds in obsessional neurosis (1912–13a:*SE* XIII:87).

12. Freud does concede that 'the differences between the situation of a savage and of a neurotic are no doubt of sufficient importance to make any exact agreement impossible and to prevent our carrying the comparison to the point of identity in every detail' (1912–13a:*SE* XIII:30).

How are we to make sense of the divergence between what has broadly been described as magic and what has broadly been described as religion at this point? And how are we to make sense of the strong correlations drawn, even in the title of the text, between obsessional acts and acts related to taboo restrictions, and the simultaneously stated disclaimers of such correlations?

Two developmental models, set in analogy: Psychic development and cultural history

I would like to address these questions by recurring to the previously mentioned extension and radicalisation of the developmental model in Freud's writings on obsessional neurosis of the 1910s and 1920s, and especially in the two texts in which the new theoretical orientations become particularly clear – and highly controversial – namely *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13a) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927c). In fact, there is more than one developmental model that is imprinted on the conceptualisations in these texts. The *first* developmental model pertains to individual psychic ontogeny, moving from 'the child's primitive psychical constitution' with its ('magical') omnipotence of thought to the Oedipus complex (variously also termed 'father complex') with its ambivalence and the consequent guilt, repression; and, in the case of neurotic pathology, 'regression' to defensive and protective measures rooted in the child's omnipotence of thought, now obsessively enacted. The *second* developmental model pertains to societal-cultural phylogeny, a perspective opened up by the Oedipus complex taken in a wider ambit.

The two developmental models are drawn together in an interlocking analogy, constructing 'the nature of the relation between the different forms of neurosis and cultural institutions', with the aim of finding out 'how it is that the study of the psychology of the neuroses is important for an understanding of the growth of civilization' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:72–73). Two vectors of analysis are now being pursued in both directions. In the early studies on obsessional neurosis, Freud had launched his investigations from the perspective of individual psychology and psychopathology, and only tentatively made any comparisons with practices related to magic and religion; in his writings from the 1920s onwards, under the imprint of the phylogenetic hypothesis, in contrast, he considers the reverse direction, namely the 'precipitates' of repression and obsession in 'prehistoric times'. Psychoanalysis affords us not only insights into psychic development, Freud avers, but also into the 'cultural history of mankind' (1927c:*SE* XXI:41–42) and conversely, historical analysis helps us 'to view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics' (1927c:*SE* XXI:41).[13]

13.In *Totem and Taboo*, likewise, the analytical vectors are being pursued in both directions: '… the formulas of obsessional neuroses … have their counterpart in the formulas of magic'; and conversely, the demonstration proceeds from obsessive acts as 'being as remote as possible from anything sexual – magical defences against evil wishes' – to their end point of 'being substitutes for the forbidden sexual act and the closest possible imitations of it' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:88).

Freud elaborates the developmental models interarticulated in the analogy as follows:

> … [*A*] human child cannot successfully complete its development to the civilized stage without passing through a phase of neurosis … This is because so many instinctual demands which will later be unserviceable cannot be suppressed by the rational operation of the child's intellect but have to be tamed by acts of repression … Most of these infantile neuroses are overcome spontaneously in the course of growing up, and this is especially true of the obsessional neuroses of childhood. The remainder can be cleared up later still by psychoanalytic treatment. *In just the same way*, one might assume, humanity as a whole, in its development through the ages, fell into states *analogous* to the neuroses, and for the same reasons – namely because in the times of its ignorance and intellectual weakness the instinctual renunciations indispensable for man's communal existence had only been achieved by it by means of purely affective forces. The precipitates of these processes *resembling* repression which took place in prehistoric times still remained attached to civilization for long periods. Religion *would thus be* the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; *like* the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father. (1927c:*SE* XXI:42–43; emphasis added)

'Religion *would thus be* the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity' (emphasis added). Axiomatic as this metaphorical[14] statement may seem at first glance, it is stated in the subjunctive mood indicating conditionality, that is, a statement whose realisation is dependent upon (an)other condition(s), in the overall analogy established here between 'humanity as a whole, in its development through the ages', and neuroses.

The terms of the analogy interlocking the two developmental axes bear closer scrutiny. In *Totem and Taboo*, cultural evolution is being traced from the animistic stage (in which humans *ascribe omnipotence to themselves*, corresponding in chronology of libidinal development and content to narcissism) through the religious stage (in which humans *transfer power to the gods* but retain some of it for themselves, in the form of practices to influence the gods in various ways according to their wishes, corresponding to the stage of object choice in the form of the child's attachment to its parents) to the scientific view of the universe (in which mature humans *submit to the reality principle*, while placing faith in the power of the human mind) (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:88, 90).[15]

In the same way that the talking cure, operating on individual psychopathology, is credited with the capacity of (ideally) bringing to conscious recognition repressed thoughts and impulses, science, operating on culture and society, supersedes 'superstition' and religion and dismantles their respective illusions. However, Freud's constructions go

14.In contrast to a simile, the rhetorical figure of metaphor elides the markers of comparison; in the terms of Quintilian's rhetoric, simile entails a comparison on the basis of similarity, whereas metaphor entails a substitution (see *Institutio Oratoria*, ca. 95 AD, ch.8.6).

15.Freud asserts the analogy in its more complex form even more firmly in *The Future of an Illusion*, published some 14 years later. 'Phases' of individual psycho-social development and 'stages' of culture are set in relations of mutual dependencies; what obsessional neurosis is for the case of the individual corresponds to what animism and religion is for culture and society (see 1927c:*SE* XXI:42–43).

even beyond this formulation of the posited analogy: 'psychoanalytic research' oversteps its own side of the analogy, being brought to bear not only on its own domain – that of 'anxiety' and 'dreams' – but also on that of animism and religion (1912–13a:*SE* XIII:97); and psychopathology becomes a 'stage' in cultural development (see 1927c:*SE* XXI:42). Perfectly consistent with this schema is Freud's metaphorical statement featuring in the title of this article – 'Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity' (1927c:*SE* XXI:43).

To summarise these points: By the time that Freud writes *The Future of an Illusion* (1927c), the analogy between the symptoms of obsessional neurosis and religious beliefs and practices is firmly established (see 1927c:*SE* XXI:42–43) – what obsessional neurosis is for the case of the individual corresponds to what animism and, superseding it, religion is for culture and society; and so is the second set of terms in that analogy, namely the analogy between the psychoanalytically established aetiologies of obsessional neurosis and scientifically established theory formation.

Moreover, Freud is firmly convinced – to the point of postulating the power of prediction for it – of the inexorable forward march of science carrying the torch that sweeps away religious beliefs and practices rendered erroneous, obsolescent and irrational by the 'scientific spirit' (1927c:*SE* XXI:39), on account of which he postulates a 'fundamental revision' of 'the relationship between civilization and religion' (1927c:*SE* XXI:40).

The analogy of interlocking developmental axes, in two terms, can be presented schematically as follows:

1. Obsessional neurosis (for which an aetiology has been established) / Individual	:	Animism, Religion / Culture and Society
2. Psychoanalysis (pertaining to the individual)	:	Science (of cultural or societal formations)

What inspires the confidence that the illusions[16] of religion will be overcome in the same way as the obsessional ideas and practices, even as both of them are said to be independent of 'recognition by reason' (see Freud 1927c:*SE* XXI:29), of relation to reality and of proof and verification (see Freud 1927c:*SE* XXI:31)?

I would like to argue that this confidence is generated by the form of the analogy into which Freud arranges the relations between psychopathology and religion, which had previously been stated in the form of comparison, with an outline of similarities and differences, or in the form of 'resemblance'. In reconfiguring these as 'analogy', the differences fall away, and the developmental model attains the appearance of causal necessity.

16.In Freud's definition, 'we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification' (1927c:31).

A question of analogy

To substantiate this, I will need to elaborate, in basic terms, the logic of analogy. We are dealing here with a material analogy. The two domains – psychopathology and religion – are not formally analogous – they are not 'interpretations of the same formal theory' (Hesse 1966:68). Instead, Freud presents us with metaphorical relationships between the two domains. In the analogy presented in Freud's writings on the relation between obsessional neurosis and religion, schematically presented above, the horizontal axis represents the similarities that he posits between them and that he had noted from his early writings onwards. But similarity is not sufficient to explain the plausibility of an analogical argument. So, we would need to ask, when and how would an argument from 'resemblance' or 'likeness' succeed (see Bartha 2019)? At the very least, a vague causal principle governing the two phenomena being compared would have to be established. Mary Hesse (1966:86–87) stipulates some conditions for material analogy – among them, the fundamental requirements for the two sets of relation:

- The horizontal dyadic relations between terms are relations of similarity, where similarity can, at least for purposes of analysis, be reduced to identities and differences between sets of characters making up the terms.
- The vertical relations in the model are causal relations in some acceptable scientific sense, where there are no compelling *a priori* reasons for denying that causal relations of the same kind may hold between terms of the explicandum.

The vertical axis – the causal relations that Freud is at pains to establish, would need to be independently evaluated. As Hesse points out, 'an acceptable interpretation of causality' is 'not only a question of the philosophical analysis of causality', but also a question as to whether 'the causal relations assumed are [appropriate] to the subject matter' (1966:80, 81). The second criterion becomes particularly important when it comes to prediction, which requires a strong causal justification.

Looking at the schematic representation of the analogy drawn by Freud, we will not find such a causal relation between animism or religion and society; we will neither be able to establish a scientific aetiology for magic or religion as social pathology, nor will science give us the 'cure' or 'therapy' for the social pathology of religion. Thus, it emerges that:

> … whatever similarity relations may be asserted between the terms in horizontal pairs, they do not carry causal relations from one analogue [in the schematic representation above, the analogue on the left- hand side] to the other. (Hesse 1966:86)

Thus, we would have good reason not to share Freud's confidence in this instance. Would this distrust, by the same token, have to extend to any and all psychoanalytic perspectives on culture, society and religion?

It is not a question that Freud had not posed in his own theorisations. The very analogy that he had sought to endow with causal necessity comes in for radical questioning, on ethical and political grounds, which are worth quoting, even if at some length:

> If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that … possibly the whole of mankind … [*has*] become 'neurotic'? An analytic dissection of such neuroses might lead to therapeutic recommendations which could lay claim to great practical interest. I would not say that an attempt of this kind to carry psychoanalysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. But we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved. Moreover, the diagnosis of communal neuroses is faced with a special difficulty. In an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be 'normal'. For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere. And as regards the therapeutic application of our knowledge, what would be the use of the most correct analysis of social neuroses, since no one possesses the authority to impose such a therapy upon the group? (Freud 1930a:*SE* XXI:144)

The unconscious in relation to culture – beneath and beyond analogy

Following Freud's own reservations about the 'analogy' laid down in the (in)famous statements on the relation between obsessional neurosis and religion, there are good reasons for disentangling the double-helix analogy knitting the two developmental models together, and returning to comparisons based on specified structural similarities and differences, without congealing them into substitutive metaphors and multi-pronged analogies. This would open up an approach to questions within the psychoanalytic study of religion unhinged from psycho-cultural 'developmentalism' with its 'progress'(ions) and 'regressions'.

Of particular interest would be the connection between psychic structures and cultural demands and constraints (see Westerink 2020:590), which are not at odds with each other in every respect. 'The claims of aesthetic and moral ideals' can also imprint themselves on prior organic repression and reaction formations; and they can find confirmation through the diversion of sexual drives from their aims, and their direction to new, culturally valued aims – a possibility for which Freud coined the term 'sublimation', (1905d:*SE* VII:178–179).

Another form of aim-inhibition, one that is demanded by active membership of a collective, is considered a powerful antidote to neurosis (without thereby being endorsed as a viable form of therapy). Left to him or herself, the neurotic creates his or her own symptomatic form of religion (Freud 1921c:*SE* XVIII:141–142). This notion resonates in the formulation quoted at the beginning of this article, 'obsessional neurosis is a *caricature* of a religion' (Freud 1912–13a:*SE* XIII:73; emphasis added). Freud compares psychopathological structures with cultural institutions or systems based on 'points of agreement' that he finds in distortions by the former of the latter. In this sense, religion as cultural institution and obsessional neurosis as psychopathology can be mutually illuminating. If they are not legible in directly corresponding terms, or as counter-images of each other, they highlight the relation between the work of the unconscious and the work of culture at one of the rare sites where the work of the unconscious is disclosed in a connection with cultural form.

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