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1 What Freud Said

Freud's monotheism. What is one to make of this phrase? In university departments of religion, which by definition are not religious social spaces but secular, pluralistic, interdisciplinary and critical, one might present monotheism dispassionately to a waiting student population in terms of how religious traditions express it through their ideologies, practices and institutional accouterments. At the same time one might also offer diverse methods (e.g., humanistic, scientific, social scientific) that have chimed in as to the "what" of monotheism. It is to the latter group that Freud belongs. His psychoanalytic theorizing developed a model of the human personality that became the conceptual framework through which he discerned the empirical reality behind what religions have framed as the divine entity at the core of self, society and universe. In the three major sections that comprise this Element we will look at what Freud said about monotheism and religion in general, the critiques leveled at him and in what qualified sense, despite such critiques, we can still find the application of his theories useful.[1]

1.1 Methods and Religion

Freud was not the first or only social scientist in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to take on the formidable task of trying to theorize about the origins of religion. Interestingly enough, he was also not the first or only to look to totemism as the key to such origins. For example, in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Freud's contemporary, the sociologist Emile Durkheim, by way of choosing totemic society as an early, simple form of religion in which the foundational elements were more easily deciphered, argued that religion is a function of group processes. The definitional strategy he promoted was sociological and it ran as follows: religion is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."[2] For Durkheim religion was not a projection of the individual but of the entire group. The myths and symbols of religion expressed group sentiments and functioned to establish group identity and solidarity. In this sense religion was "eternal": anytime you had a group you would find symbols, myths, things set off as "sacred" and any other religious

[1] Throughout this Element I take from or summarize the more detailed commentary found in my *Freud and Religion: Advancing the Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). In the latter the interested reader will find an expansion of many of the arguments presented here as well as additional ones relevant to post-Freudian psychoanalytic studies of religion.

[2] E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965[1912]), p. 62.

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accouterments, all representations of the group, whose members did not necessarily clothe themselves in the more familiar garb of modern institutional monotheisms. For Durkheim, then, *any* group, from sports teams to universities to political parties (and note that many groups are represented by "totems" like eagles, elephants, donkeys, bears, owls and so on), function like what we today, in restricting religion to institutional religion, think operates. Even countries like the United States function like a religion (the oft-used term "civil religion" applies here). To wit: it has its founders and saints (e.g., presidents and moral leaders), scriptures (the Constitution and Bill of Rights), law and ethics (e.g., SCOTUS), the sacred spaces of buildings and monuments (the White House and Statue of Liberty), symbols (the eagle and flag), sacred days (July 4 and Memorial Day) and rituals (Pledge of Allegiance and juror oaths).

For Durkheim myths, symbols and collective representations were initially engendered through rituals and what he called "collective effervescence." The religious products of the latter then had a claim on us insofar as they were inwardly felt to be above us, just as today we might think of the inward obligations foisted on us by the doctrines of institutional religion. However, for Durkheim this was not due to their ontological status, as theologians might posit. Rather, they were due to the fact that we, as human beings, are what Durkheim called *homo duplex*: we are literally singular and collective (social) human beings at the same time. To nail this down Durkheim took on William James who, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, had defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine," further isolating its deepest core in mystical experience.[3] But whereas James found the feeling of ecstasy and otherness in the farther side of the subconscious, Durkheim found it in *homo duplex*, collective effervescence and group functioning. Durkheim's definitional strategy, then, can be framed as offering a sociological version of James' more psycho-spiritual and individualistic theory.

Freud read both Durkheim and James, offering a direct response to the former in his work *Totem and Taboo* and an indirect response to the latter through the figure of Romain Rolland and his "oceanic feeling" (and one could add here Jung as well, which we will attend to shortly). Correspondingly, he also offered a more restrictive definitional strategy when it came to the "what" of religion (which again we will address later in this section). Attending to only Durkheim for now, Freud offered a different view of totemism by locating it historically

[3] W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1929[1902]), pp. 31–32.

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(through what he called the "primal deed") and developmentally (by which he meant through the generating power of oedipal conflict). In order to make his argument clear, we must take a brief detour through his understanding of the human personality. While Freud's view of the person changed as new clinical data sets emerged from his psychoanalytic practice, we can focus on two components, the structural model and libido theory (i.e., the developmental line of sexuality), that served as the basis for his interpretation of monotheism.

1.2 Freud's Theory of the Personality

As concerns the development of the personality Freud is always linked to his famous Oedipus complex. In turn, the latter is situated in a developmental process known as *libido theory.*

Freud thought that mature forms of object-love had precursors, which is to say "a developmental infrastructure," in the life of children. This developmental line was theorized as consisting in stages, each with its particular "erotogenic" zone. For example, for the first year of life or so, dubbed the "oral phase" of development, sexual development had for its erotogenic zone the mouth, which took pleasure in receiving nurturance from the mother's breast. Next was the anal stage, in which the child learns to defecate on his/her own, the erotogenic zone being the anus. The phallic stage (the erotogenic zone being the genitals) followed and, after a latency period, puberty, where the emerging adolescent takes an object (a person) as its focus of desire. He was also impressed that 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 one hand, the male child idealizes and identifies with his father, 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. Freud's clinical data led him to think that a person might, depending on various life events, become fixated at a particular developmental stage (which, in its extreme form, can lead to sexual perversions). The best outcome would be if the male child identifies with and loves his father more than he hates him and renounces his love of the mother by "displacing" that affection onto a suitable substitute.[4]

[4] Freud's major and early statement on the development of sexuality is his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* 24 vols. Trans. and ed. by J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press (hereafter referred to as S. E.), vol. 7, pp. 125–145. A brief and readable history of Freud's evolving theory of the instincts can be found

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Going on, and as we will detail in the next section, there have been some forceful critiques of the way in which Freud frames the developmental line of females. To be sure, the latter was not simply Oedipus reversed ("Electra complex" was a term coined by Jung and firmly rejected by Freud as developmentally inaccurate). Rather, Freud thought that the developmental trajectory of girls was more complicated. Like little boys, little girls initially identified as "little men" in the oral phase of libidinal development. Like little boys, then, their first love object was the mother. However, by the time girls arrived at the phallic phase, the developmental line took a new turn. Seeing that they did not have a valued appendage that was part of the male anatomy, girls felt 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 they had a deficient superego), a logic that follows from the psychological reality of having been castrated (the latter obviates any strong need to follow the dictates of the superego, the latter being more effective for men due to the fear of castration).[5]

Things become even more complicated when the developmental line of sexuality is run through Freud's "structural model." The foundational base of the latter is Freud's notion of the unconscious (later referred to as the id). Unlike James' notion of the *sub*conscious and Jung's notion of the *collective* unconscious, Freud insisted on a somatic (biological) dimension of the *un*conscious. Freud isolated two instinctual processes, sex and aggression (later 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]), which served as its biological drivers [Freud's original German term for instinct was *triebe*, best translated as "drive"]). Further, he characterized the unconscious as not so much immoral but amoral: it is ruled by the "pleasure principle," which is to say that instincts seek satisfaction. At our biological core, then, we are

in E. Bibring, "The Development and Problems of the Theory of the Instincts." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941), 102–131.

[5] To be sure, 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., vol. 22, pp. 112–135). A good overview of the critiques leveled at him can be found in J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Basic Books, 2nd edition [revised], 2000 [1974]).

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animalistic and selfish. The id seeks expression and the "mental" correlate of that somatically based desire is manifested in wishes and fantasies.

If the unconscious is 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 mediate between such transgressive wishes and a social reality that all too often demands their renunciation. Here is where Freud's notions of the ego (or *Ich*, the felt sense of "I") and superego (the *über-Ich* or "over-I") become important. As opposed to the id, Freud framed the ego as 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 about the social world, it does so in a manner that mitigates and redirects the raw "want" of the id. The ego counters the id 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 other individuals and groups) and *sublimation* (a moral concept that redirects the desires of the id to socially productive pursuits). The extension of the ego to the superego, which is experienced as that moral voice "above" us, happens in a developmental sense through identification with and internalization of the mores of the parental unit (who, it should be noted, are also informed by the mores of the culture "behind" them). The superego internalizes (and is felt subjectively) as the moral rules by which one should abide (the abrogation of which is felt as guilt). These two component parts (ego, superego) of Freud's structural model, then, ensure (ideally at least) that the successful individual can exist in a group "with others" in a way that navigates his/her own preferences with those of others with an eye toward contributing to the common good.

Summing up, then, Freud's model of the way the mind works is a *conflict model*: we are ambivalent beings whose desires will not always jibe with our internalized moral standards. Because unconscious desires are powerful and cannot be entirely repressed, contained or sublimated, they are bound to leak through in some fashion: in dreams, in symptomatic acts, in slips of the tongue, in neurotic symptoms and in all forms of religion.

1.3 The Origins of Religion

Turning now to the application of Freud's model, we have noted that in his era a number of social scientists were interested in theorizing about the origins of religion. Initially what interested Freud the most were anthropological findings about totemism. Freud agreed that totemism was the earliest universal "pre-religious" (relative to the institutional sense) phase of cultural development.

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Additionally, he adopted the following from his anthropological colleagues: the totem is a class of assorted material objects (usually animal) that are revered and worshipped; it is understood to be the ancestor and father of the clan who protected the clan and with whom the members of the clan identified (often through dressing up in the guise of the totem); it is not to be killed (except on those few sacred occasions dubbed the "totem meal" when it is permissible in a ceremony to kill the totem and eat it). While the latter characterizes its religious dimension Freud, again relying on his anthropological colleagues, appends to that its social dimension, consisting of a set of laws or "taboos" of which exogamy (the taboo against incest) was primary. Like Durkheim, Freud thought totemism, understood as a pre-religious form, might provide clues as to the nature of later, more developed institutional religion in general (to which he would return in his 1927 work *The Future of an Illusion*).[6] Unlike Durkheim, however, Freud emphasized the determinants of his libido theory, with its emphasis on Oedipus, the latter complicated by the vicissitudes of the structural model.

Given this, it is understandable that Freud, who was convinced of the universality of his theory, would rely on a series of case histories to make his argument. During the course of his narrative in *Totem and Taboo* Freud thought it particularly appropriate to draw our attention to psychoanalytic studies that dealt with analyses of children and their animal phobias. In 1909, just before the writing of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud had written a case history on "little Hans" and his horse phobia.[7] Citing similar psychoanalytic case histories from his colleagues, he concluded that the spectrum of behavior exhibited by children toward animals of various kinds (ranging from simple fear to more complex, conflicted attitudes) are traceable back to the child's father. In psychoanalytic terminology, the child "displaced" the range of emotions and conflicted attitudes found in the Oedipus complex from the father to the totem animal. If human nature is universal, then the real clue to what the totem really is and how it came to be has been found: the totem is nothing but a substitute father. It is in Oedipus, then, that Freud finds the key to the origin of religion.

Freud sought to supplement the findings of his social scientific colleagues by applying the interpretative lens of his depth psychoanalytic approach to explain how totemism came to be. In so doing, he once again adopted select findings of his scholarly colleagues: Darwin's assertion that before the existence of any society there were roving groups of primal men consisting of a feared and envied primal father, his wife (or wives) and sons, some of whom were castrated

[6] Here Freud was following in the footsteps of his sociological counterpart E. Durkheim, who employed a similar strategy in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

[7] See Freud, S. E., vol. 9, pp. 3–152.

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or driven out by the fearsome father; J. J. Atkinson's theory that the primal horde came to an end when the brothers banded together and killed the primal father out of jealousy, competition and envy; and Robertson Smith's suggestion that totemism, now conceived of as a kind of "brother clan," was punctuated by ceremonies in which prohibitions were lifted and the totemic animal was killed and eaten ("the totem meal"). Insisting that the explanation for the origin of totemism needed to be at once "an historical and psychological one," and that it "should tell us under what conditions this peculiar institution developed and to what psychic needs in men it has given expression," Freud then presents his psychoanalytic version of the origin of totemism, beginning with the "acting out" of the oedipal wish to kill the father:[8]

> One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually . . . The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed.[9]

For Freud, then, it was the repeated murder of the primal father that constituted the empirical, historical events (later mythologized in Western, monotheistic scripture) that gave rise to the feeling (as well as to the doctrine) of what scripture and theology narrate as the "original sin" lurking in us all.[10] Moreover, since psychoanalysis claims that the acting out of the hostility toward the father results in guilt and remorse, the invention of that socioreligious institution known as totemism is a kind of memory or cultural monument born of remorse for the great deed:

> Totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt[11] . . . They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex[12] . . . The totemic system was, as it were, a covenant with their father, in which he promised them everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father – protection, care, and indulgence – while on their side they undertook to respect his life[13] . . . society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt.[14]

[8] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, S. E., vol. 13, p. 108. [9] Ibid., pp. 141–142. [10] Ibid., p. 161.
[11] Ibid., p. 145. [12] Ibid., p. 143. [13] Ibid., p. 144. [14] Ibid., p. 146.

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1.4 The Development of Religion

Having ascertained the true origin of totemism, Freud was faced with the equally difficult issue of how such early forms developed into the more familiar, sophisticated, contemporary institutional religions of his era. We will momentarily see how Freud, in developing his views on this historical trajectory, once again relied on the anthropological literature of his day. But, before we do, it is equally important to note the influence of another figure: his heir turned apostate, Carl Jung.

In the preface to *Totem and Taboo* Freud confesses that, among other things, it was Jung's emerging notion of a "collective unconscious" populated by archetypes that provided the "first stimulus" for his book. Indeed, he goes on to say that he aims to provide a "methodological contrast" to Jung.[15] Given that Freud and Jung were slowly in the process of an intellectual divorce, it is notable that Freud thought enough of Jung's emerging theory to offer a psychoanalytic version of it. Indeed, Freud countered Jung with his own theory of version of the "collective mind" dominated by one (and only one) "universal archetype," namely Oedipus. It is Freud's version of the collective mind that becomes his solution to the problem of social psychology and the historical driver of new cultural forms and expressions.

What, then, was Freud's psychoanalytic version of the collective mind? In formulating this concept Freud turned to biology and the phylogenetic transmission of species memories, events and traumas. Freud became convinced that the human species as a whole shares certain historical traumas (notably the primal deed). There is, then, what he called an "archaic heritage" that "comprises not only dispositions but also subject-matter – memory-traces of the experience of earlier generations."[16] In order to make this work, he had to argue for what he called "the inheritance of psychical dispositions."[17] This has been taken as a reference to the theories of the biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), who had earlier posited the inheritance of acquired characteristics (the modern-day theoretical version being that of transgenerational epigenetics). Freud goes on to say that if one accepts such an argument, then "we have bridged the gulf between individual and group psychology: we can deal with people as we do with an individual neurotic."[18] Interestingly enough, this forces Freud to amend his concept of the unconscious, particularly as it relates to individual belief. In *Totem and Taboo* (later elaborated in his *The Future of an Illusion*) Freud notes that psychoanalysis teaches us a singular point:

[15] Ibid., pp. xiii–xiv. [16] Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, S. E., vol. 23, p. 99.
[17] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, S. E., vol. 13, p. 158.
[18] Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, S. E., vol. 23, p. 100.

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