
Freud's Flawed Philosophy of Religion: A Reply to Rempel

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In "Understanding Freud's Philosophy of Religion," Rempel (1997) argues that "the less Freud engages in highly speculative religious anthropology and historical biography [as in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*] and the more he grounds his critique firmly in the powerful insights psychoanalysis affords us for the study of the *psychology* [his emphasis] of religion, the better" (p. 222). I wish to argue precisely the contrary: that Freud's anti-religious--or, as Rempel himself points out, essentially anti-Christian, even anti-Catholic--theories are seriously flawed precisely as *psychoanalytic* psychology.

Rempel acknowledges that Freud was incorrect to advertise his theory in this field as a theory of religion in general, in that "it is not so much a critique of religion per se, but a critique of Christianity, especially modern European Catholicism"; he states that "Freud's failure to accurately define the scope of his critique does serve to undermine the proposed universalizability of a number of his claims (as we saw with respect to the absence of both ritual and a dominant father-figure in certain Eastern religious traditions)." Rempel also points out that "Compared to his treatment of what he once tellingly termed 'my real enemy, the Roman Catholic Church' ..., Judaism, for example, is treated with veritable kid gloves" (p. 236).

But there is another type of overgeneralization inherent in Freud's theory of religion (beyond its inapplicability to non-theistic religions such as Buddhism) arising from Freud's failure to utilize his own psychoanalytic concepts of *overdetermination* and *epigenesis* (Erikson, 1959) and such related methodological principles as those of *multiple function* (Waelder, 1930) and *secondary autonomy* (Hartmann, 1939) in this field. The result is a failure to distinguish different manifestations of religious faith and practice on distinctly different levels of drive (libidinal and aggressive), structural (ego and superego) and internal object-relational (psychotic, borderline, neurotic/normal) organization in different individuals, and the

multiple functions served by religion on different psychic levels in any one person. Just as psychoanalysts (as distinct from psychiatrists) do not diagnose from the external symptom picture but from the level of personality organization within which the same overt symptoms take on very different meanings and perform very different functions, so in their approach to religion modern psychoanalysts are obliged to recognize that apparently similar religious beliefs and practices mean very different things and perform very different functions for different people, and also that the same beliefs and practices may signify quite differently on different psychic levels in any one person.

Since Freud's original introduction of the libido theory and the oral, anal, phallic- oedipal, latency and genital stages--and Erikson's extension of these to later stages of the life cycle and Anna Freud's (1963) addition, beyond the psychosexual, of a wide range of other "development lines" (such as the stages of ego, superego and object- relational development, among others), psychoanalysis has been committed to distinguishing different manifestations of the same psychic phenomena associated with different stages of development and reflecting different levels of "fixation" and "regression." Even from a strictly classical as distinct from a modern psychoanalytic standpoint, Freud's theory of religion as illusory gratification of unconscious infantile wishes for a father's (why not a mother's?) protection and/or to archaic longings to reestablish the (alleged) oceanic bliss of primary narcissism is deficient and reductive due to its failure to distinguish oral religion from anal, phallic, oedipal, latency and genital religion.

Parenthetically, any psychoanalytic account of atheism and agnosticism must also respect such differences in levels of fixation and regression. For just as an individual's religion may reflect orally regressive wishes to be fed by an all-good, nurturing object, so the atheist's refusal to "swallow" such "poison" may be equally grounded in oral conflicts. At the very least and to shift from a Freudian to a Kleinian perspective, it is essential in the psychoanalysis of religion (as in the psychoanalysis of irreligion or anything else) to distinguish religion on the level of PS (the paranoid-schizoid position) from religion on the level of D (depressive position). Until the relatively recent work of analytic writers such as Rizzuto (1979) and Meissner (1984) who, among others, have brought psychoanalytic developmental psychology to bear in the understanding of religion, non-psychoanalytic psychologists have tended to do a better job than psychoanalysts in applying epigenetic thinking in this field--see, for

example, James Fowler's (1981) work on the *Stages of Faith* or the "faith journey" in this connection.

While Rempel's paper provides a concise overview of Freud's thinking in this area, its critique of the critique of Freud's views offered by Rizzuto and Meissner is highly problematic. For example, in response to Rizzuto's (1979) statement that asking a believer to renounce his or her faith is tantamount to "wrenching a child from his teddy bear" (p. 209), Rempel writes that "Freud ... made precisely the same point: ... 'A man who has been taking sleeping draughts for tens of years is naturally unable to sleep if his draught is taken away from him'" (p. 225). But, of course, it is not the same point at all. A child's developmentally normal attachment to its transitional object is not comparable to an adult's abnormal addiction to a drug. It is the blurring of such distinctions, as well as a more general incomprehension of the role of developmental and diagnostic thinking in both classical and modern psychoanalysis, that renders Rempel guilty of the very charge of reductionism against which his paper seeks to defend Freud.

Offering "what I take to be a Freudian response to the object-relational insights of Meissner" (p. 228) Rempel rejects Meissner's distinction between mature and immature varieties of faith and practice, together with the claim that "religious ritual points to underlying pathology if, and only if, religious objects and practices begin to take on magical qualities that pervert what Meissner ... refers to as their original 'authentic religious impulse and meaning'" (p. 227). Rempel writes:

The most obvious difficulty of this argument is the very real but essentially ignored issue of precisely *when* one may be said to cross the line, when praying the rosary for example, from so called "authentic" meaning to the realm of the magical? And just how much of a "magical" component is Meissner willing to tolerate in a religious belief system before he declares it maladaptive? One percent? Fifty percent? ... The impossibly delicate distinction--so important to those wishing to rescue what Freud calls *illusion*--between ... the 'normally religious' and the 'pathologically religious' ... is deeply problematic by its very nature (p. 228).

But what Rempel fails to grasp is that distinctions of the type that he regards as "impossibly delicate" and "deeply problematic" are fundamental to the entire theory and practice of both classical Freudian and post-

Freudian psychoanalysis. There is no fundamental difference between the attempt to distinguish normal and pathological in any domain of mental life and the attempt to do so in the religious domain--and yet psychoanalysis has always sought to distinguish between neurosis and psychosis (Freud himself devoted several papers to this topic), or to discriminate neurotic, borderline and psychotic levels of personality organization, or to differentiate mental phenomena on the level of PS from those on the level of D. One need not minimize the difficulties inherent in such psychodiagnostic distinctions, and in efforts to understand the levels of fixation and regression at work in various pathologies, to acknowledge the centrality for psychoanalysis in general of the very type of distinction Rempel dismisses as "impossibly delicate" and "deeply problematic" in the psychoanalysis of religion.

Writing of Meissner's distinctions between "what *he* considers 'primitive' and 'mature' forms of religious experience ... and between so-called authentic mystical experiences and merely 'pseudomystical' ... ones" (p. 228), Rempel argues that:

the entire issue of one believer's "genuine" mysticism being another's pseudomysticism is not addressed. Freud of course interprets all such attempts to safeguard religion X, practice Y, or experience Z as "normal" or "authentic" while at the same time declaring *this* observance or *that* form of piety to be pathological or inauthentic, as ultimately meaningless, unworkable, and self-serving. The very notion of reality-testing, so foundational to Freud's career-long "education to reality," simply collapses under the weight of all such attempted distinctions (p. 228).

But, of course, if such distinctions are disallowed in the field of the psychoanalysis of religion, then they must equally be disallowed in clinical psychoanalysis and, therefore, we shall have to abandon efforts to distinguish the normal and the pathological, the authentic and the inauthentic, the mature and the immature, in every domain of mental life. This would certainly have troubled Freud himself. Even his concept of reality-testing, which Rempel appears to approve, would be undermined, for Freud's own approach to making the distinctions Rempel claims to be "impossibly delicate" concerns relative degrees of success or failure of reality-testing in normal and pathological conditions.

Ironically, Freud's and Rempel's own argument against religion rests upon

the very psychodiagnostic distinctions Rempel rejects: religion is rejected because it allegedly impairs the reality-testing function of the ego. On the other hand, religion that does *not* appear to impair the reality-testing function--i.e., secondary process religion--is dismissed as not really being religion at all for it "often bears *very* little semblance to either biblical Christianity, or the understanding of the vast majority of the faithful, for whom religious belief has very little to do with so-called secondary processes, but is chiefly an emotive phenomenon addressing very primitive human wants" (p. 234). (Does Rempel's reference to "so-called" secondary processes entail skepticism regarding yet another "impossibly delicate" distinction, that between primary and secondary processes, perhaps forgetting that this is Freud's own distinction and one that is central to his own most fundamental understanding of the human mind?)

Let us be clear about the form of Rempel's (Freud's) argument: religion is a primary process affair that impairs reality-testing and any "religion" that is significantly a secondary process affair and that does not impair reality testing is, by definition, not really religion and therefore doesn't count against the theory. Aside from the tautological and self-confirming circularity of this argument, it is worth noting that it relies upon the very distinction between "authentic" and "inauthentic" religion that Freud and Rempel reject in the hands of religion's friends but, rather self-servingly, employ freely as its enemies.

"Indeed," Rempel writes, "some of *The Future of An Illusion's* greatest contempt is reserved for such 'secondary process' religionists, those guilty of erecting ingeniously elaborate, often self-serving superstructures atop the apparently simple foundation of Jesus'[s] message" (p. 234). By this logic, Jesus's message has to be "simple"--and I suppose Jesus has to be a "simpleton"?--for this message to qualify as religious! In this way virtually the entire body of contemporary theology is dismissed as "inauthentic religion," even while the distinction between "authentic" and "inauthentic" religion--in the hands of Meissner at least--is rejected.

Whatever their stance on "the religious question" happens to be, psychoanalysts and scholarly friends of psychoanalysis should do their utmost to dispell the stereotypical association of psychoanalytic scholarship with the genetic fallacy and with reductionism. In the field of religious studies, an applied psychoanalysis must keep its principles of epigenesis, sublimation, multiple function, neutralization and secondary autonomy uppermost in mind. In this way, we may succeed in producing a nuanced

and sophisticated psychology capable of distinguishing mature from immature varieties of belief and unbelief--rather than one that demonstrates through its reductionism that it belongs in the category of the latter.

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