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A Lacanian Assessment of Religion

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Introduction

Religion has been wrestled with, expounded upon, and even ridiculed by thinkers and philosophers for centuries. Recently, almost all matters concerning religion have been subject to the latter. Perhaps this is not without warrant, as much of the religious world is resistant to reason, the *modus operandi* of any meaningful discourse. Fictional character Dr. House humorously observes: "If religious people could be reasoned with there would be no religious people." However, it would be a grave mistake to completely dismiss the broader implications of a phenomenon as powerful and universal as religion. Contemporary philosopher Daniel Dennett argues this point, stating:

Religions are among the most powerful natural phenomena on the planet, and we need to understand them better if we are to make informed and just political decisions. Although there are risks and discomforts involved, we should brace ourselves and set aside our traditional reluctance to investigate religious phenomena scientifically, so that we can come to understand how and why religions inspire such devotion, and figure out how we should deal with them all in the twenty-first century.¹

The astonishing persistence of religious thought prevents us from nonchalantly discarding it as unexplainable balderdash. Let us turn our attention towards a particular individual, Jacques Lacan, who is acknowledged by many as a man with a keen understanding of the human condition. This 20th century thinker, "arguably the most influential psychoanalyst since Freud,"² is often accused of being an opaque and impenetrable writer. Thus, our task is only given an added weight, as we can elucidate the concepts of a dense thinker and simultaneously relate these findings towards understanding religion. This paper will provide an overview of Lacanian psychoanalysis and elucidate the key concepts fundamental to the Lacanian project. Equipped with the information gained in the *précis*, the discussion will be broadened in order to understand

¹ (Dennett 2006)

² (Fink 1997)

how to approach religion in Lacanian terms. While never writing about religion explicitly, Lacan's unique insights will prove valuable and provide a unique explanation of this powerful phenomenon. Specifically, it shall be illustrated that Lacan holds religious mythos as a product of psychotic delusions that have been continually propagated by neurotic individuals.

The Role of the Lacanian Analyst

What comes to mind when thinking of the professional duties of a psychoanalyst? When asked to describe this image, most people say the practitioner is primarily focused on curing the patient. Others say the analyst is a life-coach who directs the patient in a direction deemed 'correct' by the professional. More cynically, people often say that the analyst is merely a listening ear attached to a weekly or biweekly price tag. Such descriptions are reminiscent of the classic image of the haggard doctor asking his or her patient, "And how does *that* make you feel?" Lacanian psychoanalysis is so immediately striking because it goes against most *all* popular notions people tend to have about the trade.

Most people, for example, will tell you that 'you can't change a person unless he or she *wants* to change.' However, as Lacan points out: "Experience shows us that when the subject enters analysis, he is far from giving the analyst [any] place."³ In other words, Lacan deplores this folk-wisdom, arguing instead that the patient *will never* initially want to change or tell the analyst what he or she wants because he or she obviously obtains an amount of satisfaction from their symptoms. Bruce Fink writes that "Indeed, patients often go into therapy because they no longer have any will to live, or to do anything at all... because their desire is dying. How then could it

³ (Lacan translated by Sheridan 1981)

possibly serve as the mainspring of change?”⁴ Oftentimes, a patient is forced into the examination room by an external pressure; he or she has little to interest in removing this link to satisfaction – even if it is coupled with intense self-hatred or severe scrutiny by peers. Lacan uses the term ‘jouissance’ to describe this tendency of seeking pleasure by indulging in symptoms. The word is derived from the French word meaning “the kind of kick someone may get out of punishment.”⁵ In short, Lacan argues that “the therapist must *always* express a desire for patients to continue, even if he or she feels that these patients have completed their work.”⁶ A person is almost *never* ‘cured’ of his or her ailments; rather, the process of analysis allows the patient to reconcile and understand his or her ailments, thus giving him or her perspective and the ability to change, learn, and grow.

It is essential that the analyst is not seen as a ‘friend’ in the patient’s eyes. The analyst is focused *only* on what is essential: analysis of the patient.

The analyst is not ‘authentic,’ not communicating his or her deepest beliefs and reactions to the patient as one human being to another. The analyst is not a human being with feelings but a function, a role, a part to be played and one that can be played by many extremely different individuals. The ‘analyst’s desire’ is a desire that focuses on analysis and only on analysis.⁷

Assaulting the patient with personal concerns, beliefs and opinions will only encourage him or her to resist the treatment process. After all, the patient is normally quite used to hearing advice from concerned friends or family members; the analyst must avoid being grouped into the same easily ignorable category of ‘normal relations.’ The analyst’s purpose, according to Lacan, is to act as a portal or gateway into the unconscious mind of the patient. “The analyst must agree to occupy the space of or stand in for the unconscious – to make the unconscious present through

⁴ (Fink 1997)

⁵ (*Ibid.*, 8)

⁶ (*Ibid.*, 5)

⁷ (*Ibid.*, 6)

his or her presence.”⁸ By this method, the patient is *forced* to confront his or her Other. Lacan writes, “the capital Other (le grand Autre) [is the] the locus of speech and, potentially, the locus of truth.”⁹ This is Lacan’s term for the unconscious and the representation of a patient’s deepest secrets and repressed desires. When this happens to a patient, when he or she confronts the hidden entity hidden within the subconscious, meaningful growth and self-actualization can actually occur. Thus, “What was most certain is no longer at all certain, and [patients] are now open to listening to the unconscious, to hearing the other voice that speaks through them, and to attempt to decipher it.”¹⁰ The unconscious – hidden away like the submerged portion of the iceberg – must be illuminated and attempts must be made to understand it.

The analyst has many tools at his or her disposal to ensure such a confrontation occurs. While advice and opinions are not brought into a session, an analyst still plays an active role in ‘guiding’ the patient.

An analyst is anything but a neutral listener. He or she makes it very clear that certain points – points that virtually always have to do with the revelation of unconscious desire and previously unadvised enjoyment – are crucial. He or she directs the patient’s attention to them, more or less directly recommending that the patient mull them over, associate to them, and take them seriously.¹¹

For example, one technique is to punctuate certain phrases or garbled speech uttered by the patient. The analyst may pause and repeat phrases that seem particularly important, thereby indirectly suggesting they are of importance. The Other manifests itself through tics, slips of the tongue, phraseology, and other symptoms normally deemed as ‘unimportant’ by the patient.

Another similar strategy is ending the session early if something particularly important was said.

This helps produce an element of surprise – “leaving the patient wondering what it was the

⁸ (*Ibid.*, 31)

⁹ (Lacan translated by Sheridan 1981)

¹⁰ (Fink 1997)

¹¹ (*Ibid.*, 16)

analyst heard that he or she had not heard, wondering what unconscious thought had been manifesting itself.”¹² The analyst knows that “nothing in analysis can be taken at face value.”¹³ Oftentimes, a patient will say one thing (for example, the patient might say something like, ‘my father always tried to look out for me’) and mean something completely different, often unintentionally (it might be revealed later, for example, that this father was obsessed in scrutinizing his son, and ‘always looking out for me’ really means ‘always watching me, waiting for me to make a mistake’). The analyst must pay careful attention to the words spoken in each individual session, as the patient often unconsciously chooses phrases that are reflective of the Other. Thus, “psychoanalysis is concerned not so much with what he or she meant but what he or she said.”¹⁴

Such practices help the patient get in touch with the entirety of the psyche. Patients must be forced to explore *why* they behave the way that they do; for example, why they repeat certain phrases, why they are transfixed on a particular object, why they experience symptoms in the first place. They need to realize, in short, that “they are not masters in their own homes.”¹⁵ Only then can they become interested in changing, and only then will they be able to fight against their jouissance tendencies. “It is this discourse,” Lacan writes, “which, through the mouth of the analyst, calls for the opening of the shutter.”¹⁶ Only then can the light of the Other shine through and be understood.

Desire and the Fundamental Fantasy

¹² (*Ibid.*, 17)

¹³ (*Ibid.*, 20)

¹⁴ (*Ibid.*, 23)

¹⁵ (*Ibid.*, 15)

¹⁶ (Lacan translated by Sheridan 1981)

Desire, as hinted at in the above section, plays an enormous role in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. As the Lacanian psychoanalyst Darian Leader puts it, “Desire, indeed, is there to persist as desire, not as anything else.”¹⁷ In other words, human desire is such that it *only* desires to continue itself, thus it can never be entirely satisfied and does not *want* to be. In addition to this, desire must always have a cause that sets it into motion. This cause comes in many forms, as “It may be a certain kind of look someone gives you, the timber of someone’s voice, the whiteness, feel, or smell of someone’s skin, the color of someone’s eyes, the attitude someone manifests when he or she speaks – the list goes on and on.”¹⁸ Lacan’s defines this cause of desire as *objet petit a* (object little a), representing an individual’s transfixion on a particular thing or attribute.¹⁹

We are often completely unaware of *why* we are attracted to certain people or towards certain objects. Imagine a woman who almost always ends up in a relationship with an aggressive, controlling man. Naturally, such a relationship causes the woman distress, yet no other personality type will ‘do it for her.’ Thus, “The analyst attempts to get the analysand’s desire into motion, to shake up the fixation when the analysand can think about nothing else, and to dissipate the stasis that sets in when the analysand’s desire has seemingly ebbed to the point of no return.”²⁰ This object of desire needs to be discovered and, if possible, redirected entirely.

The source of desires, then, can be traced back to childhood and something Lacan calls the fundamental fantasy. Human beings are born with an immense dependence on parental care and seek to be loved by them. However, we also must give up innocent tendencies (thumb sucking, touching of genitals, etc.) in order to gain their approval. Oftentimes, the pleasure given

¹⁷ (Leader 1996)

¹⁸ (*Ibid.*, 52)

¹⁹ (Lacan translated by Sheridan 1981)

²⁰ (Fink 1996)

up in this type of compromise seems even more valuable now that is forbidden. “Naïve, simple bodily pleasure is transformed into jouissance – something far more erotic, dirty, bad, and evil, something really exciting – thanks to prohibition.”²¹ The child, for the first time, has an *objet petit a* which is fixated onto what was prohibited. This is the fundamental fantasy, defining a subject in relation to this object of desire, developed from “the way one reacted to the scene as a child... [it] colors the whole of one’s existence, determining one’s relations to one’s parents and lovers, one’s sexual preferences, and one’s capacity for sexual satisfaction.”²² In effect, we all are prisoners to our desire, transfixed on whatever was prohibited in our childhood.

To see this more clearly, let’s consider another example. Think again of the woman who dates only aggressive men. As a child, she probably wanted *all* of her father’s affections for herself. However, the presence of the mother made it impossible for her to continue her selfish desires. Now imagine a particularly intense emotional incident where her mother is treated aggressively by the father, and something about the experience sticks with her and causes her to believe ‘this is how all men should be.’ She makes a compromise with her feelings, thereby becoming forever oriented to men resembling her father she was forbidden to possess. Unconsciously, she is playing out the following mantra: ‘*I can’t have this one, but I can have one like him.*’ Naturally, every person reacts differently to the influences and prohibitions made by parents depending on the severity in which they are mandated and the circumstances surrounding them.

The Three Parts of the Psyche

²¹ (*Ibid.*, 67)

²² (*Ibid.*, 57)

Lacan divides psychological relationships into three categories: the imaginary, symbolic, and real. The terms sound complicated, but Lacan is trying to say something rather simple under the guise of technical language. Basically, imaginary relationships refer to the everyday ‘surface’ relationships we have with other people with immediacy. It characterizes inferiority/superiority comparisons we make in regards to others. The essential question of the imaginary is as follows: “Am I better or worse, superior or inferior?”²³ This is exactly the type of relationship the analyst tries to avoid with a patient, as sessions then become endless status games and challenges. Symbolic relations, on the other hand, are characterized by a person’s ego prohibitions. It is representative of the ego ideals instilled by the parents. It is, as Jacques Alain-Miller puts it, the “determining order of the subject.”²⁴ Its fundamental question is, ‘Is this in accordance to the Law?’²⁵ Is this what I’m supposed to do?’ The real is Lacan’s most difficult form of psyche to understand. At its most basic level, the real refers to “what has not yet been put into words or formulated.”²⁶ It is normally in reference to a particularly traumatic event that has been repressed. The real is “the ineliminable residue of all articulation... [it] may be approached, but never grasped,”²⁷ as it resists being symbolized and the patient is completely unaware of its existence. The subject is transfixed on a particular object and simply cannot cope with it, as it is too much to deal with. “Analysis involves the progressive draining away of the real into the symbolic.”²⁸ Analysis gives the patient the words and means to deal with this powerful part of the psyche.

²³ (*Ibid.*, 32)

²⁴ (Miller 1981)

²⁵ The Law is the Lacanian term for ‘superego ideals.’

²⁶ (Fink 1996)

²⁷ (Miller 1981)

²⁸ (*Ibid.*, 49)

Again, let us use the example of the woman attracted to aggressive men. When she first enters treatment, she is concerned about the professional prowess of her analyst. Thoughts like, *'Is my analyst qualified? Is he or she smarter than I am? Does he or she think that I am an emotional wreck?'* fill her head. This relationship of rivalry is characteristic of the imaginary part of the psyche. During treatment, the analyst might ask a question that elicits a strong negative response from the woman. For example, the analyst asks her why she doesn't find person 'X' attractive; she responds saying that 'He doesn't have any manners! I could never date anyone who doesn't know how to treat a woman right!' Here, she is articulating her ego ideals with a strong emotional response. It just *feels* right to her. This is what Lacan calls the symbolic – or relation to one's ego ideals. The real, on the other hand, is beyond the grasp of language because it is *so* powerful. She finds herself inexplicably attracted to aggressive men – yet she has repressed the original memory of the traumatic experience as a child. She fails to see herself as trying to replace her father with a man who resembles him. Analysis, then, attempts to bring this to the forefront so it may be properly symbolized, thus allowing her to understand *why* she is the way that she is.

Approaching Religion in Lacanian Terms: Neurosis and Psychosis

The previous overview of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has given us the tools necessary to explore the subject of religion. Although Lacan never specifically alludes to religion in his writings, we can easily cross-apply his ideology and general theories to religion as a sufficient means of explanation. We do know, for example, that Lacan himself was an atheist and a follower of Freud, who is famous for calling religion “the universal neurosis of

mankind.”²⁹ Much of Lacan’s theories can be described as a “certain reading or interpretation of Freud.”³⁰ This is particularly evident when Lacan discusses neurosis, but his theories of psychosis are the most illuminating on the issue of religion.

Lacan’s remarks about psychotic patients are of particular interest when approaching religion from a Lacanian perspective. In Lacanian terms, psychosis occurs whenever a person ‘forecloses’ an important element of the symbolic order. As Fink states, “Foreclosure involves the radical rejection of a particular element from the symbolic order (that is, from language), and not just any element: it involves the element that in some sense grounds or anchors the symbolic order as a whole.”³¹ Somehow, somehow, these individuals never developed a firm foundation in which to connect with reality. As discussed before, human beings are largely influenced by their parents, as parents play a crucial role in regular development. They *need* to go through the process of being told ‘No!’ so that they can begin to live by their parents’ standards and develop a superego – a sense of moral duty and right and wrong. Typically, the ‘No!’ figure in a parental relationship is the father, as he is usually the one that sets “himself up as one who prohibits, forbids, thwarts, and protects...”³² Lacan calls this universal human experience the parental metaphor, so powerful that it acts as a ‘button tie’ between specific meanings to particular words. For example, imagine a very young child who begins to kick, bite, and strike other children or adults. Upon seeing this, the father firmly explains why hitting others is wrong. Essentially, he is telling his child ‘No! You cannot have my approval while performing this action. I forbid it.’ From then on, a child *feels guilty* if they violate the ‘No!’ prohibition. Feeling is tied to meaning for the first time, and “once established, it is unshakable and cannot be

²⁹ (Freud Translated by Strachey 1961)

³⁰ (Fink 1997)

³¹ (*Ibid.*, 79)

³² (*Ibid.*, 80)

uprooted.”³³ This is the ‘button tie’ between language and meaning. After all, the child *truly* understands the link between words (‘No!’) and meaning (guilt or remorse); the child’s sense of right and wrong can thereby properly develop after this powerful encounter. Psychotics, on the other hand, never experienced this parental metaphor. They have no *true* sense of right and wrong, as the *feeling* of wrongness has never been ‘button-tied’ to a prohibition. This is why psychotics often have no sympathy or empathy, as they *literally don’t operate in this way*.

If... identity has not been solidly grounded by a symbolic identification with the Name-of-the-Father [‘No!’ prohibition], it fails to support the grammatical language structures that we equate with interactional discourse and with cognition... Mind – mental processes – unravels into fragmented parts which previously acted as a unity as long as anchored by the sense of a cohesive self.³⁴

Thus, according to Lacan, psychotics lack this initial ‘fundamental experience’ that grounds human beings to reality.

Unsurprisingly, delusions are a common trait among psychotics. For example, patients often claim they have spoken to God, ghosts, demons, secret agents, or are a part of some large unseen conspiracy. In normal subjects, the parental metaphor “serves as an explanatory principle, explaining the Other’s desire from which we are born (for as *subjects*, we are born of our parents’ desire, not of their bodies), explaining why we are here, why we’re wanted, to what extent we were wanted, and so on.”³⁵ In other words, the ‘No!’ prohibition causes regular individuals to develop a firmer and more structurally sound worldview. A child who has attached meaning to words is able to frame him or herself in a more easily fixated reality; unusual thought patterns (for example, a world in which hitting others is permissible) are rejected because they do not conform to the now firmly established values. Once given a reference point, normal individuals can extrapolate and conjure up reasons to answer why we are

³³ (*Ibid.*, 93)

³⁴ (Ragland-Sullivan 1987)

³⁵ (*Ibid.*, 109)

here, why our parents wanted us, what is right and what is wrong. Again, psychotics lack the experience of the parental metaphor, thus “in the absence of such an explanatory principle, the psychotic attempts – via the delusional process – to elaborate an explanatory principle of his or her own.”³⁶ A psychotic never considers the possibility of a flawed worldview. If he thinks that they are the son of God, they *one hundred percent believe* that this is indeed the case.

This leads us to an interesting conclusion: psychotics, then, *are responsible for the religious mythos*. A psychotic would never question the truth value of voices, visions, or mystic experiences. These people lack the experience of the parental metaphor and the explanatory powers it entails. It is characteristic to *create* a worldview that answers questions like, ‘Why are we here? Where did we come from?’ ‘What is the meaning of life?’ The delusional metaphor takes hold, and acts as “a new starting point on the basis of which the psychotic establishes the meaning of the world and everything in it.”³⁷ The psychotic has no problem telling you that he or she is chosen by God, because in their mind *they really were chosen by God*. Their world is dependent on an explanation that is unwarranted and untrue.

Naturally, Lacan isn’t trying to say that every religious person is psychotic. He maintains that neurotics, in contrast to psychotics, are the source of the delusion’s continuation and popularity. Neuroticism is produced by an underlying mechanism of repression. “The neurotic keeps all things hidden from view, from others and from him or herself” and “Once a thought is repressed, it does not lie dormant.”³⁸ Its effects can be seen in dreams, slips, physical pain, stress, and other symptoms. Lacan’s fundamental fantasy theory is very similar to Freud’s

³⁶ (*Ibid.*, 109)

³⁷ (*Ibid.*, 109)

³⁸ (*Ibid.*, 113)

theory of the Oedipus complex³⁹, as both express the universal desire for the love and attention of our parents. Normally, we are refused our initial wants, and we eventually become ambivalent towards the ‘No!’ commands that are fed to us. We don’t like being told what we cannot have, and oftentimes a prohibition just makes the object of our desire seem more exciting. We find ourselves resenting our parents (usually the father, as he normally is harsher in his prohibition), yet our instilled superego values fill us with guilt for going against their wishes. This anxiety is at the root of neurosis, and we unconsciously seek to honor our parents (usually the father) to compensate for our initial act of rebellion.

Now imagine a psychotic who claims to have a relationship with a *divine* father – someone who is all powerful and creator of the universe. A neurotic *gravitates* towards such beliefs because it allows them to cope with some of the guilt that he or she may be feeling. More importantly, it honors the father in a *spectacular way*, thus *immortalizing* him in accordance to our superego standards. The psychotic unabashedly espouses the delusion, thereby dispelling doubts surrounding some of the more fanciful parts of the creed. Neurotics continue the tradition of a delusion spawned from the mind of the psychotic.

The Proper Life

Despite being most assuredly unreligious, Lacan led a life of principles very similar to the secularists of today. Lacan argues that a life of ‘principled existence’ and ‘analytic reflection’ enables one to live with an enlightened sense about the psyche. If this way of life is mastered, a person can become entirely free of the Other’s demands. Erich Fromm calls psychoanalysis the ‘cure of the soul,’ and such a statement aptly describes Lacan’s writings. Fromm states that

³⁹ The Oedipus complex refers to the guilt we naturally feel for our ambivalence towards our father, as he is the one that forbids our attainment of our primary love object (the mother).

“psychoanalysis as a cure of the soul has a very definitely religious function in this sense, although it will usually lead to a more critical attitude toward theistic dogma.”⁴⁰ Again, this seems to perfectly sum up Lacan’s stance on religion. Psychoanalysis gives us perspective on our *selves*. With diligence, we can free ourselves from neurosis and focus our energies onto greater concerns.

Conclusion

Jacques Lacan revolutionized the world of psychoanalysis. His unique conception of desire, the psyche, and the professional role of the analyst helped frame his psychoanalytic worldview. When religion is scrutinized under this worldview, it is apparent that Lacan would believe religious mythos is a byproduct of those who lack the powerful experience of the parental metaphor. Religion is a continued phenomenon due to an individual’s neurotic insistence on repeating the fundamental fantasy. Interestingly, Lacan believed that adherence to an analytic lifestyle can bring about a ‘freedom’ from unconscious desire. This implies that religion is something that we should all strive to emancipate ourselves from.

Even if the reader is to take issue with some of the views expressed in Lacan’s writings, it would not detract from the original intent of this paper. After all, our goal was simply to gain an additional perspective on religion by examining a particularly opaque and influential thinker. Understanding religion in its entirety is a behemoth-sized problem – but any step towards comprehension helps us get closer to grasping the powerful, universal practice of religion.

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