

## Introduction

### *Psychoanalysis and Religion in Context*

[T]o us he is no more a person  
now, but a whole climate of opinion  
under whom we conduct our different lives  
—W. H. Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud”

We live in an era in modern Western countries that many culture theorists describe as “therapeutic.” Among the most important of the figures who have contributed to this change is Sigmund Freud. It is beyond dispute that his theories and nomenclature have become a part of everyday life. Terms such as the unconscious, ego, and superego have been disseminated not only through psychoanalytic clinical sessions but also through movie screens, television, literature, and social media. Our shared public culture is suffused with unconscious fantasies and psychoanalytic ways of thinking about self, other, and society.

The psychoanalytic cultural universe has also impacted the way in which we think about religion. Ernst Jones, Freud’s first biographer, pointed out that aside from sexuality no single topic in Freud’s vast corpus has engendered more interest than his analysis of religion.<sup>1</sup> And, with regard to religion, the signature of Freud’s influence can be summed up quite simply: religion is not from the hand of the divine but the very human projection of complex developmental issues and unconscious wishes. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur summed this up when he dubbed

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Basic Books, 1957), 3: 349.

Freud's understanding of religion a "hermeneutics of suspicion" – one that has for many led to a mistrust of religious belief and its multiple social manifestations. It would not be an overstatement to say that this perspective looms large behind many contemporary critiques of religion within both academia and the general lay population.<sup>2</sup>

The chapters of this volume aim to illumine such vital aspects of contemporary life by tracing them back to what Freud and his heirs thought and wrote about religion. Why did Freud write about religion? What were his seminal texts and what has been their effect on our social world? What were the critiques of his various models of the mind and analysis of religion? What new psychoanalytic formulations did such critiques give rise to? What might a revised psychoanalytic theory of religion look like and how might it further the continued relevance of psychoanalysis for analyzing religious phenomena? In answering these and related questions, our aim is to enable a self-reflective awareness of the therapeutic atmosphere in which we live while heightening the capacity to think psychoanalytically about the dynamics of religion.

To facilitate this involves a delicate balance between presenting "experience-distant" (i.e., abstract theory) and "experience-near" (i.e., existentially meaningful) dimensions of psychoanalytic thought and application. In this regard it is important to remember that Freud's theories were born of his reflections on the suffering of patients in the clinical setting. It was his effort to understand the knots of suffering that led to theory-building. As the data (the sample size of the patients in the clinical setting) shifted and new observations came to the fore, so too did the theory change to accommodate such information. This falsification of theory was apparent not only during the course of Freud's own work but also in psychoanalytic reformulations after his death. Throughout this book we will strive to track Freud's own thoughts as well as subsequent developments in the psychoanalytic understanding of religion while balancing the two poles (experience-near and experience-distant) of psychoanalytic thought and practice.

#### FRAMING THE RELATION BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION: THE THREE ERAS

Psychoanalysis is hardly the sole player in the dialogue between psychology and religion during the past century. Before we delve into the details

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

of Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic formulations about religion, then, it would be helpful to offer a historical map, a bird's-eye view as it were, for situating psychoanalysis within an academic field that has been called the *psychology and religion movement* (a term that is further explained below).<sup>3</sup> How are we to understand the dynamics and evolution of the historical interplay between psychology and religion? Who were the major figures and theories? Where does Freud and psychoanalysis fit in this wider field? Answering such questions will afford us the opportunity to introduce the theoretical nomenclature that will be utilized throughout this volume. Additionally, it offers those maps and comparisons that will prove valuable for using and critiquing Freud's theories and subsequent developments in the psychoanalytic theory of religion in the chapters ahead.

A helpful way of thinking about the historical evolution of this intellectual field is to divide it into three eras: 1880–1944, 1945–1969, and 1970 to the present. Each of these eras can be further characterized with respect to its seminal figures and their creation of originaive psychologies. For example, Freud (1856–1939) is considered to be one of most (if not *the* most) influential theorists of the initial, originaive period, with Carl Jung (1875–1961) and William James (1842–1910) being universally cited as the other two crucial figures. Even a cursory glance at this originaive period reveals it was international in scope, incorporating scholars and clinicians from North America, Europe, and even Asia. The best-known examples from North America would include William James, G. Stanley Hall (and his “Clark School”), E. D. Starbuck, James Leuba, James Bisset Pratt, George Coe, W. E. Hocking, and (from Canada) Richard Maurice Bucke. The best-known German contributions were that of Wilhelm Wundt (known as the founder of experimental psychology), his student Oswald Külpe (famous for his “Würzburg School”), and Külpe's student Karl Girgensohn (who founded the “Dorpat School”). From France one could include Jean Martin Charcot

<sup>3</sup> The term was initially introduced by Peter Homans in his “The Psychology and Religion Movement,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 22: 64–77. Additional sophistication, particularly with respect to the “projects,” stems from the map offered in Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parsons, eds., *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain* (New York: Routledge, 2001). See also William B. Parsons, “The Psychology of Religion: An Overview,” in *Social Religion*, ed. William B. Parsons (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 3–22; William B. Parsons, “Psychology of Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 7473–7481.



FIGURE I.1 Freud, Jung, and James at the 1909 Psychology Conference at Clark University.

and Pierre Janet, both of whom influenced Freud, as well as the Catholic researchers Henri Delacroix and Joseph Maréchal. While Carl Jung is cited as the most influential Swiss psychologist, one should also include his colleagues Theodore Flournoy and Ferdinand Morel. The British scholar Frederic Myers, who founded the Society for Psychical Research, and, from Asia, Girindrasekhar Bose (India) and Heisaku Kosawa (Japan) round out our survey of the more important figures of this first period. A survey of their written works reveals that they often cited each other, even borrowing and expanding on ideas rolling through their colleagues. The internationally based interaction between these men can be visually captured in the famous photograph, taken in 1909 at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, of a group of significant figures of that time, including not only Freud, Jung, and James but also G. Stanley Hall (of Clark University) and multiple others (see Figure I.1).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For the details of the conference, see R. B. Evans and W. A. Koelch, “Psychoanalysis arrives in America: The 1909 Psychology Conference at Clark University,” *American*

While this wide swath of figures is of interest to the specialized focus of scholars, for most in contemporary culture it is fair to say that the vast majority of them have been forgotten, buried by the tides of history. However, they remain relevant to us insofar as they had some influence on Freud's understanding of the psyche and analysis of religion. In this introductory chapter, our concern is with but two of them, Jung and James, not only because the latter two, along with Freud, are by far and away the best known and influential of the psychologists of this period, and not only because they heavily influenced each other, but also because all three figures are tied by the term "depth psychology" – a term coined by the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939) that, as the name suggests, has come to denote psychological models that articulate an area of the mind "below" that of normal waking consciousness. Importantly, the varying analyses and evaluation of religion found in the three men's works differ in part because they had very different theories of that "region below consciousness." As preparation for the chapters to come, it is to our benefit to show not only how Freud framed that region but also how it contrasted with that of James and Jung.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true insofar as post-Freudian developments in the psychoanalytic theory of religion tend to gravitate closer to the positions advocated by James and Jung, albeit in psychoanalytically specific ways.

### Below Consciousness: Subconscious, Unconscious, and Collective Unconscious

William James's preferred way of conceptualizing that area was with the term *subconscious* (or the *subliminal*, a term James appropriated from one of the figures mentioned above, the British researcher Frederic Myers). To utilize a helpful metaphor, imagine a beach at high tide. Let's call the line or "threshold" signifying how high the waves rush up on the beach the "liminal" (*limen*) threshold. Psychologically speaking, that line distinguishes what lies above that threshold (normal everyday consciousness) with that which lies below it (the *subliminal* or

*Psychologist* 40, no. 8 (1985): 942–948. For more detail on the interaction between these early psychologists of religion, see Parsons, "Psychology of Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, and David M. Wulff, "Psychology of Religion: An Overview," in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 15–29.

<sup>5</sup> The classic work on how the notion of the unconscious/subconscious/collective unconscious came to life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

*subconscious*). Utilizing a beach analogy, at low tide we can see for ourselves what lies “below”: seaweed, shells, rocks, and so on. Similarly, James thought that there was a psychological form of the low tide (namely, the subconscious), in which psychological processes, unseen and unknown to the conscious mind, could incubate. When ripe enough, the latter could surge their way into the conscious mind to the extent that a new identity is born (as in the case of conversion), or, as in the case of mystical experiences or certain introspective exercises (like prayer or meditation), the normal threshold of consciousness could suddenly give way to the low tide of the subconscious, revealing a vast new territory that James colloquially referred to as the “More.” James was willing to say that on *this side* of the More (the subconscious proper or, in our metaphor, the beach side), psychology had a lot to say about the various mechanisms and processes that determined how the subconscious works. At the same time, he was open to what other disciplines, such as theology, might say about the *farther* side of the More (i.e., the Ocean). Since this area below consciousness was deemed by James to be very rich and complex and, as a result, the origins of the religious life were obscured in the complexity of that mist, his criteria for evaluating the effects of religion were less *originological* (i.e., determined solely by psycho-physical factors) than what he called *pragmatic*: immediate luminousness (which is to say, are we enlightened in any way by religious experience and insight?), philosophical reasonableness (i.e., do the religious ideas make sense?), and moral helpfulness (are they of value in living the good life?). In sum, he adopted a view that emphasized the famous “what are the fruits for life” or “adaptive” benefits of religion. As further evidence of James’s open-mindedness, and with respect to religion’s more fantastic (e.g., mystical, prophetic) claims, James advised being receptive to what he called “wild facts” (i.e., anomalous phenomena running counter or contradictory to the generally acknowledged nature and limits of reality). Such caution also authorized one to engage in a “radical empiricism” that values, as a part of theory-building and the interpretative task, personal experimentation (such as James’s own encounter with nitrous oxide, where he came to see multiple dimensional realities, all separated by what he called the “filmiest of screens”).<sup>6</sup> James use of nitrous oxide would be subsumed under the general heading of what scholars of religion call “entheogens,” namely, those substances (such as peyote, ayahuasca, or

<sup>6</sup> See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1929), 378.

psilocybin) that open up the subconscious to the workings of the divine, as is evident in multiple religious traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Although James was not always sure about Freud's characterization of the *unconscious*, he had occasion to cite psychoanalytic theories with great interest and optimism. For his part, Freud, initially aiming to become a medical doctor out of the University of Vienna in the 1880s, went to study with the aforementioned Pierre Charcot at the Salpêtrière (the premier French psychiatric hospital of Freud's time) and with Josef Breuer, an older established physician who took the young Freud under his wing. In particular, Freud and Breuer engaged patients afflicted with *hysteria*, a prevailing mental affliction of his time that can be generally described as the physical expression of unconscious psychological conflict (i.e., psychosomatic illness).<sup>8</sup> For example, Freud was once faced with a woman who had all the symptoms of hysteria, including psychosomatic, intermittent paralysis of her limbs. This woman, dubbed "Anna O" (later revealed to be the young Bertha Pappenheim, who went on to become a famous social pioneer, especially for women's rights), would enter into a period of absence during which some form of a daydream or fantasy was recounted, complete with amnesia as to what was said on return. This "chimney-sweeping," as it was initially called (later becoming the basis for Freud's term *catharsis*: the process of expressing repressed emotions and trauma), led to Anna O. being symptom free, if temporarily. Freud's observation of the patient's absence eventually became the basis for his postulation that there existed an unconscious dimension to the personality. At first Freud evoked the unconscious content of this absence in his patients through hypnosis (the agreed-on routine of his time). Because Freud ended up failing at hypnosis, he devised a new way to elicit unconscious material, which he called *free association*. Freud began

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of entheogens in American religious history, see Robert C. Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Freud's initial attempt to analyze hysteria can be found (in brief) in his *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. and ed. J. Strachey (hereafter referred to as S.E.) (London: Hogarth Press), 11: 3–56 (1910), and *Studies on Hysteria*, S.E. 2: 1–335 (1893). As with all things Freud, but especially with respect to hysteria (and Freud's case history of Dora), there has been a considerable amount of criticism. The initial salvo can be found in Jeffrey M. Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). More recently, a critical assessment of Freud and hysteria is offered by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Making Minds and Madness: From Hysteria to Depression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), see esp. chapter 2.

by relaxing the patient and having them say whatever came into their mind. What he found was that all too often the patient would stop free associating, sometimes even becoming anxious. He used these observations to theorize that some mental censor (later to become the notions of the ego and super-ego) was *repressing* the conscious awareness and expression of the contents of the unconscious. The reason, as Freud came to observe, was that the daydreams/fantasies his patients recounted were often of a sexual, aggressive, or otherwise morally objectionable nature. In other words, it was for good reason that they needed to be repressed. Even so, Freud found that the patient in the clinical setting, perhaps without knowing the full extent of what they were expressing, would invariably project the various unconscious conflicts onto the analyst. This fact, which was instrumental to treatment, was what Freud would come to call *transference*.

Following the scientific motto of falsifiability, Freud knew that new clinical data necessitated the reformation of theory.<sup>9</sup> Jumping to the end of his career, he came to offer what is known as the “structural model” of the mind, which laid out the characteristics of and complex relationship between the unconscious (the German term was *das Es* or *id* [“the It”]), the ego (*das Ich* or the I), and the super-ego (*das Über-Ich*, literally the “over-I”).<sup>10</sup> Freud held that the unconscious was based in somatic (bodily, biological) processes, being dynamic in nature and so seeking expression, pleasure, and satisfaction. To put it another way, the basis of unconscious processes was “instinctual” (Freud’s original, more “experience-near” term was the German *triebe*, which is best translated as “drive”). We all know what it is to feel driven by desire, and for the “later” Freud those drives were basically two: *Eros* (sexuality and, more widely, the drive for ever greater and more complex forms of unity) and *Thanatos* (aggression and the eventual quiescence of death). Further, he

<sup>9</sup> A survey of the development of Freud’s thought can be found in W. W. Meisner, *Freud and Psychoanalysis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). Once again, with respect to psychoanalytic models as a whole, there is no dearth of criticism. Throughout this volume we will note the more relevant debates, controversies, and scholarly rabbit-holes for those inclined to pursue them. For now, we can mention that on the far side of the negative ledger are studies that seek to dismiss him altogether (e.g., Frederick Crews, *Freud: The Making of an Illusion* [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017], and Adolf Grünbaum, *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984]).

<sup>10</sup> Freud’s structural model is best articulated in his short essay “The Dissection of the Psychological Personality,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, S.E. 22: 57–80 (1933).



characterized the unconscious as not so much immoral as amoral. It is ruled only by the “pleasure principle,” which is to say that instincts seek one thing: satisfaction. At our biological core, then, we are highly animalistic and selfish. We literally “want,” and the “mental” correlate of that somatically based desire is manifested in wishes and fantasies.

Freud supplemented this portrait of the unconscious by postulating a “developmental line” of the sexual instinct (i.e., *libido theory*). Somewhat scandalous for his time, Freud thought that mature forms of object-love had precursors (a developmental infrastructure) in the life of children. For example, in the first year of life the male child took pleasure in the mother’s breast. This “oral stage” of sexual development had a pleasure zone (an “erotogenic zone”), namely, the mouth. Next was the anal stage, in which the child learns to defecate on their own (the first “gift” to the parents), the erotogenic zone being the anus. Then the phallic stage (the erotogenic zone being the genitals), and, after a latency period, puberty (the genital stage), where the emerging adolescent takes an object (a person) as their focus of desire. In addition to the possibility that one might, depending on various life events, become fixated at a particular developmental stage (which, in its extreme forms, leads to sexual perversions), during the course of development the male child is subject to the vicissitudes of the famous *Oedipus complex*. In its pure form this means that, on the one hand, the male child, through identification with the father, idealizes and identifies with him, seeking his protection, admiring his power, and wanting his love. On the other hand, the male child also sees the father as the major competitor for his first true love, the mother, and so the feelings of competition, fear (especially of castration), jealousy, and guilt (for wishing his death) are also part of, and in direct conflict with, his feelings of love and identification. The best outcome, thought Freud, would be if the male child identifies with and loves his father more than hates him, and renounces his love of the mother by “displacing” that affection onto a suitable substitute (hence the psychoanalytic view of the popular cultural phrase “I married someone just like dear old Mom”).<sup>11</sup>

Females, thought Freud, have a different line of development. The latter was not, as some assume, simply the Oedipus complex reversed,

<sup>11</sup> Freud’s major and early statement on the development of sexuality is his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, S.E. 7: 125–245 (1905). A brief and readable history of Freud’s evolving theory of the instincts can be found in E. Bibring, “The Development and Problems of the Theory of the Instincts,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941): 102–131.

as if women had an “Electra complex” (a term coined by Jung and firmly rejected by Freud as psychoanalytically vague and inaccurate). Freud thought that girls, like boys, initially identified as “little men” in the initial oral phase of libidinal development. By the time they arrived at the third, phallic phase, however, girls realized they were castrated, a psychic scar that created “penis envy.” The developmental challenge was thus far greater: the girl had to change her love object from the mother to the father and erotogenic zone from clitoris to vagina. Along the way, she would try to actualize her desire for a baby boy (and hence gain her “penis”), evincing the character traits of jealousy, envy, body narcissism, castration shame (Freud thought this was the psychological origin of the social institution of “weaving”), and perhaps even a professorship (a good cultural outcome for the sublimation of penis envy). Women were seen as less individuated, more narcissistic, and lacking in a sense of justice (which is to say, had a deficient super-ego), a logic that follows from the psychological reality of having been castrated (the latter obviates any strong need to follow the dictates of the super-ego). Such dictates are more effective for men precisely due to the fear of castration.<sup>12</sup>

If the unconscious is understood as rooted in biological processes, being “driven” to satisfaction, yet also amoral (with some of the instinctual wishes being socially unacceptable), then there must be a mental function that exists to square such transgressive wishes with a social reality that demands their renunciation. Here is where Freud’s notions of the ego and super-ego come into play. Contrary to the id, Freud’s ego is ruled by the “reality principle” and “secondary-process” thought (i.e., our reason). It helps the id get what it wants but, because it is informed with information about the social world, does so in a manner that mitigates and redirects the raw “want” of the id. The ego is characterized as operating primarily through a variety of “defense mechanisms,” the most profitable of which are *repression* (the renunciation of the id’s wants to the extent possible and in accordance with social mores), *projection* (where one denies one’s own impulses and vulnerabilities by projecting them onto individuals and groups, exemplified in bullies and racists) and *sublimation* (a moral concept that redirects the desires of the id to socially

<sup>12</sup> Here again one finds no dearth of criticism as to Freud’s views on female sexuality and development. His own views are best expressed in his later essay titled “Femininity,” in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, S.E. 22: 112–135 (1933). A good introductory overview of the critiques that have been leveled at him can be found in Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).