

Freud's Interpretation of Religion

We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence.

Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*

It was Freud's fate, as he himself observed with no shortage of pride and grandiosity, to "agitate the sleep of mankind."¹ While this bold and declarative statement may strike the casual reader of Freud as little more than self-aggrandizement, one could, by taking another look at Freud and at his impact on Western culture, make a compelling case for the fact that it was he, more than any other figure of the twentieth century, who changed the way we think about ourselves as human beings and the way we view human nature. Freud, though, did even more than that: he agitated the sleep of the religious believer, by challenging the believer's conviction that God is in God's heaven and that all is right with the world. The Western world, I would argue, is still trying to come to terms with Freud's influential critique of religion, even now, more than sixty years after his death. Witness the force field of energy emanating from my student in the Religious Conversion class, in response to Freud's theory of religion and to Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that the believer owes Freud at least a partial "yes." The intensity of the student's anger, it would seem, was commensurate with the power of the Freudian critique of religion.

To take this analysis a step further, we could say that this student was trying to come to terms with Freud's critique of religion on multiple levels. In fact, if we apply Freud's first topography of the human psyche—consciousness, preconsciousness, and unconsciousness—to what transpired in the classroom that day, we could say with some precision that this seminarian was trying to come to terms with Freudian theory on three different psychical levels. My lecture on Freud and Ricoeur's interpretation of psychoanalysis

jogged this individual's *preconscious* memory of Freud—that is, he could recall what he had learned or heard of Freud without too much difficulty—which then triggered a *conscious* feeling of anger in response to deeper feelings of an *unconscious* nature. While the latter—unconscious feelings—may appear conjectural, it should be remembered that many theorists and clinicians view anger as a frontline emotion, that which conceals more primitive and threatening feelings, such as fear and helplessness. Thus, it is hardly conjectural to suggest that my student, while responding to Freud with conscious anger, was, at an unconscious level, afraid of what psychoanalysis could do to his faith.

What is it, then, about Freud that can still agitate the sleep of religious believers? What is it about his theory of religion that continues to evoke and provoke? Let us take the response of Freud to his friend Romain Rolland, the French writer and philosopher, as our starting point. In 1929, just two years after devoting an entire book—*The Future of an Illusion*—to the issue of religion, Freud made an additional foray into this field of study, in the early portions of another classic book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In the very first chapter, Freud tells the reader that Rolland had written to congratulate him upon the successful publication of *The Future of an Illusion*, and that he, Rolland, had agreed with all of Freud's conclusions about religion except one, namely, the origin of "religious sentiments."

Rolland, according to Freud, held the view that these sentiments or feelings of religiosity have their origin in a most distinct and primitive feeling, "which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people . . . a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'."² Freud was willing to concede that this "oceanic feeling" was present in some, maybe even many people, even though he informed Rolland that the feeling did not ring true to his own personal experience. That Freud could not reconcile the oceanic feeling with his own experience is a fact of no small importance, as we will see when we get to Rizzuto's work. For now, suffice it to keep in mind that Freud, who had years before subjected himself to a period of intense and systematic self-analysis, would not accept as fact something that did not resonate with his own experience. His own experience of religious sentiments or feelings, or, more accurately, the lack thereof, became an important touchstone, consciously and unconsciously guiding his interpretation of religion.

Freud was not entirely inflexible when it came to the matter of the oceanic feeling. Though he says that he had never experienced this primitive longing for the eternal oneness of the universe, it was not beyond the realm of possibility for *other* people to experience it. The only point on which he

became inflexible was whether or not the oceanic feeling could be called the “primary source,” the *fons et origio* of our religious sentiments. Freud wrote that he had “no right to deny that [the oceanic feeling] does in fact occur in other people. . . . The only question is whether it is being correctly interpreted and whether it ought to be regarded as the *fons et origio* of the whole need for religion.”³ This, of course, was only a rhetorical comment, for by 1929 his mind was already made up on the matter: while some people may experience this oceanic feeling, there is nothing to suggest that it is of a primary nature, that it is the primary source of our religiosity. For one thing, as we have already discovered, Freud could not reconcile the oceanic feeling of oneness with his own personal experience. There was another stumbling block, however, which stood in the way of Freud joining Rolland in support of the oceanic feeling as the origin of religious faith: his theory of the psychosexual development of human beings, and the defining moment of human development, the resolution of the Oedipus Complex.

■ THE DEFINING MOMENT OF DEVELOPMENT ■

According to Freud, when the young child, or, more accurately, the young boy enters the phallic stage of psychosexual development around the age of three, things become rather complicated, both externally, within the family unit, and internally, within the boy's psyche. “The intricacy of the problem,” wrote Freud in his defining book, *The Ego and the Id*, “is due to . . . the triangular character of the Oedipus situation. . . .”⁴ What Freud had in mind when he wrote of the “triangular character of the Oedipus situation” was the young boy's experience of, and feelings toward, his mother and father. This is the age, so the theory goes, when the boy becomes cognizant of his budding sexuality, the fact that he is a male with a distinct sexual organ. The boy's powerful “object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother's breast,” now takes on genital properties.⁵

He begins to feel “pleasurable sensations in his sexual organ,” and learns from firsthand experience that these sensations can be produced at will through the manual stimulation of this organ. At first, the boy's object-cathexis for his mother related solely and uncomplicatedly to her breast. Now, however, the object-cathexis has a sexual quality to it, which undoubtedly makes it more pleasurable, but, at the same time, makes it more frightening. In the boy's internal, object-representational world, “he becomes his mother's lover.” Freud goes on to say that

[The boy] wishes to possess [his mother] physically in such ways as he has divined from his observations and intuitions about sexual life, and he tries to seduce her by showing her the male organ which he is proud to own. In a word, his early awakened masculinity seeks to take his father's place with her; his father has hitherto in any case been an envied model to the boy, owing to the physical strength he perceives in him and the authority with which he finds him clothed. His father now becomes a rival who stands in his way and whom he would like to get rid of.⁶

But, getting rid of one's father is easier said than done, especially when one is so young and small. The father, to state the obvious, happens to be bigger and stronger and more powerful. Thus, the young boy, during the oedipal stage of development, is in a state of high anxiety and feels very conflicted. On the one hand, he desperately yearns to become his mother's lover, to possess her physically in new and exciting ways, or, in short, to give free reign to the pleasure principle. Yet, on the other hand, another force is at work in the young boy's psyche, the force of reality or the reality principle, which the external forms and internal images of the father personify. Gone forever is the Edenic state of dyadic oneness and optimal bliss with the mother, when the object-cathexis related solely to her breast. Now, as the object-cathexis becomes more sexualized, the dyadic oneness gives way to a more complicated and triangular pattern of object relations; the father and his imposing presence forcefully enters the picture.

For Rolland and for many others, religious faith represents an attempt to recapture the feeling of Edenic bliss and oneness with the mother, the oceanic feeling one once had in the womb and in the early days and months of life. Freud, though, strongly disagreed with this interpretation. In his view, once the young boy passes through the triangular Oedipus Complex, with all of its pain and fear, he will be forever changed. Religious faith, then, cannot be an attempt to revive the oceanic feeling of oneness with the mother and the universe, for the early state of oneness with the mother is not the defining moment of human development. Since the Oedipus Complex is, and always will be, that defining moment, religious faith can only be the revival or reactivation of the conflicted and ambivalent feelings associated with the oedipal phase of development. Freud was especially unwavering and unyielding on this point: that the oedipal stage of development is the *fons et origo* of the whole need for religious faith is simply nonnegotiable.

Freud's inflexibility on this issue was not just a matter of personality; he had a theoretical rationale for standing firm. When the boy's object-cathexis for his mother related exclusively to the breast, all was fine and good. As the object-cathexis becomes more sexualized, however, the dyadic oneness necessarily gives way to a more complicated pattern of object relations. In wishing to possess his mother, for reasons other than to supply him with physical and emotional nourishment and sustenance, the boy risks losing the love and protection of his father, who is already the mother's lover. "I cannot," Freud argued with conviction, "think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection."⁷ This, as we will see, underlies his entire theory of religion. While the young boy would love nothing more than to yield to the temptation of the pleasure principle, to indulge his sexual desires by possessing his mother, he is keenly aware that to do so means that the more powerful father becomes his rival rather than his defender. In such a fragile and vulnerable emotional state, the young boy only has one option: the pleasure principle of desire must yield to the reality principle of potential deprivation and retaliation.

During the same period of development—almost as if the illicit wish for the mother and the perceived threat of the father's retaliation were not enough—the young boy makes a startling discovery: there are physical or anatomical differences between the sexes. On the surface, the discovery that boys have a penis and girls do not seems simple enough. And yet, when the discovery is psychically linked with the sexualization of the maternal object-cathexis and with the fear of the loss of paternal protection, the boy becomes even more terrified. Maybe, he begins to speculate, girls initially had a penis, but because of similar illicit and incestuous wishes, they had it taken away from them as punishment. If the boy cannot deny his illicit desires and wishes, then the same fate—the removal of his penis—may also await him. The threat of castration becomes further concretized and more credible, when the boy's mother, in a spirit of disguised playfulness, warns him that she will either take his sexual organ away from him or have his father cut it off, if he does not refrain from touching or fondling it. The boy takes his mother at her word, recalling that she has already taken other cherished things away from him, like her breast and his feces. So, Freud theorizes, "if at the time of the [actual] threat [the boy] can recall the appearance of female genitals or if shortly afterwards he has a sight of them—of genitals, that is to say, which really lack this supremely valued part, then he takes what he has heard seriously and, coming under the influence of the *castration complex*, experiences the severest trauma of his young life."⁸

In an attempt to alleviate or at least to lessen the unbearable feelings of anxiety and fear, the young boy abandons the object-cathexes—mother as desired lover, father as hated rival—of the oedipal period of development and replaces them with an attitude that can best be described as *identification*. The primal fear that he will lose his sexual organ and, simultaneously, his father's protection, prompts the boy to defend himself by way of a reaction formation, to identify with the powerful father by introjecting the father's attitudes and values into his own developing ego. By identifying with the father, the boy is forevermore assured of being loved and protected.

The implications for a critique of religious faith as psychological projection now become more obvious: the boy and the religious believer both fear a supremely powerful father/Father, yet, at the same time, are guaranteed his/His protection. In any case, this attitude of identification with the father's power and authority and the introjection of the father's values signals the resolution of the Oedipus Complex and the formation of the *superego*, the third division of the human psyche, along with the ego and the id. Freud captures the termination of this phase of development with the following remarks, taken from his essay, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex":

The object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications. The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates prohibitions against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis. The libidinal trends belonging to the Oedipus Complex are in part desexualized and sublimated (a thing which probably happens with every transformation into an identification) and in part inhibited in their aim and changed into impulses of affection. The whole process has, on the one hand, preserved the genital organ—has averted the danger of its loss—and, on the other, has paralyzed it—has removed its function. This process ushers in the latency period, which now interrupts the child's sexual development.⁹

Recall that in the beginning, at birth, a child is all *id*, all instinctual energy or, as Freud picturesquely described it, a "cauldron full of seething excitations."¹⁰ In this preoedipal world of existence, the child has no sense of right and wrong, no sense of reality—only pleasure and the immediate gratification of instinctual impulses. It falls to the parents to be, so to speak,

the child's temporary conscience, acting in his or her stead until the conscience is more fully developed. But soon enough, children begin to realize for themselves that their parents praise and reward them for certain behaviors, while punishing them for others. The young child's ego, the organizing center of a young and fragile personality, must therefore begin to mediate between the internal and instinctual demands for pleasure and the external demands of reality, as constituted by the parents and the home environment. Little by little, the child introjects or internalizes the norms and standards of the parents, and begins to identify with their values, because, on the one hand, they are more powerful and, on the other hand, they may at any moment withdraw their cherished love and protection. The latter, especially—the perception that the coveted love and protection of one's parents can be lost for failing to meet their standards and expectations—is more than the young child can bear. Indeed, children are filled with feelings of anxiety and fear, which would overwhelm them if it were not for the fact that their developing ego begins to forge something of a middle ground, between the instinctual demands for immediate pleasure and the parental and environmental demands for reality testing.

The parental standards and values, which were external to the child during the preoedipal years of development (age three and under), become internalized during the oedipal phase, particularly with the resolution and the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex. In the early pages of *The Future of an Illusion*, a work that became a systematic discussion and critique of religious faith, Freud stated that

It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized; for a special mental agency, man's super-ego, takes it over and includes it among its commandments. Every child presents this process of transformation to us; only by that means does it become a moral and social being. Such a strengthening of the super-ego is a most precious cultural asset in the psychological field. Those in whom it has taken place are turned from being opponents of civilization into being its vehicles.¹¹

In other words, external coercion, applied ever so skillfully and disciplinarily by the earliest representatives of the norms and values of culture, the parents, is psychically transformed into internal repression. The superego, usually at around the age of five—the end of the oedipal stage of development—begins

to take over the function of authority hitherto carried out by one's parents. What we behold is nothing short of the triumph of culture; the young child is fast becoming a self-regulating member of society.

In the coming years the child's superego will expand to include the standards and values of other important figures and influences, such as teachers, peers, and religious tradition. Though these later influences are indeed significant in terms of shaping character and personality, they will never be as foundational as the parental images recorded in the psyche. As we have already seen, the trauma resulting from the oedipal period of development and from its association with feelings of fear and helplessness, leaves an indelible and lasting impression in the child's psyche. Because so much, if not all of the oedipal ordeal happened outside the bounds of consciousness—unlike the experiences with the later shapers of personality—the influence of the parents will be uniquely and extraordinarily deep and lasting, of primary importance. The object representations recorded in the psyche during the oedipal period of development ultimately form the bedrock of the superego. As James Strachey has observed, commenting in the preface to Freud's essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," "[Freud] suggested that the very earliest of these regressive identifications—those derived from the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex—come to occupy a quite special position and form, in fact, the nucleus of the super-ego."¹² As we will see shortly, the regressive identifications derived from the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex will also, according to Freud, occupy a special position in the formation of religious faith, forming its nucleus.

For the most part, the superego is "a largely unconscious factor experienced as the conscience."¹³ Its function is to supply the ideals and standards by which the ego will mediate between the demands of internal pleasure and those of external reality. Moreover, the superego, in transforming external coercion into a mechanism of internal restraint, takes over the parental function of disciplinarian. It threatens to punish the young child for any illicit actions and behaviors, *as well as* for any illicit thoughts and impulses. The thoughts and impulses, in other words, even if not acted upon, will still be judged with the very same measure of severity. This is an extremely important point to keep in mind, especially when the discussion turns to an omniscient God with the capacity to observe and punish our actions *and* thoughts. For the time being, it is necessary to remember that the superego, by punishing both illicit actions *and* illicit thoughts, will be a harsher disciplinarian than the parents, who only punished the child for improper actions and behaviors. Before the superego had been formed, the young boy could

rest assured that as long as he did not *act* upon the erotic impulse to possess his mother and the aggressive impulse to do away with his father, he was innocent before the bar of judgment. Now, he must also guard against the mere *thought* of lust and aggression. In case he ever forgets that the stakes are significantly higher, that he will be judged for what he does, thinks, and feels, the pangs of a guilty conscience will most certainly jog his memory.

The intrapsychic triumph of culture, whereby a child becomes a self-regulating member of society, comes at a high price: the renunciation of one's deepest desires. True, the ego will soon discover that there are plenty of other things in this world from which to derive a certain amount of pleasure and satisfaction. For example, we may, as children or adults, throw ourselves into imaginative play or creative work, sensing that these experiences will bring us a measure of satisfaction and fulfillment. But, as Freud pointed out, the pleasure we derive from any aim-inhibited and socially approved endeavor will always be of a secondary or sublimatory nature. This is the price we pay for becoming contributing members of human society: we must renounce all pleasure of a primary nature, those deepest desires that would bring us the most intense and satisfying pleasure. In a sense, the ego of every individual must eventually come to know its place in the psychical pecking order, recognizing that it will always be held accountable by the introjected standards and values of the culture, as mediated at first by one's parents and later by the superego.

The superego, which we experience psychically as the conscience, can either be a restraining force intended to keep us in check, as in the case of instinctual renunciation, or a motivating force, inciting us to aim ever higher in our pursuit of the introjected parental and cultural ideals. In either case, the superego can be particularly cruel and demanding. When it comes to the former, the renunciation of our deepest desires, Freud, in total agreement with Shakespeare's Hamlet, believed that "conscience does make cowards of us all. . . ."¹⁴ And yet, human individuals really have no other choice, if they wish to live peaceably and harmoniously together in a state of mutual contentment. "I promise to renounce my most basic and primal sexual and aggressive desires, to refrain from harming or taking advantage of you, my neighbor, if you promise to do the same for me," becomes an unspoken pact or agreement necessary for our collective survival.

In Freudian theory, this quid-pro-quo arrangement is the foundation and cornerstone of human civilization. Nevertheless, what we also discover is that no matter how often we live up to the introjected parental and cultural ideals and values, the superego is never satisfied. Genuine and even

remarkable achievements and accomplishments on our part may seem to be insignificant and trivial, for before we can even begin to bask in the joy of a job well done, the superego has already begun to demand an even higher and greater state of perfection. Freud found the remark of one of Leonardo da Vinci's students illustrative of this state of affairs, when the superego becomes pathologically rigid and inflexible: "[Leonardo] appeared to tremble the whole time he set himself to paint, and yet he never completed any work he had begun, having so high a regard for the greatness of art that he discovered faults in things that to others seemed miracles."¹⁵

■ GENDER ASYMMETRY ■

Freud theorized that the young girl, around the same age, also has to work through and resolve a certain set of oedipal issues, that she, too, becomes triangulated in an intricate web of object relations with her mother and father. It is important to note, however, that prior to 1925, Freud had very little to say, explicitly, about the psychology of girls and women. Even after 1925, when he began to deal more systematically with female psychology and sexuality, Freud was, by and large, making sweeping generalizations about female development derived mostly from his research on boys and men.¹⁶ Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, Freud found himself faced with the daunting challenge of trying to ascertain, in the words of the title of a famous essay, "the anatomical distinction between the sexes." The task seemed rather daunting to Freud because he was applying a masculine theory of human development and sexuality to the study of the sexual life of women, to what he would less than generously refer to as a "dark continent."¹⁷ "Freud," writes Carol Gilligan, "struggled to resolve the contradictions posed for his theory by the differences in female anatomy and the different configuration of the young girl's early family relationships." She continues:

After trying to fit women into his masculine conception, seeing them as envying that which they missed, he came instead to acknowledge, in the strength and persistence of women's pre-Oedipal attachments to their mothers, a developmental difference. He considered this difference in women's development to be responsible for what he saw as women's developmental failure.¹⁸

In Freud's view, what the young girl is bereft and deeply envious of is the male sexual organ. He posited that when the girl discovers that she does

not have a penis, she suddenly becomes consumed with very intense feelings of envy, bitterness, and resentment. These powerful feelings are directed at the person perceived to be responsible for this unhappy predicament: the mother. Up until the oedipal period of development, the mother was for the young girl what she was for the young boy, namely, the most primary and most intense object relation. As we have seen, the boy's love for the mother intensifies during this stage of development, only to later be repressed when the hated father becomes too much of a perceived rival and threat.

Unlike the boy, the young girl does not experience an intensification of love for the mother. Rather, she is deeply resentful of her genital disendowment, and holds her mother personally responsible for this physical state of incompleteness. Moreover, the mother's own lack of genital endowment is confirmation of the suspicion that the mother is solely to blame for this unhappy situation. Thus, the young girl experiences, *during* the oedipal period of development, what the young boy will only experience later, at the *end* of the Oedipus Complex: the loosening of the intense and primary relation with the mother as a love-object. Freud, in one of his definitive essays on the psychology of women, writes that "the situation as a whole is not very clear, but it can be seen that in the end the girl's mother, who sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped, is almost always held responsible for her lack of a penis."¹⁹

The young girl, still smarting from this painful blow to her self-esteem, senses that it is now pointless to look to her mother, or to any other female for that matter, for any meaningful and lasting consolation. Instead, she must, out of necessity, turn her attention in the direction of her father, who alone is in possession of the requisite sexual organ. It is absolutely essential to keep this point in mind, when we turn our attention to Freud's psychology of religion. The young boy, because he is terrified of what the more powerful father might do to him, must turn away from the mother and the hope that she will meet his deepest need for love, affection, and consolation—this he will discover at the *end* of the oedipal period of development. The young girl, however, *already* senses, in the midst of the oedipal conflict, that she cannot turn to the mother for any deep and lasting consolation, because the mother is the source of the girl's pain and bitter disappointment. Therefore, the girl looks to the father for compensatory satisfaction, sensing that although he cannot give her a penis—that is, cannot turn her into a boy—he can at least, as he has done with the mother, give her a penis-substitute, in the form of a baby. Already, we can begin to see the handwriting on the wall, that which will prompt Freud to conclude, "Psycho-analysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it

has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father."²⁰

According to Freud, both boys and girls pass through this triangularly complicated pattern of object relations, known as the Oedipus Complex, roughly between the ages of three and five. And both boys and girls, during this pivotal stage of development, struggle to come to terms with the new and powerfully intense feelings they experience vis-à-vis their parents. But, this is about as far as the similarities go. One could try to make a case for the issue of castration, as an additional point of commonality between the Oedipus Complex of the boy and that of the girl—in both cases, it is a pivotal developmental factor. Yet, while the young boy and the young girl both experience a castration complex, they experience it in decisively different ways. Castration, for the boy, is a perceived threat, something he dreads and lives in fear of, whereas for the girl castration is something she has always and will always have to live with, a *fait accompli*. To put this more succinctly, the crucial ingredient missing from the young girl's oedipal conflict, something she does not share with the boy, is the anticipatory dread of castration. "The difference," writes Freud, "between the sexual development of males and females at the stage we have been considering is an intelligible consequence of the anatomical distinction between their genitals and the psychical situation involved in it; it corresponds to the difference between a castration that has been carried out and one that has merely been threatened."²¹

One cannot overestimate the importance of this difference, between the anticipatory dread of castration and castration as an accomplished fact, for Freud and his theory of gender. The same, as we will soon see, is equally true of Freud and his psychology of religion. The young boy, terrified of being castrated for harboring erotic and aggressive desires, has no choice but to urgently identify with, and introject the values and standards of, his parents. The young girl, on the other hand, lacking a similar anticipatory dread of castration, does not have the same sense of urgency to introject the values of her parents. Since these introjected values of parents and culture become the bedrock and very essence of the child's superego, it only stands to reason that the girl's superego will be weaker and less developed than the boy's. When it comes to the girl's Oedipus Complex, then, the motivation for its dissolution—castration anxiety—is lacking. Unlike the situation of the boy, where we see the Oedipus Complex, as Freud puts it, "smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration," the Oedipus Complex, for the girl, "escapes the fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's normal

mental life.”²² This lack of finality, the fact that the girl's Oedipus Complex has not been smashed to pieces or has not reached a definitive and decisive end, but has instead persisted well into adulthood, simply provides Freud with additional “data” supporting the view that the woman's superego is less developed.

But what, exactly, does it mean to have a weaker and less developed superego? Freud explains it this way:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. The super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in their super-ego. . . .²³

Thus, when it comes to the matter of ethics, morality, and values, the male, according to Freud, is in a position to take the lead, to make sounder judgments more independent of feelings and emotions. Freud, of course, was betraying his rationalistic bias, that the impersonal logic and reason of the male is inherently more valuable and carries more weight than the personal feelings and emotions of women. Consequently, in the social arena, only the opinions of those individuals in possession of a depersonalized superego that is rationally aligned with the standards of culture can be trusted and respected.

What is unfortunate, in terms of Freud's psychosexual theory of development and his conclusions about gender, is that he “painted” with excessively broad brushstrokes: women, who have less moral sense, who are ruled more by their emotions than their intellect, can only “inherit” their morality and values from men. We can already sense where Freud is headed when he takes his next logical and theoretical step: women, in possession of an underdeveloped superego, who must get their morality and values from men, the bearers of a more evolved superego, must, through a similar process of cross-inheritance, get their religion from men. Who, after all, yearns the most for the love and protection of an exalted father/Father? Answer: the male, who almost lost his father's love and protection, if not for the threat of castration.

Freud was well aware of the fact, even in 1925, that various critics were noticing that his psychology of women was formulated from a distinctly masculine point of view. Nevertheless, and this had become something of a recurring pattern, Freud was immovable, unable or unwilling to hear any constructive criticism regardless of the soundness of the opposing argument. For someone who, at least in theory, valued and prized reason and logic above everything else, it is rather ironic that Freud refused to listen to reason, especially with issues that certainly demanded a second look. This, to repeat, was something of a pattern with Freud, something that both supporters and critics alike could expect without fail.

Freud's classic inflexibility can also be seen in his work with phylogenetics, the study of the evolution of the human species, and particularly his unwavering acceptance of Lamarckian theory, the view that human beings are born into this world with inherited or acquired characteristics or traits. In his 1918 paper on the Wolf Man ("From the History of an Infantile Neurosis"), arguably his most famous case study, Freud wrote that "I cannot feel surprised that what was originally produced by certain circumstances in prehistoric times and was then transmitted in the shape of a predisposition to its re-acquirement should, since the same circumstances persist, emerge once more as a concrete event in the experience of the individual."²⁴ This would have been all well and good, if it were not for the fact that even in 1918 biologists, in a spirit of virtual unanimity, had already discredited the Lamarckian theory as untenable. Yet, true to form, Freud would not listen to reason.

While it is not too difficult for those of us living today to see that the Lamarckian theory of inherited traits or characteristics may have important implications for the present study of genetics, it must be remembered that in Freud's day there were few if any good scientific reasons for accepting this theory. Freud, though, remained unfazed. He stubbornly refused to part with this portion of his theory—human beings are born with inherited characteristics—even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Peter Gay, the Freud biographer, puts it this way:

We encounter here . . . one of Freud's most eccentric and least defensible intellectual commitments: Freud accepted a version of the Lamarckian doctrine—most probably encountered in the writings of Darwin, who himself subscribed to that theory in part—that acquired characteristics (in [the case of the Wolf Man] the "memory" of being seduced in childhood or being threatened with castration) can be inherited. Few reputable biologists of the

time were willing to credit, and few analysts felt at all comfortable with, this thesis. But Freud stayed with it.²⁵

In spite of overwhelming evidence that seemingly contradicted Lamarckianism, Freud clung tenaciously to this theory of inherited traits, not because he had other scientific findings that were more conclusive but because he was unwilling to consider any research that might contradict the theory of psychoanalysis. Similarly, when his psychology of women was challenged for its obvious oversights and shortcomings, Freud was equally unyielding. Karen Horney, a contemporary of Freud, and a psychoanalyst, had, as Freud would have known, "asserted a model of women with positive primary feminine qualities and self-valuation, against Freud's model of woman as defective and forever limited." Furthermore, Horney had tied "her critique of both psychoanalytic theory and women's psychology to her recognition of a male-dominant society and culture."²⁶ Still, while acknowledging and even commending the work of the women analysts of his day, Freud, commenting on the female superego, argued that "we must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the sexes as completely equal in position and worth. . . ."²⁷ One could paraphrase Gay and say that although Freud sensed that at the time a growing number of women analysts felt uncomfortable with his psychology of female development, he characteristically clung to it just as he had the Lamarckian theory, refusing to modify it by including the findings of respected colleagues.

At this point, it may appear as if there is plenty of justification for abandoning this study of Freudian theory.²⁸ Freud, it is true, did not always have the most flattering things to say about women. Nor did he attach much importance to the role of women in the development of cultural standards, morals, and values. When Freud, for example, identifies the Oedipus Complex as the origin of religious values and feelings, make no mistake, he is describing the *masculine reactivation* of the Oedipus Complex. The male, with a more developed superego, will play the primary role in the formation of religious faith. As in the case of morality and a sense of justice, the woman will get her religion from the more psychically endowed male, through the process of cross-inheritance. Indeed, there are probably those who wonder why anyone would want to engage Freudian theory more extensively, especially after seeing the way in which he undervalues the psyche of women. Nor is the undervaluation of the psyche limited to women; religious believers, male and female, will receive the same treatment.

We could, quite naturally, simply attribute the undervaluation of female psychology to context, to the time and place in which Freud was living. Freud, as Gay has observed, was hardly alone in conferring on women a second-class status: "Freud was an unreconstructed nineteenth-century gentleman. . . . He never adjusted his old-fashioned manners to a new age. . . ."29 Maybe, but that is not all. As Philip Rieff has pointed out, one cannot excuse Freud's view of women simply on the grounds that it reflects the "culture-prejudice" of his day and age:

A denial of the Freudian psychology of women cannot depend on historical reductions of Freud's own psychology. It is not enough to say that Freud himself reproduced the "masculine protest" characteristic of his time and place. His misogyny, like that of his predecessors, is more than prejudice; it has a vital intellectual function in his system.³⁰

As it stands, we can join one group of feminists and flatly refuse to engage Freud and his theory of gender, because it is, in the opinion of this group, a misogynistic psychology *of* women, devoted to the devaluation of women. Or, we can follow another group of feminists, the group that sees Freud as having constructed a theory *about* women, a theory which, in the words of Judith Van Herik, "shows how gender is humanly produced." Van Herik goes on to say that "what differentiates those who . . . reject Freudian psychology as harmful to women from those who . . . use Freudian theory for feminist purposes is that the latter judge Freud to have created a theory *about* gender asymmetry as well as a gender-asymmetrical theory."³¹ The latter group of feminists, then, adopts a both-and approach to Freudian theory.

To be sure, Freud does in fact deduce from his research that women are less psychically endowed, yet he takes umbrage at his colleague Ernest Jones's suggestion that women are simply *born*, affirming instead that women, to a great extent, are *made* in a particular cultural milieu. Thus, psychoanalytic theory is resistant to our attempts at situating it in a particular pigeonhole. Van Herik, in chapter 4, will make explicit connections between Freud's theory of gender and his psychology of religion. But before getting to the work of the theorists, we must first turn our attention to Freud's psychology of religion proper, which, as we will see, emerges quite naturally from his theory of the Oedipus Complex and the formation of the superego.

■ THE NEED FOR RELIGION ■

As we turn our attention to Freud's theory of religion, we are immediately confronted by a striking paradox. Freud, on the one hand, always spoke disapprovingly of religious faith, dismissing it as inefficacious in the life of the individual and an impediment to the evolution of the human species. And yet, on the other hand, he could not, to his dying day, stop thinking and writing about religion. Indeed, try as best he may, Freud could not banish the thought of religion from his mind. Significant quantities of time and energy were devoted to the study of this "irrelevant" subject, leading to the publication of three books dealing exclusively with the origin of religion (*Totem and Taboo*, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*), other books dealing with religion in part (e.g., *Civilization and Its Discontents*), and numerous essays and letters dealing with the issue of religion either in full or in part. Ana-Maria Rizzuto will have more to say about this paradox when we get to her work in chapter 3. She will argue that a knowledge of Freud's personality, to the extent we are familiar with it, is a fundamental prerequisite to understanding his theorizing on religion.

For now, suffice it to say that Freud's head and heart were split over the issue of religion: while his head and his intellect told him that religious faith was irrelevant or passé, his heart and emotions were telling him something entirely different. Confirmation of this internal "split" or tug-of-war, manifested in Freud's seeming dismissal of religion and his lifelong preoccupation with it, can be seen in Rizzuto's remarkable discovery that "the chronological study of all Freud's writings, from correspondence to published works, reveals that biblical citations occur in most of them and that Freud cites the Bible more frequently than any other source. . . ."³²

What became the central feature of Freud's psychology of religion was that a personal God is nothing more than an exalted father. Freud was convinced that a most intimate connection exists, psychically, between an individual's father-complex and his or her belief in God. In fact, the two, at bottom, are inseparable if not indistinguishable. Freud's bold and declarative statement, that "a personal God is nothing other than an exalted father," can be found in his book on Leonardo da Vinci, written in 1910, but even as early as 1901 he had already concluded that the familiar biblical tenet, "God created man in His own image," should be reversed: "Man created God in his."³³ This tenet in reverse was recorded in the popular book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which gives even the casual reader of psychoanalysis enough

indication of where Freud is headed with his critique of religion. By the end of the book, Freud deduces that the whole history of mythology and religion, including “the myths of paradise and the fall of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality,” can be summed up with a single interpretative word: *projection*. The religious faith of believers, so it seems, amounts to “nothing but psychology projected into the external world. . . .”³⁴ And what, exactly, are human beings projecting out onto the Rorschachian screen of the universe? Freud, in his book on da Vinci, would be more specific: a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than the projection of an exalted image of one’s earthly father.

But what would make human individuals project a psychological representation of the earthly father of childhood into the heavens, creating in their minds an image of a heavenly Father that bears a striking resemblance to an earthly father? For Freud, there is but one answer: human helplessness. As children, we long for the day when we will reach adulthood and, like our parents and other adults, be free of the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. However, as adults know only too well, the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness do not suddenly and magically disappear with the cessation of childhood. True, the fear and turmoil associated with the oedipal period of development is now a thing of the past, yet, with the advent of adolescence and subsequent adulthood, individuals soon discover that new dangers await them, dangers that are every bit as unsettling as the threat of castration. It was Shakespeare who, by way of *King Lear*, reminded us that we human beings, from the day of our birth to the day of our death, are the “poor naked wretches . . . that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm.”³⁵ For the adult, the pitiless storm of the Oedipus Complex, with its accompanying castration anxiety, may have subsided, but now there are new storms that seem infinitely more complicated and threatening. What adults must eventually come to terms with is that something ominous could be lurking around the proverbial corner, like an earthquake or flood, a disease or illness, economic misfortune, or even death itself.

At the end of the Oedipus Complex, it seemed as if the all-powerful father would be able to meet the young boy’s need for safety and security, for the duration of his life. All the boy had to do was abandon the erotic desire to possess the mother and the aggressive desire to eliminate the father, then introject or internalize the parental standards and values, and he would receive his father’s lifetime guarantee of protection. But before too long the child begins to sense that the earthly father is not omnipotent, that the father cannot shield the child from every single threat and danger. Consequently, to recover the fleeting feeling of security, the child must begin to

image a more powerful protector and defender, a defender who is necessarily *suprahuman*. This process of reimagining is similar to the psychological transition that occurs near the end of the oedipal period of development. The child, during the first few years of life, feels safe and secure in the presence of the mother; she is, as it were, the child's initial protection and defense against the dangers of life. Freud observed that

In this way the mother, who satisfies the child's first hunger, becomes its first love-object and certainly also its first protection against all the undefined dangers which threaten it in the external world—its first protection against anxiety, we may say. In this function [of protection] the mother is soon replaced by the stronger father, who retains that position for the rest of childhood.³⁶

According to Freud, once the threat and/or reality of castration enters the developmental picture, the child, male or female, will need to identify with someone more powerful than the mother, someone with the capacity to defend the child against even greater dangers. That someone, of course, is the "stronger father," who, in Freud's words, "retains that position for the rest of childhood." Freud, it must be remembered, always chose his words with the greatest care and precision. When he writes that the stronger father, following the oedipal period, retains the position of protector and defender for the rest of childhood, Freud means just that—for the rest of *childhood*, but not for the rest of one's life. When the great danger of life was the threat of diminished nourishment, the mother was powerful enough to be the child's defender. Then, when the child was faced with a more menacing danger—castration—the psychological image of the mother as protector gave way, out of necessity, to that of the stronger father. Later, when the dangers become even greater, when the threats and storms of adult life suddenly seem of cosmological proportion, the once-powerful father suddenly appears rather diminutive, if not pitiable.

What is needed in the face of graver threats and dangers, like natural disasters, illness, and death is even greater protection and solace, more than an earthly father can supply. We are forced to look beyond our family, even beyond the human race, to a suprahuman divine Power, or, as Freud put it, to "a benevolent Providence which is only seemingly stern and will not suffer us to be a plaything of the overmighty and pitiless forces of nature."³⁷ This benevolent Providence, psychologically molded in the image of its predecessor, the earthly father, is subsequently transformed into a stronger and

more exalted Defender, who takes over the function of protection. To summarize, when it comes to the psychological function of protection, the mother of the preoedipal years is replaced by the stronger father of the oedipal years who himself is replaced by an even stronger benevolent Providence, who retains that position for the rest of the individual's life.

Paul Ricoeur, as we will see in chapter 2, argues that Freud is most convincing when he links the need for religion with the feeling of perpetual helplessness. In fact, Ricoeur goes so far as to say that anytime human individuals willingly subject themselves to the accusations and chastisements of an exacting Providence, their personal God, in this particular instance, is little more than the exalted father of the Oedipus Complex. To put this another way, Freudian theory, according to Ricoeur, has quite a bit of explanatory or interpretative power, anytime the human individual tolerates or even gladly accepts the moral condemnation of a punishing God instead of facing an existence that is unprotected and unconsolated. The only problem is that Freud extends this interpretation across the board, as if every religious believer is somehow arrested, emotionally and spiritually, at the oedipal stage of development. We cannot help but be puzzled at how Freud could unilaterally assume that the danger of castration, from which we need a father's protection, is infinitely more threatening than the danger of diminished nourishment and sustenance, which we first receive from a mother.

To return to Rolland's point, might not religious faith represent, at certain times, something of a regression to a *preoedipal* stage of development, to that oceanic feeling of universal oneness with the mother when we were physically and emotionally nourished by a single source? If so, religious faith would then represent, at least in part, either a regression to the state of original oneness with the preoedipal mother or a regression to the psychological space between the "me" and the "not me," otherwise known as the transitional space. As object relations theorists, including Rizzuto, maintain, either way the psychological roots of religious faith are *not* in the oedipal period of development. Moreover, if it is established that an individual's religious faith has a preoedipal origin, we would need to determine if that faith is the manifestation of a *healthy* regression or the return to a more unified state of existence that preceded the turbulent and fragmentizing years of oedipal development.

In any case, it was Freud's firm conviction that "biologically speaking, religiousness is to be traced to the small human child's long-drawn-out helplessness and need of help; and when at a later date he perceives how truly forlorn and weak he is when confronted with the great forces of life, he feels his condition as he did in childhood, and attempts to deny his own respon-