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Editor

# Changing the Scientific Study of Religion: Beyond Freud?

Theoretical, Empirical and Clinical Studies  
from Psychoanalytic Perspectives

 Springer

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# Past Freud – Beyond Freud?

## On Progress in the Psychoanalytic Psychology of Religion

Jacob A. Belzen

In 1907 Freud published his first article on religion, thereby inaugurating the psychoanalytic psychology of religion, a part of the psychology of religion that until now has inspired more contributions than any other approach and which is even often identified with the psychology of religion as a whole by the wider public. (To give just a small indication merely of the quantitative importance of the psychoanalytic school: more than a third of the unsurpassed survey of ‘classic and contemporary views’ in the psychology of religion compiled by Wulff (1997a) is devoted to psychodynamic approaches.) The psychoanalytic psychology of religion has become so encompassing that it is now usual to distinguish several factions; these cannot all be discussed here. And since quite a few historical surveys are now available (Wulff, 1997a; Vandermeersch and Westerink, 2007) this introduction will take a different course: more or less inspired by viewpoints from the theory of science, it will pose the critical-sounding question whether and to what extent progress has taken place during one century of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion.

To answer that question comprehensively would take a full book (or maybe a series of books) dealing with the entire history of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion. The framework of an introductory chapter allows for no more than some explorations. We will, as it were, take a walk through a wide field, and as we go along point to some features in the landscape that may or even should be discussed for the purposes of more detailed research. To get a view of what the psychoanalytic psychology of religion has attained I will critically examine five points of possible progress: (1) there is a purer understanding of what Freud has said about religion; (2) there is a clearer view of the reach of the approach initiated by him; (3) this approach has been made more precise in some respects; (4) the psychoanalytic psychology of religion has recently found corroboration from an unexpected source; (5) a remarkable proliferation of psychoanalytic viewpoints has taken place in the study of religion.

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Among other things, I will discuss the idea that religion is projection, an idea that is often alleged to have originated in psychoanalysis (cf. Vandermeersch and Westerink, 2007, p. 159). Only recently the editor of an excellent volume on religion and psychoanalysis summarized Freud's psychology of religion as follows: "religion is made up of nothing but fantasy and a projection of our wishes and fears into the heavens" (Black, 2006, p. 63). We will see if and to what measure this is correct. But again, in doing so I do not intend to offer a narrative history of the idea of "religion as projection." Nor will a historical survey be offered of the whole field that stretches between the poles "psychoanalysis" and "religion." I will merely attempt to extend the question about the progress in the psychoanalytic psychology of religion in such a way as to apply it to the aforementioned idea as well: for example, what are the present views on the idea of religion as projection; is it a valid idea, and if so, in what sense; if not, in what other way should it be understood – if it is to be taken seriously at all? The answer to these questions will turn out to be fairly representative of the answers to similar questions that may more generally be asked after 100 years of work in the psychology of religion.

## **Freud on Religion**

### ***Shortcomings in the Freud Reception***

To Freud, father of both psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic psychology of religion, are attributed quite a number of critical interpretations of religion: according to Freud, religion is no more than wishful thinking, projection, illusion, neurosis and what not (Banks, 1973, p. 402). While this article does not aim to give yet another explanation of Freud's exact opinions on these points, it is important to note – as is usual in these sorts of cases – that matters are far more complicated than the one-liners, even those popular among psychologists (of religion), suggest. To give just one example: in his very first article on the psychology of religion, from 1907, Freud nowhere claims that religion "as such" is a neurosis, a pathological affliction or morbid product of anyone's mental functioning (Freud, 1907/1941). What he does say, is, briefly, the following: on the grounds of the rigidity characteristic of both neurotic behavior and religious rituals he draws a methodical comparison between the two. He does not equate them; on the contrary, in this very article can be found the statement that religiosity, the being involved in religion at the level of the individual, may well prevent a neurosis from developing. Nor does Freud say anywhere in his numerous other publications that being religious might or should be equated with being neurotic, or even count as an indication of the latter. If we look at his case studies of individual pathologies we will find that there, too, Freud does not consider a patient's religiosity a pathological phenomenon. In his study of a seventeenth-century case of "possession," for example, Freud does not declare the person involved to be ill because he is religious, not even because he considers himself possessed (Freud, 1923/1973). Freud does show that the painter Haitzmann was

a severe neurotic and that his neurosis manifested itself in, among other things, his way of being religious. Comparing Freud's texts on religion and neurosis may well lead to the following conclusion: being religious may promote a person's individual mental functioning and may help prohibit a neurosis, even though in individual cases the psychological structuring of the religiosity still needs to be examined.<sup>1</sup>

To avoid misunderstanding, and in all fairness, it must be immediately added that even though Freud would not have denied this last proposition, he never actually wrote it down in this literal form. The picture that emerges from Freud's published work and scattered remarks on religion is definitely not that of someone intent on writing with sympathy about religion, nor of someone who takes the trouble to treat it as carefully as possible. In fact the opposite is the case: nowhere does Freud hide his opinion that he is not at all enthusiastic about religion; he even thinks that what is promulgated by religion is simply wrong and untrue. Religion proclaims things about reality that science has shown to be wrong; in Freud's view it is science, not religion, that gives us reliable knowledge. (And he places so much confidence in science, in human rationality, that he goes so far as to call it "our god," Freud, 1927/1948.) We must therefore make a sharp distinction between Freud's opinions on religion at, let's say, the macro and micro levels, between his views on religion as system of practices and (above all) convictions, and his views on religion at the level of the individual. We might term the former his ontological (or if you like, religious) views, the latter his scientific-psychological views. As far as the former are concerned, Freud regarded religion as wrong. He did not "believe" in the content of religion. In the case of the latter Freud limited himself to making pronouncements about the role of individual religiosity as a part of a person's whole psychodynamics. One should not lose sight of these nuances: for Freud, the fact that somebody is religious does not mean that that person is mentally ill or deranged in any way. Even when an individual has bizarre religious views or demonstrates bizarre faith practices, this does not mean that being religious as such is "insane" or that religion as such is madness (or even nonsense). But, as Freud would say, neither should one draw the opposite conclusion: the fact that faith enables somebody to deal with life may be a good thing, but it is no indication of its value or its truth. In Freud's eyes (natural) science has proved to be the only reliable road to truth; things incompatible with that science are wrong and doomed to disappear. For that reason Freud – like Comte, the founder of positivism, before him – thought that religion was an outdated stage in humanity's development, a stage whose origin and role are explicable but which is now, thanks to science, "superseded" and ready to be left behind. Just as children may have many neurotic features that they, as it were, "automatically" grow out of, religion is a phase that humankind will outgrow;

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<sup>1</sup> One also finds this view in the most recent literature. Pargament, one of the best-known modern researchers in the field, arrived at the conclusion: "Questions about the general efficacy of religion should give way to the more difficult but more appropriate question, How helpful or harmful are particular forms of religious expression for particular people dealing with particular situations in particular social contexts according to particular criteria of helpfulness or harmfulness?" (2002, p. 168).

not overcoming it would certainly constitute something like a neurosis at the level of humanity as a whole. Or put in still other words: religion is wrong, according to Freud, even though at the individual level it may well be that the religious life should be valued positively in its psychological respect, since a person may find in religion strength, comfort, social embedment, inspiration and much more. (And conversely, it must be repeated, one should not draw any invalid conclusions from this: the fact that faith gives strength, etc., is wonderful, but it would be even better to derive such strength from science, which is so much superior to any form of religion whatsoever. Despite all the nuances that can be found in Freud's work on religion, his basic attitude is negative: he did not "believe" in religion, yet he did believe in science.)<sup>2</sup>

The critical reader may wonder whether, even according to Freud's own criteria, "believing in science" might not be psychodynamically structured in the same way as someone else's "believing in god" (or whatever form of religion is involved). In other words: is not the whole account of religion *mutatis mutandis* applicable to science as well? Basically this is indeed the case. When Freud remarks about religion that it is an "illusion" (Freud, 1927/1948) he does not primarily mean by that that it is nonsense, something in flat contradiction to for example intersubjectively verifiable "facts." Freud calls faith an illusion because it typically has the character of the wishes of which in part it is a consequence. Because wishes are at the basis of faith, it is an illusion, not because it is deception or untruth. The critic will immediately reply: could not the same be true of scientific accounts of things? Freud admitted this: in principle, scientific views could also be based on a wish, which would be responsible for the similar illusory nature of scientific knowledge. But this would only be the case "in principle." According to Freud's positivistic and fairly outdated views on science, wishes play no part in it; science is a purely rational process (and astonishingly many philosophers of science still cling to a similar viewpoint and reject as nonsensical such disciplines as the history of science and even more so the sociology and psychology of science . . .). But even in Freud's book in which he calls religion an illusion (Freud, 1927/1948), his reasoning is more nuanced than is suggested by the well-known one-liners that pretend to sum up his opinion. In any case one returns to the same point: it is not as a psychologist that Freud objects so much to religion (in his view it is not a delusion) but rather as a "thinking person," somebody with a certain (irreligious, even antireligious) take on life and the world. That religion contains "illusion" is not a final counterargument. "Illusion" can be found everywhere except in science, and therefore science is superior to all other ways of thinking; science will progress beyond all of them, including religion. Freud was an unflinching adherent of scientism.

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<sup>2</sup> His followers would rather quickly lose sight of these nuances: while Jung and his school would develop a great interest in religion, an interest that, though positive, also led to a contamination of religion and psychology (Vandermeersch, 1974/1991), the first generations of "Freudians" would be largely antireligious, sometimes so violently (or often without nuance) that patients who adhered to some form of religious practice were regarded as insufficiently (psycho)analyzed. But later on things changed, cf. later.

## ***Religion as Projection?***

If we were to take the trouble to present a precise exegesis, our findings would be confirmed regarding the idea of “religion as projection”: Freud himself is much more nuanced than he is generally said to be. A few remarks about this will suffice. Contrary to what authors such as Black (2006), whom we already quoted, but also Banks (1973) maintain, Freud nowhere said that religion *tout court* was (a matter of) projection. That thesis should rather be ascribed to Feuerbach: according to the Feuerbach of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, god is an objectified externalization of the essence of human nature (Feuerbach, 1841/1957). Freud nowhere says this or anything even remotely similar. In only one place does Freud talk about projection in a context that has to do with religion. But it must immediately be added that the relevant chapter from *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (Freud, 1901/1962, pp. 287–288) deals with superstition, and that Freud talks about “myths” literally, not about religion as such. (Freud discussed religion many times in other places, but without using the notion of projection to analyze it.) The line from Feuerbach to Freud, if such can be identified, has often been presented as if Freud had provided an empirical–psychological foundation for the thesis on the essence of religion already put forth by Feuerbach. It may well be asked, however, whether this view is correct and whether Freud himself saw it that way too.

For a start, projection is one of those concepts from psychoanalysis that have remained unclear (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1972); Freud had already admitted this and expressed his intention to devote a special study to it (Freud, 1911/1964, p. 66), which however never appeared. In general one would probably have to deny that religion is a matter of projection. Despite the obscurity of the concept it can still be maintained that projection is a mental operation in which the subject denies “something” of himself (qualities, feelings, wishes) and ascribes it to someone or something else. (The best known example is hate: one denies the hate in oneself and ascribes it to others, which in an extreme form can be perceived in paranoia, for example, but equally in non-clinical situations such as prejudices, conflicts, discrimination, etc.) To say, for instance, that in the individual image of god various qualities of the subject’s own father are projected onto god, then this is wrongly formulated: according to the psychoanalytic conceptual framework, what one means is not projection but *transference*. In any case, religion as an extraordinarily complex and multiform element of culture cannot be called a projection; god might possibly be regarded as a projection but is not designated as such by Freud. As already indicated, Freud merely links (outdated) myths to projection, but only very casually, in an early publication and in a way that is hardly technical–psychoanalytical yet.

Next, one should keep in mind here the nuance – ambivalence would be another good term – in Freud’s text itself. With his psychoanalysis Freud developed a sound form of individual psychology (psychology dealing with individuals) that has been widely accepted in many different types of clinical practice and care. (Although psychoanalysis as a treatment is no longer found very often, it remains true that modern psychotherapy and clinical psychology, in all their diverse forms, would be unthinkable without the many different insights and techniques derived from



psychoanalysis.) Freud, however, was at least equally interested in questions that far surpass the level of the individual, questions concerning art and literature, society and culture. Though many introductions to psychoanalysis fail to mention it and many psychoanalysts are ignorant of it, Freud was an important theoretician of culture. (It is therefore striking that nowadays his theories are taught more extensively at faculties of letters, humanities and the like than at those of psychology and psychiatry.) His views on culture (including religion at the level of culture) have always remained controversial, however; many consider it a category mistake when a psychoanalyst (who is judged to be competent merely at the level of individual clinical problems) airs his opinions on phenomena at a macro level, the level of society, history and culture. There is no need for us to discuss that methodological issue here. We merely wish to establish that Freud operated at both levels, that he did so far from naively (he clearly indicates, for instance, that a psychoanalytic account can always only offer a partial perspective on such things as religion as a cultural phenomenon, which he then nevertheless often presented as the last word on the matter) and that he initiated an endless stream of commentaries and reflections in this field. (Freud was for many years the most often quoted humanities scholar.) It also needs to be established that his culture-theoretical views have often been contradicted, even by sympathizers. Let us keep in mind the fact that Freud, a brilliant clinician and courageous theoretician, attempted again and again, on the basis of his authority in the field of individual psychology, to discuss phenomena located at a higher level than that of the individual, more or less successfully.

If one studies “Freud and religion” (or “Freud on religion”) – provided one knows how to master the gigantic quantities of secondary literature that have accumulated over the years<sup>3</sup> – the same conclusion is reached again and again: with all the contradictions, redefinitions of the subject and changes in outlook that characterize his work, Freud is usually much more nuanced in his psychological statements on religion than most of his strictest adherents.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, in the first decades after Freud’s death the debate on “religion and psychoanalysis” immediately became less profound: nothing of the things we suggestively posed at the beginning (religion as neurosis, as illusion, as projection) can be found verbatim in Freud,<sup>5</sup> but they are notions that in a vulgarized form have greatly stimulated the Western psychological critique of religion. Freud was a reductionist as regards religion. He was very critical of religion, he foresaw its end, but nowhere did he reduce it to a psychic mechanism. He did believe, though, that all psychic mechanisms (including pathological derangements) can play a part in religious action and experience (and also

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<sup>3</sup> Some years ago an application was even made to the American Academy of Religion to set up a section on “Freud and religion” as a more or less autonomous field of academic research.

<sup>4</sup> Freud for example never demanded that psychoanalysts be non-religious, although this become an unwritten rule among psychoanalysts after his death. He never suggested to his friend, the pastor and psychoanalyst Pfister, to either give up his faith or look for a different occupation. He did believe, however, that after psychoanalysis faith would disappear in most believers (Freud & Pfister, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> It is therefore striking to read how Banks (1973) in his “reappraisal” keeps on referring to Freud’s projection theory of religion, while being unable to produce any textual evidence for it.

in its products, such as images of god, dogmas etc.). But this is hardly going to be contradicted by enlightened Westerners nowadays: that psychic mechanisms play a role in religious action and experience, as in all human action and experience, is almost a pleonasm.

## The Range of the Psychological Perspective

As said, this chapter is not intended as one more explanation of Freud's pronouncements on religion; these have merely been some introductory remarks. What we are really concerned with is the question whether progress has been made, for instance concerning the idea of 'religion as projection' – what is the present situation? Happily, the answer can be brief: after Freud there was no progress for decades. If we may believe the American Bailey (1988), who seems to have studied the matter closely, it was only in the Netherlands that something worth mentioning was put forward on this matter, and this was during the so-called projection debate. We cannot hope to give a complete history of this debate (some aspects have already been treated by Breevaart, 2005; and Belzen, 2007), but we do want to see whether psychological theory has made any progress. So the context of that debate can only be briefly touched on here. After the appearance of Simon Vestdijk's *De Toekomst der Religie* ("The future of religion," 1947/1992) a storm of protest burst forth in the Netherlands and a (not in all respects scrupulous) discussion arose. The oft-reprinted book was, however, an "essay," as the subtitle says, not a scientific exposition. Some of the central claims of the essay were later put on a more academic foundation by Fokke Sierksma (1956/1980). This proved to be a book of exceptional scientific quality that almost nobody was able to respond to substantively. According to Fortmann, the first professor of the psychology of religion in the Netherlands, the theory of "religion as projection" was so important and contained so much explosive material which in a vulgarized form could only lead to religious doubt and even apostasy, that Vestdijk and Sierksma deserved a "good answer" (Fortmann, 1957, p. 7). Let us therefore see what important things can be found in that scientific *pièce de résistance* of the projection debate, Sierksma's *De Religieuze Projectie* ("The religious projection," 1956/1980). If it is really as crucial as Bailey maintains, a survey of its contents may be in order – since it is hardly known outside the Netherlands.

### *The (Dutch) Projection Debate*

In his wide-ranging monograph, Sierksma takes up Vestdijk's thesis that people place the ideal of the "eternal" man outside themselves. The term used here, also by Vestdijk himself, is "projection," a term seemingly derived from Freud. But is this right? And what exactly is meant by it? What is projection and how does it operate? These have proven to be complicated questions, right up to the present day

(cf. Neuser and Kriebel, 1992). Sierksma went in search of an answer and uncovered quite a few meanings of the term.

In his search for clarification he involves not only psychology and philosophical anthropology but also various data from cultural anthropology and biology (or, if you like, animal psychology). The following account of his ideas is impermissibly brief but contains at least the main outlines. Sierksma finds that the human being wants to “find out the truth”; that humans are probably the only beings on our planet who know, or at least think they know, of a distinction between real and unreal, between objective and subjective. Human beings realize that what they perceive might not be reality as it is. Every animal, including man, lives in a fragmentary “Merkwelt,” to use Von Uexküll’s terminology: some things get perceived, others do not. An infinite number of stimuli – an “Ausschnitt” – is made of the world-as-such, which is the animal’s own world. So the animal adapts to the world, but just as much it adapts the world to itself. The goal of particularly the last-mentioned, subjectivizing function of perception (the “projection”) is to give organization and stability to a world that otherwise would remain a chaos, a function that is vital in the struggle for life. There is, however, an essential difference between the human being and the other animals: the animal lives centrally, the human “ex-centrally” (philosopher Plessner’s term), the animal has no self-consciousness, man does; the human can place herself beside and opposite herself, can know *that* in perception she organizes the world in a certain way.<sup>6</sup>

Man must cope in the world, trying to master it with the tools designed by him. In an analogous way he tries indirectly, by means of projection, to master that part of the world that will not be conquered. When for example an “Eskimo-man”<sup>7</sup> knows he is threatened by famine, he projects a goddess at the bottom of the sea who keeps the seals prisoner. The unity of word and image plays a significant part in this: the word, too, is an indirect tool of the mind to get a grip on the world. When the tool reaches its limit, man uses the power of the “word-image.” By means of word and tool man thus tries to complete himself and to gain control of the world.

Sierksma also discusses the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious. He points out that the external and internal world are stabilized in the same

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<sup>6</sup> This point is central to Sierksma’s argument, a point he finds confirmed by many scientists and thinkers: “[Man] objectifies *and* he subjectifies. He transcends himself, but he cannot cut himself loose from himself. That is the paradoxical situation of the homo proiciens. The paradox of the being that simultaneously lives centrally and excentrally is reflected in the paradox [...] that [man] lives by appearance and reality. In appearance he finds reality, in reality he again and again discovers appearance. However one approaches man, one always encounters a paradox. The anatomist Bolk finds a grown-up fetus. The biologist Portmann finds a bird that is nidicolous and nidifugous at the same time. Sartre finds the paradox of the *en-soi* and *pour-soi*. One can continue: Nietzsche, Gehlen, Jaspers, all who do not limit themselves in a short-sighted specialty to one aspect or one fragment of man, end up with man as paradox incarnate. It may therefore be considered an advantage and a confirmation of the thesis proposed here about human projection, that it too, issuing from a comparative approach to projecting man, encounters an irreducible paradox: man with projection *and* theory of knowledge, between appearance and reality, subjectifying-*and*-objectifying” (Sierksma, 1956/1980, pp. 26–27).

<sup>7</sup> In this brief presentation of Sierksma’s arguments I have of course retained the latter’s own terminology, including his use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to human beings in general.

way. One might think that the projecting of one's own feelings and desires on others destabilizes the outside world, but in fact what takes place is a restoration of the disturbed balanced in the inner world. Projection here therefore serves as a defense mechanism (of which, by the way, there are more than psychoanalysis has described) that is meant to prevent man from being overrun by the forces of his inner world. For the psychology of religion, the main thing is to distinguish outer and inner world, since there are many religious projection phenomena that essentially serve as a defense against dangers from outside, as in many "primitive religions," while in much spirituality projection arises as a defense against man's inadequacy vis-à-vis his inner world. But in both cases it is the inner world's subjectivity that compensates for a lack of objectifying distance. In both cases the projection is the result of human limitation and inadequacy.

Although in the early part of the book Sierksma occasionally clarifies something by using an example from the religious domain, not until the fourth and last chapter does religion itself become the subject. He proves to be a proponent of a so-called functional definition of religion. There have been so many attempts to define religion in terms of a certain content that it is best to decide that it is in principle indefinable. According to Sierksma, the only scientifically tenable minimal definition is therefore that in religion there is an awareness "that there is something" (Sierksma, 1956/1980, p. 31). This awareness, that there is something that nevertheless eludes us, which we cannot get in our grip, is a necessary consequence of the correlation of the sphere of human life and the life form: in the ex-centric structure man has become his own mysterious background, and parallel to that his world has obtained a background for him. Man does not perceive signals but sees things that have a hidden back. To man it is obvious that an object (let's say a cup) is more than what we can perceive of it, that it has a back, depth. We consider this obvious because our ex-centric life form has its correlate in an ex-centric world: man himself has depth and so the world has depth. As he always did when referring to man's ex-centric structure, Sierksma relies on Plessner, who pointed out that "[a]ls Ich, das die volle Rückwendung des lebendigen Systems zu sich ermöglicht, steht der Mensch nicht mehr im Hier-Jetzt, sondern 'hinter' ihm, hinter sich selbst, ortlos im Nichts, geht er im Nichts auf, im raumzeithaften Nirgendwo-Nirgendwann" (Plessner, 1928, p. 292). This mysterious ego (the transcendental ego), that can objectify our other ego and makes us conscious of ourselves, cannot itself be objectified. In religion it is made into an absolute, it becomes a transcendent quantity, hypostatized metaphysically (Sierksma, 1956/1980, p. 167), *eo ipso* it becomes a Thou, with whom the mystic wishes to become one. Sierksma respects the mystic and the Buddhist: they at least do not remain totally naive in the face of the inevitable projection. Though a mystic projects as well, he regards the inner world as in principle and absolutely superior to the outer world; he can more easily recognize and undo his projection. The non-mystic, however, bases himself precisely on that outer world: when he constitutes that by subjectifying, he complements it with a piece of inner world, although for lack of something better.

Sierksma had published an impressive work. It is tragic that it received so little substantive response. At the time of the "projection debate" the book's arguments

were hardly discussed. People talked about Sierksma personally, his style, his supposed atheism, but there was no attempt to refute him. Such an attempt was only undertaken some years later by Han Fortmann, a priest and phenomenologically oriented psychologist, but it cannot be regarded as successful (cf. Belzen, 2007). Without entering into the history of the projection debate or the (non-)reception of Sierksma's *magnum opus*, let me just say that large parts of Fortmann's four-volume *Als Ziende de Onzienlijke* ("As if seeing the unseeable One", 1964–1968) do not deal with the projection issue at all, and that Fortmann greatly changed his views during the years he worked on it. After starting out by launching a frontal attack on every notion of "projection" (as a phenomenologist he wanted to demonstrate that there is no such thing as projection), at the end of his work he indicated that he was no longer so convinced of the things he had initially proposed; in any case he recognized that it was wrong to deny the existence of empirical forms of projection. Since Fortmann's book, Dutch and other European psychologists of religion have shown remarkably little interest in the projection problem. The genius of European psychology of religion since the Second World War, the Belgian Vergote, indicated in his first major work that he would not discuss the matter and the Dutchman Faber only dealt with it in 1985 but devoted not a word to Sierksma's contribution (Vergote, 1966/1967; Faber, 1985). The non-appearance of a translation has caused the work to be totally ignored abroad. The aforementioned American Bailey was the only one to "discover" the work as part of his research into the projection problem and was very impressed; he even initiated a translation, but it had little influence. Only Harvey (1995) treats Sierksma and places him on equal footing with Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Freud, and later Guthrie and Becker.

### *Increased Modesty*

There is something else, however, that at first view can be seen as a form of progress, partly as a result of the projection debate: a clearer view has developed of the range and thus the limitations of the psychological (including psychoanalytic) perspective. When psychology originated in its modern, self-consciously empirical form (around 1880) there was euphoria in many different fields: it was supposed that uncovering psychological "laws" would trace and reveal man's involvement in all things human (which would include forms of culture, such as religious culture). Great things were expected of psychology, among other things in the sciences of religion, which, after their "initiation" by the German Müller and the Dutchman Tiele, had begun to collect various, mainly historical, data about several forms of religion but were still lacking a systematic, analytical perspective (Molendijk, 2005; Sharpe, 1986). Psychology appeared to offer the solution: a science seemed to be developing that, with its knowledge of the human mind, could explain how and why religions are as they are, why they arise, exist and perish. The first practitioners of the psychology of religion too were full of enthusiasm and almost without exception overrated the reach of their perspective. The first monograph that carried

“psychology of religion” in the title, though merely based on a very deficient questionnaire,<sup>8</sup> pretended to be able to draw conclusions about “religion” as such instead of (and more correctly) about the religiosity of those questioned (Starbuck, 1899). James, Wundt, Girgensohn: they all believed they could approach “religion” as it is, though with the help of entirely different types of psychology. Gradually, however, the awareness grew that the psychological viewpoint is only one of many, which, legitimate though it is, always needs to be complemented by other viewpoints (not even excluding theological ones). (In a way Freud had already set a good example here: he emphasized repeatedly the merely partial character of the psychoanalytic viewpoint, but his way of phrasing was usually such as to convey the impression, after reading his expositions, that this was apparently the last word on the matter . . .)

The Dutchman Sierksma’s study of religious projection was consequently not an example of empirical psychological research but a true study into foundations. It therefore moves in the direction of philosophy, and Sierksma does indeed sound more like a philosophical anthropologist than a psychologist when he proclaims his views on religion as projection. He is no longer interested in projection as an empirical mental process (however this is to be understood) but in an ontological structure typical of man as such. He no longer talks about projection in the sense that Freud gave to this concept: the placing outside of man of something subjective (wishes, instincts, feelings) and reifying it in some way (if only by ascribing it to others).<sup>9</sup> Sierksma really talks about the theory of knowledge: he describes how necessary it is for human beings (or at least those few intelligent people who reflect on this) to perceive the world in a certain inevitable way while at the same time realizing *that* they perceive in a certain way. Projection is a normal part of human perception and plays a part in religion, among other things. Religion is a certain type of interpretation of reality. Religions exist because man, necessarily, projects. (And there are even forms of religion where the projective character of the religious perception is recognized as such; Sierksma regards Buddhism as an example of this.)

There is also a second sense in which Sierksma strolls far beyond the borders of psychology: rather than explain the functioning of perception (a central topic in psychology), and of projection as part of that perception, religious or not, he takes up the question of why religion as such exists – a question which most psychologists of religion had meanwhile stated lay completely outside their competence. As Wulff, too, notes in his survey of the major theories in the psychology of religion (1997a, p. 15), most psychologists of religion no longer talk about religion as

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<sup>8</sup> As such, however, this was a novelty in the sciences of religion; I do not mean to repudiate Starbuck’s originality!

<sup>9</sup> With his theoretical reflections, Sierksma moved in the same direction as that in which the later Feuerbach had moved, according to Harvey (1995). In 1851 Feuerbach supposedly defended the view that man, driven by feelings, fears and desires, abstracts certain qualities from his surroundings and personifies these (or, as in the case of monotheism, unites these abstractions and personifies them). Also the later Feuerbach is no longer concerned with placing outside man something that is said to be present only in man himself, but with finding an inevitable modality of human perception, a “grid” as Harvey calls it, that is imposed on us in perception and that makes us see the world as we see it.

a macro phenomenon, at the level of culture, but only about the religious functioning of individuals. A psychologist of religion such as Vergote, who pays a great deal of attention to his discipline's foundations, does not deny in so many words that human-psychological processes have influenced the various historically grown religious *Lebensformen* (in Wittgenstein's sense), but he does exclude the issue of the human-psychological part in the rise of culture and religion. With the cultural anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1965) he contends that the origin of culture cannot be scientifically examined: on the one hand the historical knowledge needed for this is lacking, and on the other culture and religion are nowhere found *in statu nascendi*. Those who make claims about origin or genesis base themselves on knowledge of what they have been able to study (which is precisely not that origin or genesis) and put forward inadequately validated theoretical presuppositions (Vergote, 1983/1984, p. 19). We will come back to this at the end of these reflections. Let us first look at some "innovations" in psychoanalysis in general.

## **The Psychoanalytic Approaches Made More Precise**

In psychoanalysis itself a number of developments have taken place since Freud of which it is not unambiguously clear that they have been instances of progress. They are assessed in rather diverging ways by the adherents of the various psychoanalytic schools. For example, the Lacanians are as a rule very critical of the development of "ego psychology" (of which the so-called object relation theories are descendents), and most psychoanalysts tend to regard Kohut's so-called self-psychology not as an innovation within psychoanalysis but as a departure from it. But apart from the question whether these developments involved the use of more effective forms of psychoanalysis than Freud's, in their applications within the psychology of religion later authors have at least been able to give greater precision to the methodology. Two examples must suffice. The development set in motion by Jacques Lacan (which Lacan said was a "retour à Freud," the wish to understand afresh what Freud had meant to say instead of what the American psycho-culture in particular had made of it) has stimulated some important reflective work on the foundations of psychoanalysis (cf. among others Laplanche, 1987; Vergote, 1997/2002). A psychologist of religion from this tradition such as Vergote emphasizes strongly, following Lacan's attention to the symbolic order, that a child comes into contact with a specific historically and culturally determined form of some particular religion and that it develops a certain relation to it. When he enters into that relationship (whatever its nature), the human being brings with him his subjectivity, and that is why, for example, the image that the individual has of a god (a god with whom the individual becomes acquainted in any tradition whatsoever) always carries, besides features of a certain religious tradition, traces of the individual's father and mother as well. This constitutes a clear correction to some of Freud's statements: whereas Freud believed that one's personal image of god would derive from the father image, Vergote found through extensive research, carried out in different



cultures, that motherly qualities also characterize individual images of god (Vergote and Tamayo, 1981).

The object relation approach introduced into psychoanalysis by Winnicott has produced quite an array of publications that are often more positive about religion than Freud's followers from the first half century of psychoanalytic psychology of religion (Jones, 1991; for a brief survey, cf. Meissner, 2000). One study from this tradition, now considered a classic, is that by Rizzuto (1979). Like Vergote's findings her conclusions correct Freud's statement quoted above: "god" is always more than an exalted father. Strictly refraining from making judgments about the ontological truth content of any view of "god" whatsoever, Rizzuto consistently distinguishes between god as represented in certain religious traditions and the individual's image of god. Psychoanalysis deals with the last only, where it uncovers traces not only of the biographical father but also of many others of importance to the individual. (And when Rizzuto speaks of the "birth of the living god," she does not mean god-in-himself, or god as represented by a certain tradition, but the god as experienced by an individual; she too, therefore, speaks of the formation and functioning of a personal relation to some culturally given concept of god.)

Aside: these psychoanalytic psychologists of religion (unlike psychoanalytic psychologists of religion, of course, who hardly talk about images of god, projection and the like) no longer address these problems in terms of projection – which is understandable, because it is not primarily projection but transference that is involved, as we noted earlier. We also saw earlier that they do not ask about the existence of "religion," of some religious tradition as such. Rather they reject Freud's attempts to make statements about religion at the cultural level, as a cultural system of symbolic actions and interpretations. Still, one may ask whether they do not thereby abandon a question that psychology may contribute to answering. We will briefly go into this, prompted by some recent developments that, at least in methodological respect, seem to provide a remarkable corroboration of the psychoanalytic viewpoint.

### ***Halfway Assessment: Progress?***

But let us first note that at the level of psychological theorizing about projection there has been no advance beyond what Freud had already proposed since Sierksma. Like Freud himself, Sierksma wants to go further than psychology's instruments allow: Freud arrives at this value judgment on religion as such on the basis of his positivistic and scientific worldview. Sierksma becomes an epistemologist who connects the existence of religion with the nature of human perception. Insofar as psychologists of religion such as Vergote and Rizzuto are able to improve on Freud, they do not do so in the area of projection but in specifying which subjective factors play a part in forming the individual's image of god.

One might think, therefore, that if there has been any progress since Freud, it consists of a better understanding and use of the perspective he developed.



Psychoanalytic insights would be applicable in a more limited way than Freud himself believed (they ought not to be applied at the level of culture) and they should be used with more precision (the individual's image of god does not only bear the marks of the autobiographical father, as Freud formulated it). Seen in this light, and given the fact that Sierksma was unable to advance the theory of projection as a psychological mechanism, one would do better to speak of a relapse than of progress with the latter: for Sierksma started to consider religion again as a cultural rather than a more limited individual phenomenon. Bailey would then be wrong in suggesting that we take Sierksma seriously where projection and the psychoanalytic critique of religion are concerned.

The strange fact is, however, that these attempts by Feuerbach, Freud and Sierksma to discuss religion at the cultural level as well, which in this interpretation are to be rejected, have recently received support from unexpected quarters. I will mention three approaches and point out the paradox that some of the things we considered wrong in Freud are now being attempted again by modern scientists, although they often have no knowledge of his work and sometimes even think they are doing something original.

## Unexpected Corroboration

In past years several publications have provided remarkable corroborations of a number of methodological insights from the psychoanalytic psychology of religion. The striking thing is that these corroborations originate from or are akin to approaches in psychology and the social sciences that usually have no relation to psychoanalysis and even consider themselves to be approaches of a totally different nature ("genuinely scientific," as they also employ experimental research), and therefore generally know nothing of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion. We are talking about disciplines such as neurobiology, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. Only a few authors so far have been able to build bridges between their disciplines and the psychoanalytic tradition.

*Psychoanalysis and neurobiology.* A rare example of an author who knows how to integrate different perspectives is Mel Faber, whose own background is in yet another scientific field. As a professor of literature, Faber, in a fascinating set of arguments, tries to connect psychoanalysis and neurobiology. His monograph is too rich in viewpoints to summarize in a few sentences. One of his main goals is to show that the attention given by psychoanalysis to early childhood is justified and is confirmed by recent neurobiological research: the child's Ur-experiences lead to certain structures (synapses) at the physiological level that give structure to perception and provide inspiration for religion.

During the course of the early period the basic biological situation of asking and receiving between caregiver and offspring is internalized synaptically into the mind-brain of the developing child to become a rooted perceptual-neurological response to subsequent events (an attractor state). Over and over again, thousands

of times, for years, the needful child asks and receives through the ministering interventions of the all-powerful parental provider. Mnemonic development among humans is such that virtually all of this previous, foundational interaction is fated to go “underground,” to pass into the unconscious realm through the advent of what neurobiology terms infantile amnesia. Accordingly, and in reference to religious experience, one remembers the early period *implicitly* when one is *primed* to do so by a wide variety of inward or external cues, including most notably (1) supplication, the theological instructions for which draw directly upon the asking and receiving of the basic biological situation, and (2) crisis, in many forms such as physical danger and personal setback (loss), which awaken implicit mnemonic longings for intervention by the succoring caregiver who is now projectively present as the benign Parent-God of religious narrative. (Faber, 2004, pp. 181–182)

According to Faber projection plays a major part in perception, not as something supposedly pathological but as rooted in our earliest childhood: the relations and experiences from those days give us a bias to perceive in a certain manner. So it’s entirely logical that human beings transfer onto the concept of a god (endowed to them by some religious tradition) the images of, experiences with and feelings toward the “gods” who were their parents and/or first caregivers. Religiosity is therefore not a neurosis, nor is religion nonsense. Faber may be much more nuanced than Freud (he is not, for instance, prone to scientism) but *au fond* he is very close to him: just like Freud he says he is not able or allowed to judge the truth claims of religion (whether a “god” exists outside and independent of the concept of god as constituted by human transfer and furnished by a religious tradition is a question about which psychology has nothing to say), but he also makes it clear that personally he is just as much an atheist as Freud.

*Cognitive science.* Recently a number of anthropologists started to take aspects of psychology seriously, especially aspects of cognitive and evolutionary psychology. From an anthropological or general social-scientific perspective many questions can naturally be asked about religion as a cultural phenomenon: why is religion so important to so many people, why are there so many forms, why are people prepared to give their all for their religion, why does religion continue to exist when there are much more efficient ways of thinking about the world, etc.? The anthropologist Boyer (2001) answers by referring to the human mind: the way the human mind works is responsible for religion. Natural selection has prepared the human mind to take in certain types of information and treat it in a certain way; evolution as it were has equipped the mind with predispositions. Boyer does not say that everybody is or becomes religious, merely that a person can become religious only in a certain almost predictable way; and if a person does function religiously, this will happen in a certain way (a way that is similar to that of others – variation is much smaller than the phenomenal level of the lived religions would lead one to suspect).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A small group of scientists of religion is forming under the inspiration of authors such as Boyer. Like him, they read parts of cognitive psychology and are apparently very impressed with the scientific research going on there, complete with experiments and statistical analysis. Scientists of

Not being a psychologist, Boyer is not so interested in the way religious meaning arises and is structured in individuals or groups; he is concerned with the much more fundamental question of religion as such (unlike Faber he does not give any final value judgments on this).

*Evolutionary psychology.* More interesting, certainly more innovative, are the attempts by some of these anthropologists to include evolutionary psychology in their arguments. Guthrie (1993, 2001), for example, explains religion from an evolutionary perspective: people are genetically equipped with a certain cognitive bias, namely to interpret ambiguous things and events as if they were of great importance. Of great importance is what is alive, and in particular what is human. So we tend to think of our surroundings as “alive,” as animate, as analogous to ourselves. If we make mistakes in this (for instance mistake a branch for a snake) we don’t lose much, but if we are right we may gain everything, such as our own life. Gods, demons and similar “supernatural” entities are in Guthrie’s view at the end of a spectrum of human-like beings that we think we perceive in the world. Just like Boyer, Guthrie contends against various more or less popularized views of “religion,” such as functional explanations of religion’s existence. One cannot explain its origin from an effect (such as the comfort, the worldview, the legitimation of morality, etc., that religion can offer). The origin is thought to be due to a more primitive tendency to over-evaluate ambiguous phenomena in a certain way. This tendency has been very useful, even necessary, in the course of evolution, and has therefore become stronger through natural selection. Religion is therefore animism and anthropomorphism, of an intuitive nature at that, which means spontaneous and independent of external tutelage.

The evolutionary perspective in itself does not seem to be psychological; rather, evolutionary theory offers a framework in which psychological descriptions and explanations can be incorporated. Various mechanisms, which are also recognized in psychoanalysis, reveal themselves as the outcome of humanity’s long history

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religion usually only learn about the older theories of Freud and Jung during their education but not about the flood of research and studies that have appeared since then both within and outside psychoanalysis. Scientists of religion such as Whitehouse (2004; Whitehouse & McCauley, 2005) are apparently happy to have “finally” found a form of psychology that is scientific and may assist them in their own research. But the level of this work is often still disappointingly trivial. Take for instance the hypothesis put forward in Andresen (2001) that brain processes are of crucial importance to religion. With all respect: doesn’t that sound simple? Is not blood circulation crucial as well? If one then demonstrates extensively that in children with autistic disorders or with dysfunctions of the prefrontal brain lobes no “normal” representations of god are being found, what has one proved? What else does that teach us about “religion”? A bit more knowledge of the ideas in the psychology of religion, and of social-scientific methodology in general, would have been useful to these cognitive scientists of religion (N.B. they are by training scientists of religion). The “central assumption of the cognitive science of religion” must sound highly trivial to the ears of psychologists (of religion): “all religious thought is constrained by cognition” (in Whitehouse & McCauley 2005, p. 188). This is definitely not a new insight, nor is it a methodological improvement on the psychology from the days of Freud, James, Wundt and other founders. (They could have read the same thing in the scholastic philosophers: *omne quod recipitur, recipitur secundum modum recipientis.*) See also the thesis, proposed with much aplomb, that religion is as it is because the human mind is as it is (Slone, 2004).

(an example is the so-called attachment systems, cf. Kirkpatrick (2005), but one could just as easily try to prove this for repression, projection, transference and the other mechanisms designated by psychoanalysis). The diverse religious activities and experiences that are found cross-culturally and cross-temporally turn out to be byproducts of these psychological mechanisms and systems, which have evolved to serve completely different evolutionary functions. One must note that the authors who follow this line of reasoning do not explain religious phenomena with the help of psychology but with the help of an evolutionary viewpoint, and maybe that's where the problem also lies: they explain too much from too few premises, they leave aside various cultural-historical particulars, since these can all be subsumed under adaptation and selection. Consequently, they no longer give explanations at the levels at which psychology and the social sciences operate. In other words, although they affirm and incorporate several forms of psychology including psychoanalysis, they make no contributions to them and do not bring about progress at the level of psychological theory. They do of course, and even preferably, speak of religion at the level of culture (and even the history of mankind), but they refrain from making statements about the ontological truth claims of particular religions.

These modern scientists of religion therefore demonstrate a tendency that we previously criticized in Freud and that later psychologists of religion believed they had rectified: there is a desire again to discuss "religion" as such, not merely individual religious experiences and actions but also religion as a cultural phenomenon, as a phenomenon at the macro level. And not because, as anthropologists or scientists of religion at the macro level, such authors might indeed employ other approaches than psychology. but on the basis of that very psychology! So what was criticized in Freud is precisely what is practiced by these researchers of religion. Barrett (2004) for instance wrote a small book provocatively titled *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Briefly stated, his argument comes down to this: on account of their biological equipment people have, across cultures, structurally the same cognitive tools. Without being aware of it they all use certain "mental tools" which make them think about the world in a specific way. With this mental equipment people also think about god and gods. The postulate of a god who is supposedly omniscient, omnipotent, immortal, etc., is accommodated to the structure of human thought, can therefore very easily be disseminated and barely wiped out.

## **Proliferation of Psychoanalytic Viewpoints**

Those who are happy to see attention being given to the sciences of religion, or more broadly to the scientific exploration and analysis of religious phenomena, and to the psychic dimension of these phenomena, will regard it as progress that psychological viewpoints have been adopted by many researchers who are certainly not primarily known to be psychologists of religion. Of the various psychological approaches, psychoanalysis in particular has made its way into the heart of theology, the science of religion and religious studies.

Perhaps this is only an illustration of a certain trend. It is a peculiar phenomenon at any rate: even though many have vilified psychoanalysis since its inception as being unscientific, it has had more influence on scores of scientific areas and on the thinking of the Western intelligentsia, and can be found in more of the common parlance and cultural stereotypes, than any other field of knowledge. Not only has psychoanalysis had a great impact on psychology, but it has also left its mark on “harder” sciences such as medicine (besides the obvious psychiatry, other fields that can be mentioned are psychosomatics and more far-reaching holistic approaches), while its influence in the social sciences and humanities, at the present time in particular, is especially widespread. Psychoanalytical (or at least Freudian) ideas can be found in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, art and cultural studies (film studies, dramaturgy) and many other disciplines. (A sampling would produce an abundance of bibliographical references and would distract us from the actual theme, but above all it would be unnecessary: the fact is sufficiently known.) The phenomenon of this impressive proliferation of psychoanalytical ideas is simply remarkable; nothing comparable can be seen in the other branches of psychology. The explanation cannot be that these other branches require longer training (analytical training, including teaching analysis, requires many years of education and usually presupposes preliminary university training), are more difficult to learn (most psychological theories, certainly the more recent, are definitely simpler than psychoanalytical theories) or can only be practiced within a certain research setting (psychoanalysis also takes its most important data from a closed setting, and many instruments used in psychological research [interviews, questionnaires, observation] are not developed by psychologists and are also used in other disciplines, sometimes even in market “research”).

The answer to the question why psychoanalysis is so widespread does not have to be attempted here. It is enough to point out the fact. As indicated, however, the phenomenon as such cannot be regarded as progress in the theoretical sense. What we are talking about here, after all, are applications of psychoanalysis. Its actual development takes place on the basis of observations made during patient treatment; reflections on these observations lead to new theories or to the transformation of existing theories. The question of progress should be answered at this level. Anyone who distrusts psychoanalysis as such will probably not be convinced of its worth or correctness by its application in the social sciences or the humanities. Anyone who thinks it is a good idea to recognize the psychic dimension in numerous cultural phenomena will probably be favorably disposed to it *a priori* (and in principle to other psychologies that lend themselves to cultural analysis). The fact remains that psychoanalysis, more than any other psychological theory, can also be found in theology and religious studies – as a conversational partner or, to a lesser degree, as an analytical instrument (cf. for example Winer and Anderson, 2007; Black, 2006; Merkur, 2005; Jonte-Pace, 2003).

Whether psychoanalysis (or any psychological approach) has ever achieved substantive progress by being applied in the exploration and analysis of religious phenomena is to be doubted, but cannot be discussed here. Nor need we answer the question whether the integration of psychological viewpoints in research of religious

phenomena is not first and foremost a sort of epiphenomenon with, or example of, the enormous proliferation of psychology in general in some Western countries (and so, somewhat maliciously formulated, a following of a certain fashion). (The answer would moreover depend on one's assessment of (the dissemination of) psychology in general and of psychological analysis or religious phenomena as such.) We do, however, wish to note that the proliferation of psychology (and the accompanying protopsychologization of quite a number of everyday phenomena<sup>11</sup>) has been an important precondition and accompaniment of the turn toward experience that has taken place in sections of the sciences of religion in the Western world during the twentieth century.

## Before Closing

At the end of this introduction we must now return to and answer the questions with which we started out: what is the upshot of one century of psychoanalytic psychology of religion? Has there been progress? What has become of the idea that religion is projection, for example?

As our discussion so far has made clear, no unambiguous answer can be given. Every brief answer could be, would even have to be, provided with critical comments. The answers will differ according to the opinion one has on a number of other matters. If one believes, for example, that psychoanalysis is not really a scientific psychology (because psychoanalysts don't perform experimental research, for instance) one will not have a high opinion of the application of psychoanalytic viewpoints in research into religion. If one thinks that a human-sciences approach is irrelevant for theology and the science of religion as such, one will leave psychoanalytic contributions unread. But even those who are more positive about psychology of religion may become somewhat disappointed after looking more closely at certain concepts of psychoanalysis. Current psychoanalysis has hardly anything more to say about projection, for example, than it did in Freud's own time. And concerning the oft-heard idea that religion is projection, matters turn out to be rather different from what they had seemed at first sight. Though Freud was negative about religion, he did not regard it as projection; he would have agreed, however, if somebody had said that projection plays a big part in religion. But after one has recovered from the possible shock caused by the imposition of a psychological perspective on religious phenomena, one may find that the notion that projection can have a role in religion is really rather trivial. Of course projection can play a part, just as all other psychic mechanisms can. Religion is human reality. It shares fully in all the

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<sup>11</sup> Note the "psychologizing" way in which people in the West now express themselves when talking about themselves, their lives and relationships. Psychological jargon has, sometimes in a highly misunderstood way, entered into the general language of social intercourse (people talk about "complexes" from which they suffer, about "subconscious" reasons; they say "what went through your mind when . . .," they tell how they feel, etc.).

vicissitudes of human life, influences them and is influenced by them, so it is no surprise that religious life contains everything that psychology studies more generally. Of course religious functioning is *also* a matter of projection, repression, fantasy, attachment and coping (to name only a few of the psychological constructs that some psychologists of religion have emphasized: van der Lans, 1988; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Pargament, 1997). *All* human affairs play a part, after all. To quote a well-known summary of clinical psychological research on religion: religion can be anything with regard to mental health and psychopathology: a cause of mental illness, but also a prophylactic, a therapy, a medium through which a disorder becomes manifest, etc. (Spilka et al., 2003).

Another matter is whether religion is nothing but a matter of projection, fantasy, attachment, coping, etc. Such a reductionist view is rather naive and in any case was not defended by Freud. Certainly, he did say some ugly things about religion, thought it was outdated, did not believe in it, and occasionally produced a sweeping statement, but in general he clearly saw that religion as a complex cultural phenomenon cannot be explained on the basis of any psychological perspective (and certainly not by appealing to a single psychic mechanism). As far as individual religiosity is concerned, he never said it was pathological as such. Freud proves to be more nuanced than many who refer to him seem to realize; one is better off reading Freud himself than his many followers. So has there been no progress since Freud? Again, the answer depends on the views one has in many other areas of life. If one believes that the developments that have taken place in the world of psychoanalysis since Freud are instances of progress, then of course analyses of religious phenomena that are based thereon will appear to be more adequate than those of Freud himself. (A follower of this opinion would have to consider, however, that (a) those different schools are in conflict with each other, and (b) publications in the psychology of religion by an author from a certain school may be rejected by other authors from the same school; see, for example, how critical Meissner (2000) and Faber (2002) are of publications like the one by Jones, 1991.)

There may have been progress since Freud on those issues where his statements were really too sweeping. That god even psychologically, as individual representation, proves to be other and more than an exalted father was seen at the time of Vergote's and Rizzuto's publications, among others, as an important correction and complement. However, whether it constitutes a theoretical improvement of the viewpoint inaugurated by Freud is questionable. For most other "corrections" of Freud's statements on the psychology of religion it is true that Freud himself would probably not have denied them. He made clear that his reflections on religion do not constitute an integral part of psychoanalysis, and he freely allowed others to use the same psychoanalytic theories and concepts to reach entirely different conclusions in the psychology of religion from the ones he had drawn. In this respect a psychoanalytic author's private convictions about religion, if she has such convictions, prove to be of greater importance to her conclusions than any form of psychoanalysis used by her. Psychoanalysis was initially clearly critical of religion. Later there were quite a number of religious persons who studied it and became experts in it, and who produced psychoanalytic publications that were much more positive about religion



than those of Freud and his first followers. (Well-known authors like Vergote, Meissner, Jones and Scharfenberg all became priests in their respective churches.) To the extent that their familiarity with and possible sympathy for what they studied enabled such authors to do greater justice to the objects of their research, this is certainly a form of progress in the psychoanalytic psychology of religion. (Insofar as it produced nothing better than apologies, it probably wasn't.)

It is remarkable that a certain purification of the psychoanalytic perspective now seems to be regarded as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. It will probably be necessary to reevaluate the wish to limit the authority of psychology to analyzing individual religiosity, which would render psychology unqualified to deal with religion as a cultural phenomenon. There is after all a psychological dimension to products of religious activity at the cultural level such as dogmas, rituals and symbolism in general. As the cognitive science of religion promulgates rather bravely, religion will never be able to be or to function as anything other than what can be processed by the human mind. This insight, however, might also be extended in a historical direction: then as now, the existence and growth of various forms of religion will have depended on what the human mind could facilitate. So there seems to be even more reason to try to establish a link between history and psychology as approaches in the sciences of religion than has been considered so far (cf. Belzen, 1997). Of course, the findings of such a combination of history and psychology will always provide a merely partial view on reality as research object, as is the case with all scientific research. In any case, it seems to become possible again – via a detour and certainly with greater modesty than was sometimes demonstrated in the history of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion – to use psychoanalysis for making claims about religion at the level of culture.

The merely moderate optimism about the substantive progress achieved since Freud should not be judged too negatively. If one looks at the state of affairs in other areas of psychology, similar conclusions will be reached. When modern, scientific psychology was created, a large number of psychologies were developed by pioneers such as Wundt, Janet, James and Freud. Their “grand theories” have led to an endless stream of research and publications, but whether we have progressed much beyond initial insights and intuitions is still an open question, and one that psychologists don't usually ask themselves. Driven by the obligation to grow and expand that characterizes the academic world nowadays, maybe they don't get round to these questions. But when sometimes they ask them, their conclusions are mostly in line with what has been stated here about psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic psychology of religion (cf. for example Gibson, 1985; Gleitman, 1985; Wulff, 1997b). It speaks volumes that the founders of psychology, almost without exception, are still able to inspire and to provide food for discussion (as has probably been the case with Freud more than with any other of the others).



## Finally – A Preview

Psychoanalysis has now been integrated in various ways into research on religious phenomena, into reflections on religion and even in theological publications. Again: those who find it important to study and reflect on the human, empirical-psychological dimension of religion will very probably consider this a kind of progress. Like psychology in general, psychoanalysis has at least contributed to making human reality the subject of greater scientific attention, and the same is true in the scientific study of religion. The papers in the present volume testify to this trend, first – in a section entirely written by practicing psychoanalysts – by demonstrating the transformations in the psychoanalytic approach to religion, and second – in a section with papers authored by scholars on religion – by showing the impact psychoanalysis has had within disciplines different from the scientific study of religion.

*Section one* documents the changes in the way contemporary psychoanalysis deals with religion, in a twofold way. The classic object of psychoanalysis and the place where all psychoanalytic theory is developed, altered and corroborated, is the clinical setting. While one may doubt whether the way present psychoanalysts deal with the religiosity of their patients is different from Freud's approach, it is almost certainly different from the approaches of many who came after Freud or even practiced during the days of Freud. A neglectful or even deprecating approach to religiosity has given way to a more neutrally benevolent attitude – as should characterize every response to all and everything that patients bring up during analysis. In exploring the place of religiosity, or rather of religious thoughts, feelings, fantasies, acts and activities, etc., within the larger psychic household of the patient, many psychoanalysts nowadays will neither endorse nor attack religion. (Although, as noted above, it must be admitted that most of those who try to do justice to individual religiosity are personally positively inclined towards religion.) In the case-studies by Rizzuto, Meissner and Corveleyn, we observe psychoanalysts at work in their *proprium*, so to speak: in the clinical approach to individual psychic functioning.

Psychiatrist Ana-María Rizzuto discusses the history of psychoanalytic dealings with religion in the twentieth century based on her own experiences within this history. She starts by returning to Freud's bold analogy between the rituals of obsessional neurotics and religious behaviors. Freud wanted to understand "the psychological processes of religious life." His followers primarily applied his ideas to the cultural manifestations of religion, a part of which came to be known as applied psychoanalysis. Very few, however, continued Freud's efforts to understand the psychical processes of religious life in their analysands. According to Rizzuto's judgment, the arrival of postmodernism prompted a significant change. Religion became an unwelcome term while spirituality became fashionable, which she interprets as Western culture having moved its center from the divinity to the self. The new psychoanalytic schools focused on the self, and intersubjective experiences joined the postmodern trend by becoming interested in spirituality. With a clinical case Rizzuto illustrates the connections between parental imagos and the divinity, as

Freud had suggested, while at the same time signaling that the self needs a context for its meaningful existence.

A professor of clinical psychiatry, William W. Meissner discusses the technical differences separating the approach to the religiously committed patient by analysts with irreligious, agnostic or atheistic convictions (usually following the anti-religious attitudes of Freud), from the approach to these same patients by analysts who are neutral with regard to the validity of religious beliefs. He points out that while the older view saw neurotic elements as inherent aspects of religious beliefs, a religiously neutral or even accepting view would see them as neurotic contaminants or distortions of religious beliefs that can be analyzed without necessary detriment to the religious beliefs themselves. Thus, both attacks on or pressure to abandon religious beliefs as neurotic and efforts to foster or promote religious attitudes would amount to forms of countertransference enactment. The optimal stance of the analyst with respect to the patient's religious views is based on the therapeutic alliance, especially analytic neutrality – neither attacking nor promoting religiously oriented attitudes, but focusing specifically on the exploration and understanding of neurotic manifestations to enable the patient to establish a more autonomous and productive approach to religious matters, whether to embrace a more mature and adaptive approach to religious beliefs or the opposite. Meissner discusses these issues in relation to the analysis of a religiously committed but conflicted analysand.

A third chapter based on clinical work is authored by psychologist Jozef Corveleyn. His approach to the theme of religious delusion is comparative: he characterizes the religious delusion in a well known case of psychosis (the “Schreber” case, also discussed by Freud) by comparing religious delusion in the so-called hysterical psychosis. Corveleyn argues that Canetti's viewpoint on Schreber's delusion as politically motivated is wrong, and that Schreber's delusion is an essentially religious one. He defines, explains and illustrates the hysterical religious delusion with the help of an extensive case study from his own work in a psychiatric hospital. Corveleyn shows that the psychotic religious delusion differs from the hysterical one mainly in terms of three structural characteristics: the religious content in Schreber's evolution can be considered an attempt to re-construct his lost world; religion is used by Schreber as a absolute truth system; and, although Schreber's delusion can be considered a reconstruction of his world, its ultimate effect is not a real restoration of his contact with the common social world.

Following these clinically based chapters, the first section of this volume turns to theory. It testifies to the increasingly positive attention being paid to religiosity as discussed by Rizzuto, Meissner and Corveleyn by showing how present psychoanalytic theoreticians take up the issues of religion and spirituality. Historian of religion Dan Merkur asserts that most psychoanalytic publications on mysticism have followed Freud in treating mystical experiences as transient manifestations of infantile solipsism. He then makes the controversial claim that quite a number of psychoanalytic authors have been or are mystics themselves, however, and these authors would have treated the mystical as something much more central to human psychology in any case. To prove his point, Merkur briefly reviews the work of quite a number of well-known psychoanalytic theoreticians.

Philosopher Paul Moyaert concludes this first section of the book by focusing on the post-Freudian criticism that Freud would have neglected the vitalizing power of religion. He argues, however, that the critics limit their impact by focusing on Freud's one-sided emphasis on the Oedipus. According to Moyaert, a strong interest in the pre-Oedipal is not sufficient to valorize the power of religion; it is the bodily drives that need to be placed in the heart of a new discussion about Freud's negative understanding of religion. To understand why post-Freudians criticize Freud, Moyaert shows that his notion of religion is based on repression, social adaptation and moral education. What Freud missed is the ecstatic power of religion. This Moyaert illustrates with an uncommon but nevertheless well-known Christian prayer: *The Adoration of the Crucified*. This prayer is the opposite of a contemplative calming down of the drives and has no anesthetic effect. It belongs to the Dionysian dimension of religion. This example makes clear why a critic of Freud needs to focus on the drives: where else can religion find the force to vitalize life if it not by mobilizing the drives? This prayer reanimates a specific constellation of partial drives, i.e. drives organized in a masochistic scenario. In his third section Moyaert analyses what happens to these masochistic drives when an individual cultivates the Christian prayer. His example is intellectually provocative because it helps to describe the vicissitudes of the drives in religion. Freud called religion sublimation, but as post-Freudians have emphasized he never succeeded in elaborating a satisfying theory of sublimation. The example Moyaert is analyzing gives a clear idea of a successful sublimation of drives in religion. And what else is a fertile sublimation than a transformation that does not destroy the natural *élan* of drives, but rather increases and intensifies their power? In perversion the scope of masochism remains limited to the sexual; in sublimation the scope is broadened to other domains of life. Drives put their personal stamp on someone's religious way of life. The final question Moyaert addresses is why Freud didn't recognize the power of religion. Moyaert argues that the cause has to be found in Freud's inadequate notion of pleasure and in his wrong ideas of the pleasure principle. Freud associated pleasure with satisfaction or evacuation of tension. But, according to Moyaert, pleasure can better be defined as an unhindered expression of an activity.

*Section two* of the present volume demonstrates some of the changes psychoanalysis has brought about in classical areas of the scientific study of religion such as mythology, anthropology, ethnography and philosophy of religion. The sections opens with a chapter by sociologist Michael Carroll, who shows that although Freud himself saw myths (like dreams, literary texts, etc.) as reflecting the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes, the study of myth was not central to his own work. Even so, the psychoanalytic study of myth can now be counted as one of many established approaches to the study of myth. As Carroll points out, for most commentators, the core divide among psychoanalytic investigators studying myth is the divide between Freud and Jung. Freud's original work on myth has given rise to at least three separate subtraditions which proceed, in turn, from (1) Freud's original wish fulfillment argument, (2) from ego psychology and (3) from the object relations tradition. The Jungian tradition, by contrast, is much the same today as it was when first presented by Jung himself in the early twentieth century. According to Carroll, this means that

the psychoanalytic interpretation of a particular myth is tightly bound to a larger theoretical structure that has implications which go far beyond the study of myth. This fact would have limited the influence of psychoanalysis among those studying myth. His essay concludes by considering a final puzzle: the fact that the Jungian approach to myth has long been far more popular with the educated public than any of the Freudian approaches to myth. One likely reason for this is the fact that Jung's approach to myth promises the general public easy access to a type of "unchurched mysticism" that is popular in modern secularizing societies.

The next chapter takes a historical approach as well. It critically discusses the developments in the psychoanalytic study of Buddhism. This "dialogue," as Parsons prefers to name it, is dealt with in three sections: 1880–1944; 1944–1970; 1970–2007. Each of them proceeds by offering a brief summary of the socio-historical context of the era under consideration, followed by a critical examination of the major figures, analyses, debates, and developments. In general, Parsons sees the first era as being the most undeveloped and reductionistic. The second era exhibits more extensive cross-fertilization and mutually respectful dialogue, with an adaptive approach being featured. The current era Parsons evaluates as significantly more sophisticated, with the major figures in the dialogue evincing interdisciplinary sensitivity, existential awareness, and a willingness among the psychoanalytically inclined to champion the Buddhist claim for a truly spiritual, transcendent dimension to the human personality.

The authors of two following chapters continue to discuss specific religious traditions, only this time drawing on their own original empirical work. After presenting an historical and critical overview of the major psychoanalytic studies of Hinduism to date, focusing on intra-psychic developments in Indian men as informed by, and reflected in, Hindu culture and family life, Daniel Meckel identifies three hermeneutical dimensions of the major writings: the scientific-explanatory, the cultural interpretive, and the religious-integrative. He presents several major works in historical sequence and supplements them by psychological case studies from his own ethnographic research. Meckel makes a strong argument for a dialectical approach to studying the inner worlds of Hindu's, one that stresses the ongoing and dynamic interaction of psyche, culture and religious experience.

The anthropologist René Devisch presents his profound and rich argumentation in four steps. Before addressing the topic of the multilayered function and meaning of the father figure in the religious perspectives of the Yaka of southwest Congo in Africa, he explores some relevant theoretical avenues offered by both the social anthropological and the significant post-Freudian francophone literature in the traditions of Devereux and Lacan. These readings demonstrate a recent psychoanalytically acknowledgeable attention to a local people's particular intercorporeal, intersubjective and transworldly shaping of self, unconscious fantasy, emotion and social commitment. Conversely, such attention echoes the anthropologist's very flexible observational participation in the life of the host community, in a manner evocative of the transferential process that develops between a psychoanalyst and an analysand. Section 2 sets out Devisch's own combination of a culture-sensitive, endogenous anthropological approach and aspectual psychoanalytically informed

interpretation of the domain of the religious among the Yaka. Apart from the missionary and post-missionary sphere of influence, the Yaka religious composing with the life world comprises a four-part framework, without, however, any reference to some personalized Divinity or single Supreme Being. Section 3 focuses primarily on the bilineal kinship structure of the extended family among the Yaka. Patri-lineal descent as determinative of a person's social identity is combined with the matrilineal filiation of physical life and individual destiny. Devisch argues that it is the maternal uncle, and not the father, who in the name of matrilineal filiation, authoritatively gives witness to the religiously enforced Order of the Ethical Law and the local version of the incest prohibition as the minimal intersubjective ordering. In Section 4 he summarises the glaring difference among the Yaka between encompassing, religiously-tuned and phallogocentric symbolization processes on the one hand, and on the other the more fragmentary and diverse augural sensibility to transworldly matrixial *signifiance* or emerging meaning production.

The final two chapters demonstrate the impact of psychoanalysis since Freud in the field of the philosophy of religion. First, James DiCenso explores psychoanalytic resources for understanding human development involving self-reflection, increased ethical capacity, and other-directedness. He does this by tracing a line of thought in the history of philosophy that moves from concern with the objects of religion (God, the soul, etc.) to questions of self-knowledge and ethical advancement. Freud is shown to share some of these broad humanistic ethical concerns with the European philosophical tradition, while also questioning the rationalist and disembodied worldviews usually assumed by that tradition. DiCenso then moves to a discussion of post-Freudian theorists such as Lacan, Foucault, Ricoeur and Kristeva, who build upon the more differentiated, dynamic, and inter-personal psychoanalytic model. Under the rubric of "the subject," they articulate a dynamic model of self-reflection in line with Freud's work, while also more explicitly articulating an overall framework for ethical or spiritual development (as for example in Foucault's model of "care of the self" as a spiritual project). In this way they contribute to a psychology of religion that is not so much concerned with interpreting existing traditions, as articulating a spiritual potentiality for reflective capacity leading to greater other-directedness.

Finally, Diane Jonte-Pace asserts that although the year 2007 marked the centennial of Freud's first analysis of religion, his short essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, published about a decade later, provided the framework for interpretations of religion and culture that have proved more valuable in contemporary thinking. In her chapter she examines the work of French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. After a brief introduction to Kristeva's life, career, and theory, Jonte-Pace argues that Kristeva's earlier work focused on mourning and that her later work turned to melancholia. The early work showed how traditional monotheisms structure and symbolize death and loss, while the later work showed how cultures and individuals experience melancholia when religion cannot provide the framing narratives for loss. Jonte-Pace also argues that Kristeva revises Freudian notions of melancholia as pathological, showing that melancholia can sometimes be adaptive: in particular,

she discusses the study of biblical and religious texts as a constructive and creative way of engaging with postmodern, post-religious melancholia.

Largely withholding any claims about theoretical progress that psychoanalytic approaches to religion might have achieved, the chapters present a rich illustration of the claim that psychoanalysis since Freud has been transformed by and has transformed itself the scientific study of religion. Because of the study of religion, psychoanalysis has been transformed in its dealings with patients and their religiosity, and it conceptualizes and evaluates religion and religious phenomena differently than Freud and the first generations of his followers. In addition, psychoanalysis has transformed the way in which other scholarly disciplines on religion approach their subjects. Whether and in what sense, transformations as these constitute progress in the psychoanalytic psychology of religion or in any study of religion, is perhaps better assessed by more independent observers than the authors of the following chapters. A truly interdisciplinary enterprise, psychoanalysis reaches out to other disciplines, provokes discussion and seeks both collaboration and objections. And so, hopefully, does the present volume.

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