

EDITORIAL: THE OBJECT OF RELIGION

andrew skomra

"There is something profoundly masked in the critique of the history that we have experienced... Ignorance, indifference, an averting of the eyes may explain beneath what veil this mystery remains hidden. But for whoever is capable of turning a courageous gaze towards this phenomenon — and... there are certainly few who do not succumb to the fascination of the sacrifice in itself — the sacrifice signifies that, in the object of our desires, we try to find evidence for the presence of the desire of this Other that I call here the dark God."

— Jacques Lacan¹

How does one begin to make sense of religion within the field of psychoanalytic thinking? Such a question, despite appearances, is more than a hapless ploy to avoid speaking of such a nebulous matter. Amidst the disarming resurgence of religious fundamentalisms and the cries of mortified secularists who feel they are suffering from the return of this offensive signifier, psychoanalysis maintains that the idea of religion possesses an intensive, "crystallizing power." What binds these mortal enemies is the precise fact that each looks upon religion as though it were an object, coming later to distinguish themselves only by the angle from which they scrutinize its opacity. The hesitation of recent psychoanalytic thinking amidst the veneration and aversion that surrounds religious phenomena can perhaps best be attributed to the widespread *demand to know* what to do, or where to place "it." Analytic discourse refuses to ascribe value to the question of whether the object of religion is good or bad, living or dead. Pleas to make such judgments, for analysis, are the very mainspring of the problem.



Thus, for psychoanalysis there is nothing novel in the interrogation of religion. Although Freud contends that religion is “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity,”² the socially-sedimented nature of belief is not met with a strictly hostile, atheistic rejection. Instead, his encounters with the incredible non-sense of religion served a quite pedagogic function. We can observe in the long and sinuous line, traced from *Totem and Taboo* to the point where “the pen fell from Freud’s hands”³ at the climax of *Moses and Monotheism*, that his encounters with devout cultures marked a descending slope into the vital recesses of our modern condition. Such labor proved essential to the very formulation and endurance of the project of psychoanalysis. Although emerging in the form of a “critique” of all religious sacralization, what Freud unfurrowed was the grain of truth behind religion’s zealous repressions, isolating their ultimate necessity for the genesis and structure of discourse — which is to say, the creation of a history irrevocably tied to the birth of the modern subject, the foundation of collectivities, and even the very possibility of history. Though his interest in the cultural contours of religion, we will admit, held Freud ever-too-slightly captivated by the monothetic, his exploits demonstrated that science (within definable limits) is not confined to the mere cataloguing of its own historical development. Rather, the real revelation that Freud unearthed was the obligatory reformulation of the margins of our past and present conditions of existence, which

any reasonable being cannot ignore — that is, unless a certain barbarous repetition is what these beings have chosen to pursue.

For Freud, as well as Lacan, the stakes of religion are only of this world — only pertinent after the establishment, and in relation to, modern science and the subject which it engendered. But, when the question of religion is raised in analytic discourse it is not inspected through the avatars of rational, positivist science. Such sciences, at least on the surface, turn a blind eye to the “archaism” of religion — basing their search for knowledge on unquestioned evidential models so as to accelerate and freely enjoy the accumulation of information absent of any first or final cause. If ever it appears as an object of concern within these sciences, religion is deemed a mere obstacle to humanity’s apparently inscrutable inclination toward progress. Lacan’s sagacity, in this respect, is evident in his strategic mobilization of religious thought for the unsettling of apathetic precepts that scientific thinking supposedly constitutes itself upon. The foremost recipient of his wrathful wit, it seems, is the smug indifference that science shows toward the problem of causality. What Lacan signals in his intervention is that in a world dutifully constructed to be the container for manufacturing and appropriating data, what inevitably transpires is the flattening of our experience such that no objective realm is left for desires or convictions of truth that go beyond predetermined coordinates. The inane contradictions and

delirium that inevitably ensues, it could be argued, receives its complement in the form of a culture of techno-gadgetry that hopelessly introduces products to temporarily sustain these endeavors without cause. These little bits of pleasure, in their objective disposability, point out the effects of scientific agendas that unknowingly acknowledge the need for attachments, and limits for its pursuits, only to fall back on squandering all of its resources. The realms of the religious emerge in Lacan's counter-attack against the grave political and economic consequences that stem from disavowing the passion for annihilation that fuels the solipsism of scientific man. It is the contention of psychoanalysis that the reckless enjoyment of knowledge in-itself, and the byproducts that we are necessarily left with, is carried out only through a prior ignorance or hatred not toward religion *per se* but to the infrangibility of a certain religious function that absently structures our relation to existence as such.



Analysis, by way of a formal, ontological reduction, points to the necessity of experiencing an irremediable alienation that religion historically bears witness. In spite of its ever-present suspicion *vis-à-vis* science, however, psychoanalysis most certainly does not rally to the cause of religious fervor. Instead, the real commitment of analysis proves all-the-more adept at stymieing those righteous few who speak in the name of God, and claim to know something of his desires. For the pious to speak from such a position of knowledge amounts to nothing more than the egregious attempt to conform its congregations, and patrol the border, to something that does not exist. The theoretical labor of psychoanalysis, then, with respect to religion, consistently turns around this point, which is nothing more than a questioning of the Other: how shall one preserve a position for God despite its utter vacuity? If analysis evokes religious figures and tropes, it is never to find a way to fill in this gaping hole. Rather,



they are employed for the servicing, and questioning, of desire — that is, to either deny or compel one's pursuit of an obscure element that escapes all discursive appropriation. God is only significant for analysis if it remains as a guarantee of our own indefiniteness, as a signifier that preserves a space for an absence while at the same time foreclosing any possibility of our ever obtaining it. Religion is placed within the reasonable limits and conditions necessary for sustaining the very opacity of our jouissance. From this vantage, psychoanalysis does not feign the subject's ability to square accounts with its creator. Given the structural impossibility of such balancing acts, analysis goes well beyond the obliviousness of moral dogmas, which persist only through a faith in reconciliation that yields nothing more than anxious and excessive prohibitions, and ultimately desire's putrefaction.

The difficulty of speaking about religion, then, will only intensify when one's imperative is to do so psychoanalytically. What this



vocation of analytic thinking insists upon is the occupation of an impossible, “in-between,” site that promotes the dissolution of any position choosing either to transfigure or discard the concealed truths of the religious. To be allied with such a cause necessitates the very rethinking of religion's objective status, without giving in to its own tradition's devotion to a dark, mimetic desire. The task, then, is to remain faithful to an immanent, impure One. The question of creation, the ontological status of One, the exception, sacrifice, saintliness, love — all are common figures culled from the immense history of religion. But this is no return, as the significance attributed to such notions has been rigorously subtracted from, on the one hand, any position hoping to resolve the subject's discord with divinity, and on the other hand, from any logic seeking to forget the yawning gap that internally divides this leering Other. We are thus left with testimonies to an irrevocable, absolute, difference — the convictions of which proliferate in infinitesimal acts of thought.

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 275.
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 2:43.
3. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 259.