

The Other Freud

Religion, culture and psychoanalysis

James J.DiCenso



London and New York

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
Introduction: tensions in Freud, extensions in Lacan and Kristeva	1
1 Trauma, Oedipus complex, and the exigencies of subjective formation	15
<i>Traumatic experience and psychological reality</i>	15
<i>Oedipal dynamics and entry into the symbolic</i>	19
2 Religion, ethics, and acculturation	29
<i>Freud's critique of religion and the latent issue of ethical transformation</i>	29
<i>Lacan and the problem of modalities of subjectivity</i>	40
3 Displacement, supplementarity, and symbolic meaning in <i>Totem and Taboo</i>	49
<i>The myth of origins and the problem of origination</i>	49
<i>Omnipotence of thoughts and cultural reality</i>	57
<i>The sacrifice: from the real to the symbolic</i>	66
4 <i>Moses and Monotheism</i>: the trauma of symbolization	77
<i>More originary hypotheses</i>	77
<i>Textual and psychological vicissitudes</i>	82
<i>Trauma and the return of the repressed</i>	86
5 <i>Moses and Monotheism</i>: the psychodynamics of <i>Geistigkeit</i>	97
<i>The great man and the symbolic order</i>	97
<i>The realm of Geist</i>	101
<i>Drive renunciation and subjective transformation</i>	107

6 Psycho-cultural inquiry from Freud to Kristeva	115
<i>Issues of critique and transformation</i>	115
<i>Displacing the ego and opening to the Other</i>	118
<i>The unconscious structured like a language</i>	125
<i>Kristeva on melancholia, art, and religion</i>	128
Concluding reflections	139
<i>Notes</i>	145
<i>Index</i>	169

Introduction

Tensions in Freud, extensions in Lacan and Kristeva

After a century of ongoing influence, Sigmund Freud's work continues to exhibit a remarkable regenerative power. This is related to the interdisciplinary and hybrid quality of his writings, which elude appropriation by any single interpretive approach. Unquestionably, there are also conceptual problems and contradictions ensuing from this play of opposing tendencies. However, such tensions contribute to the production of multiple levels of meaning and lines of argument that expand the horizons of psychoanalytic inquiry. An inherent conflictual quality fosters plurivocity in a way that keeps the Freudian corpus open to fresh encounters. It may be that if Freud's work was more consistent and systematized it would also be more one-dimensional.

A pivotal development in contemporary postmodern thought, occurring in several forms, is the recognition that conflicting tendencies within texts can be *intentionally* emphasized and explored as a resource for expressing new insights. Readings of Freud along such lines have been undertaken by Jacques Lacan, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and many others. These theorists have applied themselves to a wide range of Freud's writings, and have contributed to an ongoing rethinking of psycho-analytic theory. The present inquiry appropriates aspects of the conceptual and methodological contributions of these predecessors, while integrating them into my own line of thought. In this, I am seeking to illustrate how postmodernist strategies of reading elicit new perspectives on the subject that evoked Freud's most reductive and inflexible tendencies: *the psychological function of religious forms within cultural existence*.

Freud's major writings on religion include some of his most important inquiries into the intersections of psychology and culture. There are, of course, rather glaring manifest problems and limitations in these writings, particularly *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, but also *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. These works have served to establish the dominant psychoanalytic views of the psychology of religion within the closed, essentially dismissive parameters assumed by most theorists. However, assuming a fairly clear, obvious level of surface meaning discourages sustained analyses of these texts. My intention in this study is to rectify this neglect, which seems glaring for several reasons. Freud's writings on religion have shaped so much

thinking about the relations among psychology, religion, and culture that their influence alone, their history of effects, warrants re-examination to sort out what may or may not be occurring in them. It is well established that portions of *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, in particular, are inaccurate and outdated in many of their manifest claims. Yet the massive influence of Freud, the ongoing impact and appropriation of his texts, calls for delimiting which aspects of his thought on religion and culture might be salvaged, and which merit rejection.

Beyond this, however, close reading reveals Freud's inquiries to be quite complex, multileveled, and fruitful for ongoing interdisciplinary reflection. My argument is that these writings reflect on the meaning of cultural forms related to religion in significant ways, exceeding the scope of Freud's explicit postulates and arguments. Additionally, they open broader questions concerning subjective formation and development. These questions are related to religion in its traditional forms, but extend beyond those confines into other, related cultural and symbolic spheres. They concern the meta-issue of the formation and transformation of human subjectivity within culture, necessarily involving language, values, and ideals. That is, while Freud's analyses purportedly address the question of how religion *originates*, they serve better to illuminate aspects of how it *functions*, psycho-culturally.

Divergent approaches to these intricate problems appear in relation to polarities within Freud's overall views of the human situation. At times, his discourse is entrenched in mechanistic, biologicistic, and positivistic tendencies. In this it aspires toward cause-and-effect explanation within closed-system thinking. This quest for closure is related to Freud's pursuit of an ultimate, underlying point of origin for higher-order psychological and cultural developments in a definite force, event, or deed. Thus, on the overt or intentional level, his analyses of religion seek to establish the fundamental determinants of (mainly Western) religious belief and practice. Significantly, however, even on this reductive level the resulting formulations of underlying truth are *multiple*. The latent content discerned behind religion appears variously under the categories of illusion, delusion, and symptomatic displacement of repressed affect traceable to traumatic historical experience. This multiplication of the underlying referent serves to contribute to a destabilizing and de-literalizing of reductive levels of analysis.

Beyond the fissurings created by the failure of literal explanation, alternative counterbalancing orientations are evident throughout Freud's work. These derive from an understanding of human beings as *open systems*, formed by interpersonal relations occurring within cultural frameworks. In Anthony Wilden's terms, "living systems, at the organic level, and social systems, at the person level, are open systems. They depend for their structure and survival on the exchange of matter, energy, and information with their environments."¹ To characterize this dynamic, open-system orientation as it appears in Freud's work, I will frequently employ the term *psycho-cultural*.² This expresses psychological

dynamics as inextricably connected with relations to otherness, covering a range of domains. These include the interpersonal realm of specific others, but also what Jacques Lacan calls the symbolic order, or *grand Autre*: language, symbolic systems, judiciary and ethical codes, and other cultural forms. I also follow Wilden in defining culture as “the means of representation” within a given society.³ Myth, religion, literature, art, and indeed all forms of communicative media play a major role in subjective formation within culture—that is, in *acculturation*. I will argue that Freud’s texts on religion illustrate subjective formation as interconnected with *others* and *otherness* in multiple ways. Given a careful reading, they conspire to reveal an *other Freud*, concerned with issues of psycho-cultural formation and transformation.

* * *

Freud’s constructions concerning the origin and development of religion intertwine with inquiries into major issues such as the nature of ethical capacity, the interdependency of individual psychology and cultural existence, and possible guidelines for psycho-cultural modification. For our purposes, Freud’s narrative constructs are engaged and interpreted only insofar as they explicate the psycho-cultural status and function of religion. Generally, religion is understood as sets of cultural forms conjoining symbolization and idealization with ethical transformations of subjectivity. On the more obvious level, then, religion has to do with specific cultural resources that function in this formative manner (and this in itself extends the domain of religiously significant media beyond the historical religions *per se*). In addition, religious concerns may be further extended to include the psychological and developmental issues intertwined with these cultural forms. In other words, personal development—as psycho-cultural and as involving symbolically and ethically informed modes of subjectivity—is *itself* a focus of the psychology of religion. Freud’s writings on religion and culture address all of these issues, under several guises. For example, I will argue that the paradigm of adaptation to reality, formulated in the critical analyses of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*, is intertwined with an inquiry into ethical development. This latter issue, and its interconnection with cultural constructs, becomes more explicit in the subsequent *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Here, the limited, quasi-positivist definition of reality offered in the earlier text gives way to a more elaborate articulation of the cultural construction of reality. This allows for an exploration of multiple faculties and media in the meaningful formation of psycho-cultural existence.

After preparing the conceptual ground through an interpretive engagement with Freud’s more straightforward cultural writings, I turn to the more problematic, overdetermined narrative constructions of *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. Each of these will be shown to contain a wealth of insights into psycho-cultural developmental issues. These insights have been marginalized and neglected, mainly because of the obscuring influence of the pseudo-historical speculations at the surface of the texts. In the earlier writing, for example, one finds valuable insights into the way symbol systems constructively

affect and transform intra-psychic orientations, as well as relations to others and to reality. An issue that arises in a variety of ways is symbolically mediated *distanciation from immediacy*. This sense of immediacy is understood in multiple, but interrelated forms: as drive satisfaction, as narcissistic gratification, and as fixating objectification of the other.

The later text, *Moses and Monotheism*, builds on the latent insights of its precursor. It includes more refined analyses of personal transformations occurring in relation to cultural ideals (with monotheistic religion essentially acting as a paradigm for these). To describe these transformations, Freud often has recourse to language that stands in an uneasy relation to more prominent, well-defined psychoanalytic concepts and agencies. Thus *Moses and Monotheism* is laden with references to “drive renunciation” (*Triebverzicht*), “soul” (*Seele*, consistently mistranslated as “mind”), and *Geistigkeit* (translated as “intellectuality,” but also having the sense of “spirituality”). While Freud seems to be attempting to employ a completed psychoanalytic model to explain the origins and nature of religion, there is in fact *a reciprocal impingement of religiously derived concepts and issues upon psychoanalytic theory*. A series of intersecting themes emerge that pressure and alter the boundaries of the original explanatory model. Their pluralized and interstitial status meaningfully reflects qualities of subjectivity that cannot be collapsed into rigid, self-contained categories.

Freud’s writings on religion are vital for understanding and rethinking his metapsychological analyses of cultural forms. Particularly significant is the relation of these forms to intra-psychic transformations, partially embodied in the agency of the super-ego but actually straddling the three agencies. There are indications in these writings of a differentiated model of subjectivity, necessarily formed within the symbolic media of cultures. Thus the surface questions of the literal truth or falsity of religion give way to deeper and more complex analyses of subjective acculturation in qualitative terms. By extracting and extrapolating on such themes, I hope to show that these Freudian writings can continue to make a significant contribution to the contemporary discourse concerning issues of psychological development as intertwined with linguistic and cultural media.

I will argue that, in the margins of these writings, Freud is rethinking *questions of subjectivity* beyond the confines of dominant psychoanalytic models. There is at present a long list of thinkers who critique notions of subjectivity in which the term “designates the relation *of a substance* to itself.”⁴ This phrase, taken from a recent work by Jean-Luc Nancy, summarizes conceptual tendencies toward establishing the subject as the self-certain foundation for truth and reality. From the start, Freud’s work has contributed to undermining such totalized models of subjectivity. For example, the portrayal of subjectivity as differentiated into conscious and unconscious—and later into ego, id, and super-ego—works against assumptions of a punctual, self-transparent individuality. The Freudian subject is also *located* in several ways. It is an embodied and gendered subject, structured by relations to others and by specific cultural

influences. The contingency and variability of subjectivity, which are the concomitants of locatedness and embodiment, work against tendencies to elevate specific experiences and perspectives to the status of universality.

One of the paradoxes of Freud's work is that, while it provides important resources for overcoming abstracted, decontextualized models of the subject, it nevertheless sometimes perpetuates an imposition of certain fixed norms. Specifically, Freud repeatedly raises the perspective of the male subject to that of a universal. This occurs most glaringly, but certainly not exclusively, in the formulation of the Oedipus complex as the core of a developmental model. Luce Irigaray has rightly argued, with specific reference to Freud, that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine.'"⁵ There is little doubt that Irigaray is correct in this assessment, and she undertakes important work in formulating a discourse more reflective of gendered experience. Nevertheless, I do not believe that all analyses of subjectivity are necessarily compartmentalized within gender-specific categories, just as they are not necessarily and entirely culture-bound. To my mind, the key differentiation is between elevating specific finite perspectives to an exclusive universality and attempting to speak, from within finite categories, to shared issues of the human condition. The great artistic, literary, philosophical, and religious creations throughout history display something of this latter quality. Freud's work prioritizes male experience, and builds its symbolic and conceptual world around primarily male terms. Certainly, in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* this androcentrism is glaring. Nevertheless, when de-literalized, Freud's analyses can continue to reflect meaningfully on shared issues. These include the fact of locatedness within cultural forms, tensions between freedom and determinism that ensue therefrom, and resources and strategies for increasing awareness and autonomy. I will discuss these matters further in [Chapter 1](#), with specific reference to the Oedipus complex, and they will reappear throughout my analyses of the writings on religion.

The interdependency of subjectivity and culture, increasingly recognized by Freud, indicates the necessary, constitutive infiltration of external realities into the core of personhood. These Freudian insights are the basis for many of Jacques Lacan's formulations. As one commentator summarizes, "the theory of the subject is at the same time a theory of culture for Lacan, since both arise through the process of symbolization."⁶ Thus the present use of terms such as "the subject" and "subjectivity" derives from Lacanian usage. However, in prioritizing the de-reification of subjectivity, Lacan's work is certainly not free from the excesses characterizing much postmodern thought. In other words, like Derrida, Foucault, and others, Lacan often seems to take pleasure in simply undermining traditional, totalized notions of subjectivity (particularly as entrenched in notions of the autonomous ego). Overall, however, I believe that Lacan's work transcends the playful, if sometimes irresponsible, *dissolution* of the subject. He extends Freudian inquiry into subjectivity as differentiated and

culturally located, so that issues of language and communication related to modes of relationality become paramount.

As I will argue and illustrate at some length in the chapters which follow, Freud's concerns extend beyond a more simplistic placement of the individual within culture. They examine the symbolic vehicles necessary to both psychological and cultural formation in a manner that is truly dynamic, and that offers conceptual resources for critique and transformation. In other words, while the psychoanalytic model developed here indicates a dependency of subjectivity upon cultural symbol systems, it also shows symbolic tools, mediated by significant others, to be necessary resources for human agency.

Freud's inquiries point to developmental exigencies related both to interpersonal relations and to the cultural ideals and values informing these relations. In this regard, questions concerning the *ethical* possibilities of subjective development within culture will be raised. In his great work on Freud, Paul Ricoeur describes the "ethical significance" of psychoanalytic speculation as related to its transforming effects on the alienated individual.⁷ Hence Ricoeur distinguishes ethics from morality in the narrower, prescriptive sense. Because they can contribute to transformations of subjectivity fostering self-awareness and reflective capacity, Ricoeur makes a case for psychoanalytic theory and practice as having ethical dimensions. I will expand on these arguments by showing that Freud's writings on religion, in exploring the problem of subjective development structured by cultural ideals, make major contributions to this type of ethical inquiry.

* * *

I have noted that strategies for approaching Freud's work as manifesting conflicting trajectories with multiple registers of meaning have been formulated by several theorists. The French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche provides a model for the present inquiry in discerning an "unspoken dimension," and "unconscious lines of force" in the Freudian corpus.⁸ In this he appropriates the differentiation between *manifest* and *latent* levels of meaning formulated in the *Interpretation of Dreams*. This concern with an interplay of incongruous meanings can become the springboard for hermeneutical encounters with Freud's own texts, whereby insights contrary to the surface (manifest) lines of argument are elucidated rather than repressed. Of course, the language of manifest and latent, or surface and depth, should not be taken too literally. In textual interpretation, as in dream interpretation, the surface itself contains the depth. It thus becomes a matter of discerning the ruptures in a manifest viewpoint or line of argument; these provoke a troping of the text so that it is seen in a different way. Therefore in reading Freud I am not concerned with positing an underlying, hidden level of meaning. Rather, my procedure is to follow lines of tension in the text that disclose alternative perspectives.

In a similar vein, Jane Flax has summarized the issue by stating that "ambivalence, ambiguity, antinomies, and paradoxes pervade Freud's theories."⁹ She further emphasizes that these numerous forms of tension and, indeed,

contradiction, should not be glossed over. The *inconsistencies* in psychoanalytic theory need to be addressed; at the same time, a fuller appreciation of the richness of Freud's work requires careful attention to its fluctuating perspectives, levels, and registers. Flax notes that the majority of commentators on Freud, in following an interpretive paradigm governed by principles of consistency and homogeneity, "tend arbitrarily to reconcile the antinomies in his theories or merely to cancel out one pole in favor of the other."¹⁰ Such responses, both within and without psychoanalysis, assume knowledge of what Freud *really* meant. These assumptions characterize critical, anti-Freudian responses as much as doctrinaire psychoanalytic theory. For example, a common feature of object-relations, ego-psychology, Jungian, and existentialist theories is the rejection of biologism, taken as a more or less self-evident dominant explanatory principle in Freud's work. Authors from these schools then introduce what they take to be innovative emphases on freedom, creativity, and spirituality. Unfortunately, the assumption that Freud's work is consistently and coherently biologicistic and mechanistic blocks access to other possible readings and ensuing insights. Failure to recognize plurivocity feeds into the practice of surpassing a closed set of texts rather than exploring more fully the resources inherent in those texts. In this way, fixed assumptions about Freud's work are perpetuated and conceptual possibilities inherent in the work remain dormant.

In psychoanalytic theory the tension between manifest and latent content is supplemented by a series of dynamic concepts. Thus Freud offers several explicitly formulated ideas that speak to a contemporary interpretive sensibility. For example, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* notions of *overdetermination* and *overinterpretation* anticipate the rejection of paradigms of univocity by contemporary theories. Overdetermination applies to formative influences in the genesis of dreams, symptoms, and texts. Overinterpretation indicates the consequent multiplicity of modes and levels of meaning that emerge in analyzing these phenomena." Meaning is, in principle, uncontrollable and open-ended. This open-endedness is the product both of an inherent pluralization within language and symbols (as expressed in Paul Ricoeur's emphasis on *polysemy*), and of the proliferation of meaning in relation to contexts and viewpoints (as in Jacques Derrida's *dissemination*). Derrida summarizes the latter thus: "dissemination... can be led back neither to a present of simple origin nor to an eschatological presence.... It marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity."¹² Derrida certainly accepts Ricoeur's notion of polysemy, but insists further on the creative force of dissemination. This expands the dynamic of meaning production beyond an *inherent* plurivocity of discourse. It expresses an ongoing process that can never be reduced to the text or phenomenon *in itself*. An ever-shifting other or outside is necessarily operative in establishing the sense of a text. This outside might be understood in terms of context, as long as we bear in mind Derrida's caveat that "no context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness."¹³ That is, no context is final or closed. Again, it is particularly fruitful to direct

these interpretive procedures toward Freud's densely imbricated discourse (as Derrida has himself done to some degree).¹⁴

* * *

The following interrogations illustrate that in Freud's writings on religion and culture an apparent surface consistency and homogeneity is continuously disrupted. In these writings, the most reductive assumptions are often conjoined with insights and ideas that resist and subvert the more limited surface or manifest content. My strategy of reading highlights such contradictions, and then offers means whereby potential insights contained in the contradictory moments are developed and articulated. If one delves into Freud's writings and works out their sometimes inchoate latent insights their unparalleled range and penetration of conceptualization becomes enhanced as a resource for ongoing reflection. This does not mean that a systematic alternative view to the manifest theories is cleverly hidden in Freud's work. Appearing in tension with some of the dominant arguments and, often, in a literary, symbolized form, the counter-insights to the manifest arguments remain fragmentary and incipient. The task of the present work will be to bring these latent insights to a more coherent and well-articulated state of development. This is accomplished both in the interpretive engagement with the writings on religion and culture, and through extrapolations on key ideas.

A meaningful analysis of the tensions within texts such as *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* requires a strategy of *reading against the grain* that does not assume a uniform flow, a homogeneous current of meaning. This potentially allows counter-moments or seemingly marginal aspects of the work to enter into the interpretive process, altering the status of the dominant arguments. This strategy for reading Freud is enriched by his use of polysemous narrative constructs, including figurative and myth-like images and symbols, in the presentation of his ideas. This is in line with Freud's numerous references to the intuitive discernment of psychological truths in the works of poets and artists. However, the more poetic moments in Freud's work also conflict with his predominant resistance to embracing literary and figurative forms of discourse as scientifically valid. This is one of several sources of tension in these writings. It is engendered partly by Freud's inability or unwillingness to develop his more poetic insights systematically and partly by his somewhat restricted, quasi-positivistic understanding of scientific inquiry.

I will not argue that Freud's empirically based critiques of religion are unfounded or entirely incorrect. Indeed, empirical and experiential bases are essential to critical reflection on cultural and subjective modes. However, there is a line where an empirical attitude hardens into doctrinaire forms of radical empiricism, scientism, or positivism. A standard definition of positivism's standpoint is that "science is the only valid knowledge and facts the only possible objects of knowledge."¹⁵ In Freud's work, such positivistic views appear in many guises. The early trauma theory, the postulation of libidinous drives and infantile wishes as the bases of psychical and cultural phenomena, and

the reduction of the origin and meaning of religion to determinate primal events are all manifestations of positivistic tendencies.

In regard to the mixed elements of scientism, positivism, and radical empiricism in Freud's work, I will illustrate that these surface orientations can be subjected to a deconstructionist type of analysis. That is, the positivistic elements in Freud's thinking are qualified and overturned by elements *within* his own inquiries. My approach is again influenced by Derrida in this respect. He argues that empiricism predicates truth on a form of experience designating a "relationship with presence."¹⁶ In this form of inquiry the postulation of truth becomes embedded in a privileging of a single interpretive modality of the phenomenally given. Therefore more comprehensive and differentiated forms of understanding require resistance to the closure sustained by fixation on presence. What is present, or empirically manifest under specific conditions to a particular observer, needs to be held in relation to other possible experiential and conceptual configurations. The interplay or complementarity between perspectives and interpretations yields deeper insight into any given phenomenon. Elsewhere, in commenting on the nature of logocentrism and metaphysics as representative of closed or totalized systems of explanation, Derrida again discusses empiricism. As he states, "realism or sensualism —'empiricism' —are modifications of logocentrism."¹⁷ Any orientation that privileges a determinable reference point as the final ground and arbiter of truth is, in this sense, logocentric or *meta-physical*. The latter terms become pejorative by indicating closed and controlled systems of reference, whether materialist or idealist, resisting intrusions of new, alternative perspectives.

In "Freud and the scene of writing," Derrida undertakes a deconstruction of the focus on "presence" in Freud's topographical model of conscious and unconscious, as developed in relation to dream interpretation. He overturns the paradigm of an underlying unconscious content or referent, determinable in itself apart from the modalities of representation by which it comes to be known.¹⁸ Yet, for all his fascination with psychoanalysis, Derrida never applies the deconstruction of empiricism to the Freudian writings on religion and culture, in which positivist and empiricist paradigms figure most prominently. The present work makes a new contribution by undertaking a deconstructive analysis that overturns a metaphysics of radical empiricism and its correlative reductionisms. Freud's discourse on religion, combining a "scientific" mode of explanation with a high degree of literary depth and complexity, provides a unique test case for this strategy. Subverting and splitting open the positivist shell of these writings discloses elements of an alternative orientation to psycho-cultural realities, unassimilable with the dichotomized categories of empirical and ideal.

Roland Barthes has noted that overturning fixed readings and attending to the *playing* of the text "coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy."¹⁹ Barthes's formulation traces disclosures of new meaning and insight to the unraveling procedures of deconstruction and other postmodernist styles of reading. However, this argument goes beyond a fascination with mere dissection and

dissolution. It indicates what may be termed a *reconstructive* component that can ensue from postmodernist analyses. A twofold inquiry, moving from fissuring surface meaning to assembling symbolic resonances and fragments of alternative lines of thought, reflects the strategy of the present undertaking. The analysis proceeds from moments of tension in the Freudian texts to the discernment and elucidation of latent insights concerning the psycho-cultural function of religion. Such alternative levels of meaning can be understood in terms of narrative or disclosive, rather than historical or correspondence, models of truth.

A useful definition of narrative truth, within a specifically psychoanalytic context, is provided by Donald Spence:

Narrative truth can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on aesthetic finality.²⁰

Spence is particularly concerned with narrative criteria for truth in the psychoanalyst's understanding and interpretation of the analysand's recollections. The significance of narrative truth, however, extends beyond these parameters. It exhibits important points of contact with Freud's notion of the truth value of *psychical reality*. In each, self-accounts, like dreams, may reveal profound psychological realities of an individual's life. That is, what is at issue are symbolized expressions of subjective experience and self-understanding. These can be psychologically "true"—that is, disclosive of personal meaning—even if they do not literally correspond to external events. As Spence emphasizes, "narrative truth has a special significance in its own right...making contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular set of events."²¹ Spence contrasts the narrative approach to truth with the criterion of correspondence with definite facts that characterizes historical truth. The latter, he argues, "is time-bound and is dedicated to the strict observance of correspondence rules; our aim is to come as close as possible to what 'really' happened."²² Spence tends to see Freud as firmly rooted in a historical approach to truth. This view certainly captures the dominant intentional and surface orientation of both *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. It is in line with Freud's arguments concerning the historical, as opposed to the material, truth of religion (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)). Yet this historical approach represents only one dimension of these texts, and perhaps not the most significant one. Without assuming an unproblematic fit of Spence's categories to Freud's writings, a narrative approach helps reveal much that remains obscured by Freud's predominant focus on historical validity. However, emphasis on narrative levels of meaning must be supplemented by *deconstructionist* procedures. These are required to disclose and interrogate textual conflicts and tensions in a way that moves beyond surface levels of meaning. If there are narrative and symbolically portrayed insights in these texts,

they emerge sporadically, covertly, and in points of negation at the literal and manifest levels.

On a manifest level (that is, as a set of pseudo-historical constructs) the narrative account first formulated in *Totem and Taboo* shapes the analysis in *Moses and Monotheism*. It is transposed onto the biblical setting, with Moses partially re-enacting the role of primal father. Freud also uses the earlier narrative as the explanatory backdrop to the subsequent one. Thus he invokes phylogenetic memories of the primal parricide to explain patterns of affective behavior and irrational eruptions of guilt. This attempt at a causal link, however, serves to divert the focus from narrative repetitions that are indicative of deeper psychological and symbolic levels of meaning traversing the two texts. The etiological accounts of Freud's pseudo-historical constructs act as *myths* informing us about the *status and impact* of ideal cultural forms. The significance of these mythical constructs parallels Mircea Eliade's interpretation of cosmogonic myths as establishing *paradigms* for cultural worlds or the order of things. The symbolic order, representing the establishment of reality *in the time of origins*, is not historical but paradigmatic.²³ Similarly, Freud's narratives—seemingly describing the origins of religion, culture, and morality—better serve to symbolize dynamic psycho-cultural processes. Freud's narratives use particular historical materials, and constructive extrapolations thereon, to make points reflecting more broadly on religious dimensions of psycho-cultural existence. In remarkable contrast to the materialist views habitually associated with psychoanalysis, these texts especially highlight *language, symbolization, and ideals* as forming and transforming humanly experienced reality. The precise nature and function of ideals, values, and worldviews, of course, varies enormously in different cultural and historical contexts. Nevertheless, it is their *necessary* intervention in personality formation that is the core latent insight of Freud's religious writings.

* * *

In examining Freud's cultural and metapsychological writings, the initial construction of psychoanalytic method and theory within a therapeutic context cannot be ignored. Generally speaking, there are two sides to the matter: the normalization of pathology and the pathologizing of normality. With regard to the first point, even in Freud's earlier writings the boundary between normal and pathological begins to be blurred. Similar "mechanisms" are evident in pathological, neurotic manifestations such as hysterical symptoms, compulsions, and phobias, and in everyday occurrences such as dreams, faulty acts (parapraxes), and jokes. It can be argued that this blurring works against the segregation and disenfranchisement of the mentally ill by locating their experience and behavior within general human terms.²⁴ Reciprocally, however, there is an extension of the therapeutic model to cultural levels, which are seen to require critical amelioration. Freud's tendency to pathologize is quite evident in most of his cultural writings. Pathologizing provides the basis for a critique of specific cultural formations and practices, among which religion figures

prominently. Here the following question becomes crucial to my inquiry: Does the prominence of a pathologizing attitude toward culture obscure lines of critique informed by *constructive* goals? The concerns of this question are sustained by many underlying arguments in Freud's writings on religion and culture. These do not merely *undermine* existing structures and orientations, but point beyond them in a manner governed, quite explicitly, by ethical ideals and concerns with meaningful human development.

The overtly pathologizing, reductionistic, and atheistic stance of the texts on religion has too often been taken as predetermining their possible meaning. Of course, it seems clear that Freud's intentional stance toward traditional religions *is* both atheistic and predominantly critical. In *Moses and Monotheism*, for example, Freud is quite explicit about his views on literally understood religious postulates. Speaking of the satisfaction found in the belief in a higher being, he concludes: "We can only regret that certain experiences in life and observations in the world make it impossible for us to accept the premise of the existence of such a Supreme Being."²⁵ One must respect Freud's avowed position. Moreover, Freud's arguments outlining the pathological and regressive dimensions of specific forms of religious belief and practice demand serious engagement. Yet this atheistic and generally critical orientation does not mean that his analyses do not yield constructive insights. This argument does not involve positing that Freud was secretly religious. Rather, the point is that Freud's writings inquiring into the psycho-cultural dimensions of religion are not fully governable by his manifest intentional stance. These writings are, on some levels, critical and pathologizing, but they disclose much more about religion and culture than symptomological and positivistic models allow.

One might further argue that Freud's atheism, combined as it is with a spirit of critical scientific inquiry, acts like a creative catalyst as much as it forms a restrictive prejudgement. A critical, questioning orientation impelled Freud's detailed psychodynamic inquiries into religion, morality, and culture. Beginning with a rejection of literal, metaphysical self-understandings of religion and morality, Freud sought the sources and meaning of religion *within* culture and psychology. The care with which Freud elaborates an explanatory model yields numerous valuable insights into the human significance of religious forms. These incorporate symbolic, representational, and aesthetic activity concerning meaningful worldviews related to ethically informed subjective maturation. As overdetermined, religious forms speak to issues of meaningful interpersonal subjectivity in a manner that cannot be reduced to their constitutive components. Thus my analysis of Freud is not directed toward a final definition of religion, but rather toward further unfolding modes of subjectivity informed by symbolic frameworks of meaning, values, and ideals. The emerging insights may, I hope, be reapplied to transform our understanding of traditional religious forms, but this task is not undertaken here.

* * *

From among the various *postmodern* theorists to have engaged Freud, the work of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva most expressly informs my analyses. They provide strategic conceptual tools for the project of rereading Freud and offer structural concepts that extend the insights emerging from this reading. However, my intention is to address and appropriate the work of either theorist not *in toto*, but only insofar as it contributes to my line of inquiry.

I approach Lacan as one who continually stimulates fresh reading and understanding. He opens our interpretive eyes, both generally and with particular respect to Freud, and also provides new concepts and categories that extend aspects of Freud's thought. Attempts to classify Lacan's work either as a coherent system or as a failed attempt at systematization seem misplaced. Lacan understood his work mainly as an exegesis of and extrapolation on Freud, and it is in this spirit that it is employed here. Lacan contributes to a mode of interpretation and model of subjectivity that develop the dynamic conceptions *within* Freud's work while resisting its reifying tendencies. Ultimately, using Lacan to enhance a reading of Freud on religion and Freud's texts on religion as a context for reading Lacan illustrates previously unseen points of convergence between the thinkers. My analyses will illustrate the point that Freud's inquiries into religion seem to call for Lacanian categories of interpretation, such as the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*. In this I am less concerned with legitimating Lacan than with clarifying and strengthening certain insights and lines of inquiry he develops out of Freud.

Like Freud, Lacan was an avowed atheist.²⁶ He should therefore be understood as contributing to a psychology of religion in functional terms. Again, for my purposes this has to do with issues of meaningful and ethical subjective development within cultural forms. Even on this level Lacan does not offer a comprehensive theory of religion, and it may well be that formulating such theories is predicated on systematizing and totalizing premises which are no longer tenable. Lacan's work, however, provides an insight into the psychological significance of religion, or into what may more accurately be termed the religious dimensions of subjectivity. He illuminates broadly religious issues by addressing interconnections among language, symbolism, ideals, and the formation of ethical and reflective capacities through his open-system model of the subject.

One of Lacan's few direct statements concerning religion supports the view that problems of meaningful psycho-cultural development are in themselves religious ones. He describes religion as being at once a mode of posing "the question of existence in the world" and of the subject's self-interrogation.²⁷ There is an evident interconnection between these two points of focus. That is, religion is related to the question of the subject's mode of being, and to sets of symbol systems and practices that express and inform those subjective modalities. The Lacanian orientation offers a means of conceptualizing self-transformation and maturation as relational, and as involving linguistic and symbolic resources. The Lacanian model, variable and open-ended as it is,

encompasses both the ethical dimensions of human relations and the cultural symbol systems that structure them. I believe that these aspects of Lacanian thinking are brought into much sharper focus by juxtaposition with Freud's inquiries into religion and culture.

Julia Kristeva's writings, more directly than Lacan's, delve significantly into the Freudian texts on religion. *Powers of Horror*, for example, includes a great deal of reflection on issues and themes related to *Totem and Taboo*. Although the present work undertakes a new, sustained analysis of Freud's writings on religion and opens original lines of inquiry, Kristeva's analyses will be incorporated into my interpretations at several important points. In addition, Kristeva develops conceptual tools that extend Lacanian models of the subject-in-process, especially as it is related to meaningful development within symbolic forms. Overall, Kristeva does not always agree with Lacan, but much of her work refines his analyses of the intersections between individual psychology and culture. Kristeva furthers these analyses, particularly with her model of semiotic forms of expression connected with religious and artistic production. The category of the semiotic enriches the Lacanian understanding of the nature and role of linguistic media in the interplay of cultural and individual development. It also contributes to an understanding of psychical trauma, conflict, and the breakdown of symbolizing capacities, while providing strategies for addressing these issues. In these inquiries Kristeva opens issues concerning critical and transformative responses to existing symbolic social structures. In other words, while Freud and Lacan tend to illuminate issues of symbolic *structuring*, Kristeva moves to issues of *restructuring*. In this way, her work speaks to many issues emerging from my reading of Freud.

By extracting some latent themes in Freud's work, and extending them through insights and ideas derived from Lacan and Kristeva, I hope to develop further the dynamic model of subjectivity they share. Following the thread provided by issues concerning the subject-within-culture establishes more intimate connections between these key figures in French psychoanalysis and Freud's foundational texts on religion and culture. This shared project reveals Freud's analyses of religion to be more intrinsic and essential to psychoanalytic theory, and much more complicated and innovative, than has generally been considered. If the present work is successful in its endeavors it will be difficult (if not impossible) henceforth to read Freud on religion and culture according to previously standard assumptions.