

Review

by

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Rancour-Laferriere, D. (2002). *The Joy of All Who Sorrow: Icons of the Mother of God in Russia: Traditsiya Pochitaniya Ikon Bogomateri V Rossii Glazami Amerikanskogo Psikhoanalitika*. English and Russian, hardcover, 352 pages, with 28 Colour Illustrations. Moscow: Lodomir Publishing House. \$57.00. ISBN-10: 5944510390; ISBN-13: 978-5944510396.

This is a visually beautiful book (containing 28 color-plate illustrations of icons and related photographs) that provides a wealth of information regarding the worship of icons of the Mother of God in Russia. In addition to reviewing its history and theology, Rancour-Laferriere presents his empirical observations of icon veneration. While this descriptive scholarship is of considerable interest, the author's approach to psychoanalytic interpretation is problematic in many respects.

In *The Future of An Illusion*, Freud (1927) distinguishes between *illusion*, a belief that, while neither validated nor invalidated scientifically, is accepted as true because one wishes it to be so, and *delusion*, a belief that is embraced despite the fact that it is known scientifically to be false. Although in *Future* he describes religion as illusion, only three years later, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud abandons this distinction, without explaining his reasons for doing so, and refers to religion as delusion.

Since the existence of God, defined in the orthodox sense as an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent supernatural being, can neither be proven nor disproven by science, both theism, the claim that God exists, and atheism, the claim that God does *not* exist, are rationally and scientifically insupportable. Both are grounded in subjective wish rather than objective evidence and, hence, both qualify as illusions in Freud's sense.

The only rational, scientifically supportable, non-illusory position with respect to the existence of a supernatural God is agnosticism: the acknowledgement of one's inability to know whether such a God exists or not. In abandoning his earlier view of belief in God as wishful illusion and viewing it as delusion, Freud embraces atheism, the unscientific claim that God does not exist. Since such atheism is a belief based on subjective rather than objective grounds, it qualifies, by Freud's own definition, as an illusion.

Interpretations of the "God" signifier in non-supernatural, metaphoric or virtual terms, as in demythologizing, "religionless," existentialist versions of Christianity, are, of course, outside of the domain of this argument which only applies to the question of the existence or non-existence of a supernatural God.

Rancour-Laferriere proudly embraces reason and scientific empiricism, approaching the

study of icon veneration like a cultural anthropologist, referring to his field notes and offering a chart in which he distinguishes and counts the various gestures he observes venerationers making before icons:

Table I. Selected Veneration Sequences. C – lights candle; X – makes sign of the cross; B – bows before icon; P – falls prostrate before icon; N – kneels before icon; K – kisses icon; F – taps forehead against icon; , – transition to another act; ,, – pauses between acts; W – walks away from icon.

At the same time, the author declares himself an atheist, apparently unaware of or at least unconcerned about the irrationality of this position, and fails entirely to address Freud's inconsistency with respect to religion as illusion or delusion.

Rancour-Laferriere uncritically accepts Freud's untenable distinction between art and religion in which, while artistic illusion merely embellishes reality, religion falsifies it:

If I tell an educated Orthodox person that Anna Karenina does not exist, that she was merely invented by a famous novelist, there is usually no objection. But if I tell this same Orthodox person that God does not exist, I will be sure to encounter strenuous objections. Religion is not merely a literary narrative (the Bible), or a musical composition (religious chant), or a painting (an icon). Religion, although just as illusory as any work of art, is also a system of beliefs about objective reality. As such it moves beyond the realm of illusion and into the realm of potential collective delusion. The readers of Tolstoy's great novel are not deluding themselves, but readers of the Bible may well be. Religion would not be religion without the possibility of delusion.

For Freud (and Rancour-Laferriere), art is a creative and adaptive sublimation, while religion is a defensive and maladaptive maneuver. While there is no doubt that fundamentalist and literalistic forms of religion fit this model, what it ignores are non-literalistic, creative and adaptive forms of religion, as well as literalistic and maladaptive uses of art. As Forster and Carveth (1999) have pointed out:

The history of censorship of art and literature attests to the failure of many to grasp the illusory nature of art in just the same way that many have so failed in regard to religion. Although he recognized the virtual quality of art, Freud failed to appreciate virtuality in religion and to understand that religion too can be held as paradox and not merely as a literalistic representation of and/or prescription for reality. He did not distinguish between infantile and mature forms of either religion or art, erring in favour of art and against religion, and this failure colored his subsequent investigations.

So dogmatic is Rancour-Laferriere with respect to his equation of psychoanalysis and

atheism, and so closed to the possibility of creative, sublimated and virtual forms of religion, that when he encounters a religious analyst he is convinced he cannot really be a psychoanalyst at all:

I recall a visit to the Holy Trinity Monastery of Saint Sergei in Sergiev Posad several years ago. With me was a Russian psychiatrist friend (who will remain unnamed). At the time this friend was treating some of his patients by psychoanalytic methods, and in our conversations he characterized himself as a “psychoanalyst.” But I noticed, as we entered the monastery, that he purchased some candles. Then, when we reached the famous Chapel over the Well, he entered it, bowed before an icon, made a sign of the cross, and lit a candle before the icon. Astonished, I watched him repeatedly bow and make the sign of the cross before the icon. This man was clearly an Orthodox believer, and so I felt obliged to conclude that he was not also a “psychoanalyst.” At least he had not taken his psychoanalytic knowledge to the point of applying it to his own world-view.

While Rancour-Laferriere, following Winnicott, appears sympathetic toward the human need for illusions, arguing that “Religion falls away only naturally—if it falls away at all—and only in those who are ready for a new and different set of illusions,” one suspects such sympathy is more a matter of lip service than of substance, for he fails to raise the question of the illusory (i.e., religious) nature of Marxist and Freudian atheism. His own embrace of atheism and a kind of positivism displays the dogmatism, the either/or thinking, the lack of nuance and subtlety that characterize the true believer. Although one cannot know without having had the opportunity to psychoanalyze the author, at times one wonders whether he clings to this substitute dogma as a distancing defense against a profound attraction to the religious illusions he dissects.

Rancour-Laferriere writes insightfully about the functioning of icons “as a kind of supplementary superego within the context of the peasant hut. To sin in their presence was to experience a greater sense of guilt, or shame, than to sin in their absence.” Later in the text, pondering the psychology of yet another analyst who is also religious in some sense, the author finally manages, despite his bias, to raise a crucial question:

... atheist Sigmund Freud viewed religion as a neurosis amenable to therapy, yet might religion itself also be therapeutic? Much has been done in the areas of “poetry therapy,” “art therapy,” “dance therapy,” and so on, but could there be such a thing as “religion therapy,” or even “icon therapy?” Can religious belief itself promote mental health?

Rancour-Laferriere seems unaware of the extensive literature that, without in any way denying the pathological potentials of religion, at the same time demonstrates the role it often plays in promoting psychological survival, healing and well-being. But, he concludes reductively, even if it can promote healing, it does this on a delusional basis: “Icon therapy is real, even though it depends on a delusion, namely, the collective-

endorsed delusion of presence.”

As might be expected, Rancour-Laferriere’s discussion of the central role of images of the Mother of God, more specifically of the Mother and Child, in the matrifocal culture of Russia mostly reduces the psychology involved to childishness: “the one who venerates an icon of the Mother of God is regressing to an infantile, pre-Oedipal position where there was still a belief in the omnipotent maternal object.” Although he describes the religious person’s capacity to regress in this way as “a great gift” that “makes the anxieties and pains of adult life more bearable,” it is nevertheless regressive, infantile, magical, and ultimately masochistic:

One of the undeniable attractions of the Mother of God to her Russian venerated is that she suffers. In this she resembles the venerated themselves, who most often approach her in time of need, that is, when they themselves are suffering. In this she also resembles her son, who after all is believed to have suffered in so special a fashion as to have “saved” humankind by his suffering and death on the cross. Psychoanalytically put, Christ and his mother share the feature of moral masochism, for they are both represented as voluntarily suffering victims, as willingly humiliated slaves.

Central to Rancour-Laferriere’s argument is his definition of Christianity as “the ascription of redemptive value to Christ’s model masochism”:

That Christ’s behavior constituted what psychoanalysts refer to as masochism is clear from a contemporary psychoanalytic definition of the term: “any behavioral act, verbalization, or fantasy that—by unconscious design—is physically or psychically injurious to oneself, self-defeating, humiliating, or unduly self-sacrificing.”

Although the Christian narrative, imagery and symbolism of self-sacrifice can certainly be employed in masochistic ways, it is as if the author can only conceive of the willing acceptance of pain and even death for the sake of others as pathological. He appears to lose sight of the willing endurance of pain by mothers in childbirth and the sacrificial suffering we all accept on behalf of our children, our loved ones, even our countries. In fact, psychological health requires acceptance of the unavoidable suffering that is a part of the human condition; it entails, as Bion understood, revisiting and reversing the decision that lies at the root of neurosis: the decision to avoid existential pain. The way out of neurotic suffering is the acceptance of the non-neurotic, existential suffering it evades.

Unlike Rancour-Laferriere, Freud understood the necessity for self-sacrifice. He regarded the renunciation of primitive instinct as a requirement of becoming a civilized adult; and he celebrated the sacrifice of narcissism in favor of object love: “for in the last resort we must begin to love in order that we may not fall ill, and must fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we cannot love” (*On Narcissism*, 1914). His attitude toward scientific reason

is that it entails the discipline of willing submission to facts that may painfully contradict our wishes, the sacrifice of egocentrism entailed in the decentering brought about by the blows to human narcissism delivered by Copernicus and Galileo, by Darwin, and by Freud himself. Resolution of the Oedipus complex entails surrendering the incestuously desired object out of love, as well as fear, of the rival, despite competitive envy and hate. “Not my will but thy will be done” says the child, as he surrenders to the laws of civilized life. The fact that the Christian myth has widely been literalized and exploited sado-masochistically does not mean that, at the same time, its symbolism has not addressed aspects of the human condition all-too-often obscured or overlooked by secular ideologies—such as the essential self-sacrificial dimension of maturity and psychological health.

There is no denying that Christianity offers wonderful opportunities for the enactment of masochistic psychopathology, but the reductionism that conceives of it exclusively in these terms is simply unacceptable as psychoanalytic scholarship at this juncture in the development of the discipline. For many years scholars in the fields of applied psychoanalysis and psychohistory have struggled to transcend the crude reductionism of early work, including works by Freud himself, that have given these perspectives a bad name among scholars sensitive to the complexity, multiple determinants, multiple functions and multiple meanings of human cultural productions. While the Christian myth is certainly open to sado-masochistic exploitation, as in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (see Carveth 2005 for a critique), can any symbolism hope to better represent Winnicott’s notion of surrender of the false self as a requirement for the rebirth of the true self than the myth of the death and resurrection of Christ? Can any symbolism hope to better capture the agony clinical psychoanalysts witness daily on our couches than that of the Stations of the Cross?

At one point in his text, Rancour-Laferriere appears to approach this insight: “Life is, after all, a Golgotha, says Tarabukin. But a Golgotha accepted leads to resurrection and everlasting life, so perhaps the suffering is not suffering-for-suffering’s sake, perhaps it is not masochistic after all.” But this line of thought is abruptly dropped in favor of a critique of Nikolai Tarabukin’s attitudes. Even if it had been pursued, Rancour-Laferriere would likely have linked it to literalistic supernatural belief in a life to come, rather than viewing it as symbolic of the sort of resurrection from a neurotic death-in-life to a healthier life-through-death-of-the-narcissistic-ego, through “acceptance of castration” (read crucifixion), that psychoanalysts (Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Bion and Lacan most explicitly) have described.

References

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Brief Bio

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