



Working Paper 146/2015

Freud, Religion, and Messianism

Gilad Sharvit

Abstract¹

This paper seeks to address Freud's early theory of religion and to uncover its basic anti-eschatological structure. I argue that Freud identified in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) a fundamental religious impulse, at the infrastructure of human history, which commits history to constant struggle between guilt and rebelliousness. This impulse, the product of the murder of the primal father, prevents, in the Freudian formulation, the fulfillment of the ideal of reason within history. Compared with German Idealism theories of history and nature, Freud's theory of religion subverts the organizing structure and purposeful causality of historical progress, and hinders all hopes for a Hegelian End of History. Freud's anti-messianic theory of religion thus not only negates the eschatological vision of German philosophy, but allows for political action by rejecting hopes for transcendental salvation. If Freud's critique of religion usually assigns Freud to the tradition of Kant and Hegel, the proposed reading of Freud's theory of religion establishes his place in counter-Enlightenment philosophy, alongside Nietzsche and Heidegger.

¹ The author would like to thank the Center for Austrian Studies, European Forum at the Hebrew University and the City of Vienna for the generous financial support which made this paper possible, and Prof. Christoph Schmidt for his careful reading of the manuscript and his illuminating and valuable suggestions.

“As Zarathustra crossed over the great bridge one day, the cripples and the beggars surrounded him and a hunchback spoke thus to him: ‘Behold, Zarathustra! The people too learn from you and are gaining faith in your teaching; but in order to believe you completely, they need one more thing—you must first persuade us cripples!’ Zarathustra, however, responded to the speaker thus: ‘If one takes the hump from the hunchback, then one takes his spirit too—thus teach the people. And if one gives the blind man his eyesight, then he sees too many bad things on earth, such that he curses the one who healed him. But the one who makes the lame walk causes him the greatest harm, for scarcely does he begin to walk when his vices run away with him—thus teach the people about cripples.’”

Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On Redemption”²

² Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 109.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
A. Freud's Critique of Religion	7
B. Attempts at Reconciliation	12
C. <i>Totem and Taboo</i>: Religion, History, and Ambivalence	17
D. Freud, Schelling, and the (non)Teleological Design of History.....	22
E. Religion and Anti-Messianism	26
Epilogue	30
Bibliography	31

Introduction

In a thank-you letter to Ludwig Binswanger, one of the pioneers of existential psychology, on the occasion of Binswanger's lecture in honor of Freud's eightieth birthday, Freud was forced to defend his psychoanalysis from a criticism of the Swiss psychiatrist (one that was considerably widespread by the time). "Of course I don't believe you. I always lived on the ground floor and in the basement of the building—you maintain that on changing one's viewpoint one can also see an upper floor housing such distinguished guests as religion, art, and others. You are not the only one...." Freud, clearly upset with the constant allegations against his reductive science, which supposedly neglects the "upper levels" of human reality, decided not to hold back. "In this respect you are the conservative, I the revolutionary. If I had another life of work ahead of me, I would dare to offer even those high-born people a home in my lowly hut. I already found one for religion when I stumbled on the category 'neurosis of mankind.'"³

For Freud, the "high-born people" and their abstract and rationalized notions of culture emptied the human sphere. The demand to separate the spiritual from the material, to elevate the ethical to the realm of reason, and to degrade the drives to sinful behavior, plundered, according to Freud, the human experience. One of Freud's main goals was to re-possess those abstract ideals and bring them back to reality. In practical terms, Freud aimed to reconnect the cultural phenomena to the libidinal matrix of the individual. In that context, Freud was especially critical of the attempts to relegate religion to a holy realm of transcendental divinity and to a distant God "by replacing him [with] an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle."⁴ Religion was part of human reality: not an "upper-level" ideal, but bloody and material. It offered an emotional foundation for human experience exactly because it was part of its "basement" foundation. In the following, I seek to explore this "basement" quality of Freud's religion as presented in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). In particular, this paper aims to illustrate how the emotional/libidinal infrastructure of religion manifests a fundamental theoretical significance.

³ Freud, *Letters*, 431, letter 286, October 8, 1936.

⁴ His resentment was evident in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), where he declares: "One would like to mix among the ranks of the believers in order to meet these philosophers, who think they can rescue the God of religion by replacing him by an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle, and to address them with the warning words: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!'" Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 74.

Writing *Totem and Taboo*, Freud was very much engaged with his basic early metapsychology. At that time, Freud had “a Darwinian struggle in the mind,”⁵ in which the interaction of conflicting drives constituted the psyche. This mental dualism was also the source for his theory of history and religion. In individual and in historical development, drive (or force) contradiction was responsible for the evolution of the psyche/religion. Freud’s *Character and Anal Egotism* (1908), in that sense, prepared the way for his meta-plan of history: in the same way that character was formed out of constituent conflicting drives, history was formed out of constitutive ambivalent forces of guilt and rebelliousness. If the life of the individual was grounded on the contradictory interaction of drives at the libidinal level, then in *Totem and Taboo* human history was similarly based on the interaction of the contradictory forces of religion. My claim is that this theory of religion offers a subversive view of religion and history, in which history as the realm of mitigation of the eternal emotional ambivalence of guilt and rebelliousness (which the murder of the primal father unleashed) defies all attempts at rational reconciliation.

In my reading, Freud’s analysis of religion uncovers a religious impulse that runs against apocalyptic messianic, but more importantly, against the theory of ‘history as progress’ of the Enlightenment, and thus serves as an unexpected criticism of rational utopianism. Freud’s insistence on ambivalence at the core of the religious impulse first expresses an unwavering denial of the religious “wishful fantasy of the Messiah,”⁶ yet at the same time uncovers and rejects the eschatological framework of German philosophy. Thus, alongside Freud’s critique of faith, I suggest that *Totem and Taboo* offers a critical and necessary role to religion: religion inoculates culture against both religious and rational unhealthy hopes for redemption, and promotes (and does not hinder) constructive political action.

The discussion of Freud’s critique of religion as an anti-messianic theory begins with a description of the basic paradigms with which Freud thinks of religion, and is followed by a short illustration of the contradictory reactions to Freud’s critique of religion, focusing on the influential works of Peter Gay and William Meissner. Both are indicative of the narrow dichotomy that Freud’s readership was offered until recently (confronted with Freud’s critique of religion, one was forced to choose between religious faith and Freudian psychoanalysis). Consequently, and building on recent contributions that focus on the crucial insights that Freud’s critique of religion offers to the humanities in general, I propose a rereading of Freud’s

⁵ Young-Bruehl and Bethelard, 825.

⁶ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 89.

early theory of religion in *Totem and Taboo* in which Freud's insistence on ambivalence at the core of religion and history emerges as an important theoretical basis for a possible psychoanalytic critique of the increasingly popular notions of messianism. My argument focuses on Freud's theory of religion and ambivalence and on the structural identity between religion and the oedipal complex as an entry point to the discussion on the endless struggle between two forces of religion—guilt and rebelliousness. Freud's theory of history is then compared with the teleological framework of history and nature of German Idealism. The comparison with Schelling's philosophy, one of Freud's important forerunners in German philosophy, exhibits the similarities between Freud's and Schelling's conceptions of historical development, but at the same time exposes an essential difference: whereas Schelling (like Kant and Hegel) committed his natural history to a rational teleological structure, Freud denied such a position and insisted on the impossibility of an end to the historical tension of religion. Lastly, Freud's theory of religion is discussed as an anti-eschatological theory of history, in reference to the Bataille-Kojève debate on Hegel's thesis of the End of History.

A. Freud's Critique of Religion

Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) noted the belated interest of the author in cultural problems, "after making a long detour through the natural sciences, medicine and psychotherapy."⁷ The book's point of entry to the discussion on the value of human culture was the emotional pain that civilization inflicts on the individual—repeating to a large extent the crux of Nietzsche's concerns about the repressive function of society in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Focusing on "the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d'être*," which was "to defend us against nature,"⁸ Freud ascertained that the role of religion is to supply the fundamentally inadequate, "defenseless" and "helpless"⁹ mankind with (essentially ineffective) emotional support. Instead of constructive control of the environment, as advocated by the Voltairean ideal of cultivation of "one's own garden," the religious believer appeals to the mercy of the gods, and tries "to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and, by so influencing them."¹⁰ In Freud's version of Enlightenment, science and reason called for adult behavior, while religion consoled the believer, yet afforded no truly effective solution to the basic human condition. It indeed degraded mankind to an "infantile" reaction; one that imitated "a similar state of helplessness: [of] a small child, in relation to one's parents."¹¹

Freud, however, was very quick to admit that the defense against nature was only a transitory function of world religions. In modern reality, as nature was to a considerable degree under control, religions were assigned another purpose. "It now became the task of the gods to even out the defects and evils of civilization."¹² The modern age relegated religion to the moral domain. According to this social explanation of religion, one extremely popular in nineteenth-century liberal theology, religion's task was to educate the simpleminded, those unfit for complex philosophical doctrines. To counteract that claim, Freud had to delve in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) into a different kind of argument, one that concerns the truth value of religious beliefs. If Freud focused on the opposition between religion and action earlier in the text, here Freud emphasized the opposition between religion and truth. Against those ascribing allegorical meaning to the religious texts, and thus an alternative but equal path to social

⁷ As he noted in a postscript from 1935 to his *Autobiographical Study*. Quoted by Strachey in the editor's notes to *The Future of an Illusion*. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

wisdom, Freud claimed that the statements of world religions are nothing but illusions. And an illusion, stated Freud, was “not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error...”¹³ In contrast to errors, illusions have truth value, one that is “derived from human wishes”¹⁴ and not from reality. Illusions might be true, that is, in conformance with reality, but that does not confirm their truth value, only their tentative agreement with reality. By defining religious beliefs as illusions, as predicates with truth value, Freud granted religious beliefs independent epistemological status. Echoing Spinoza’s attack on superstitions in the *Tractates Theologico-Politicus*, Freud countered the calls to harmonize religious and scientific/philosophical truths: religion was not a different way to confer the same rational truth, but a categorically contrasting and opposing system of knowledge. Science was grounded in reason, religion in dreams and wishes, and one could either hold to his religious beliefs or join modern society. The rupture between the two categories of truths was just too deep. Religion, moreover, was even dangerous because it inhibited the possibility of attaining another, ‘better’ truth. It was literally pushing mankind to the side of the road:

It is asking a great deal of a person who has learnt to conduct his ordinary affairs in accordance with the rules of experience and with a regard to reality, to suggest that he shall hand over the care of what are precisely his most intimate interests to an agency which claims as its privilege freedom from the precepts of rational thinking. And as regards the protection which religion promises its believers, I think none of us would be so much as prepared to enter a motor-car if its driver announced that he drove, unperturbed by traffic regulations, in accordance with the impulses of his soaring imagination.¹⁵

The ‘religious as infantile’ paradigm was revisited only three years after the publication of *The Future of an Illusion*, in the opening chapter of Freud’s monumental *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In a long reply to Romain Rolland’s attempt to secure the authenticity of religious feelings by relegating them to a quasi-mystical “sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, 171. Interestingly, Freud’s insistence on the ‘religion as illusion’ paradigm seems inconsistent. Whereas in *Illusion* Freud toiled to dissociate illusions from delusions, which he regarded as essentially “in contradiction with reality” and thus “differ[ing]” (Freud, *Illusion*, 31) from illusions, in a later work he denounced world religions because they “must be classed [as] mass-delusion.... No one, needless to say, who shares a delusion ever recognizes it as such.” Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 81.

of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic’”¹⁶—Freud reiterated his claim that those feelings should be recognized as “an early phase of ego-feeling.”¹⁷ If religion had no claim to truth, as Freud clearly proved in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud had to respond to a second claim of modern theology according to which religion is grounded in some sort of deep emotional experience of oneness with the world/God. To fight against that thesis, which was historically popularized by Friedrich Schleiermacher and echoed in the then recent works of the Jewish theologians Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, Freud degraded the ‘holy’ experience of Rolland to a long-repressed narcissistic feeling. The religious believer was nothing but a scared child who unconsciously revives a feeling of omnipotence—one which was grounded in the primary (and blissful) narcissistic unity of the ego and world in infancy—to fight the overflowing fears of “the superior power of Fate.”¹⁸ Just as he treated so many other human narcissistic convictions, Freud conceded that the oceanic feeling had originated from an authentic experience only to add that this experience was rooted in an infantile transitory mental reality and prescribed no unnatural phenomenon. In that sense, the childlike essence of the religious phenomenon marked, according to Freud’s paradigm of the ‘religious as infantile,’ not a reconnection with god, but intense despair and alienation from the world and from oneself, in line with the main argument of Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

Freud offered another critical analysis of religion that was focused on religious practice, and less on religion’s truth value, in his relatively early *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907). This short essay opened with Freud’s observation on the subtle resemblance between obsessive actions of neurotics “and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their piety.”¹⁹ Both phenomena, Freud suggested, originate from the same basic motivation to protect the individual from an overflowing feeling of guilt. His hypothesis was that analogously to the neurotic effort to relinquish guilt with the aid of ceremonial actions, the religious practice of the believer is directed toward the repression of antisocial urges. In essence, the religious believer’s anxious anticipation of divine punishment for his corrupt inclinations fosters heightened tension that religious practice aims to relieve.²⁰ This analogy presented the obsessional neurosis as “a travesty, half comic and half tragic, of *a private*

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Freud, *Obsessive Actions*, 117.

²⁰ Ibid., 125.

religion,”²¹ but more importantly, regarded “obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion...as a *universal obsessional neurosis*.”²²

Freud’s ‘religious as neurotic’ paradigm was based on an analogy between the neurotic and the religious believer at this point. The move from the private to the public sphere, however, was only hinted at.²³ *Totem and Taboo*, written half a decade later, would give Freud the opportunity to demonstrate the deep and inherent connection between these two realms of human reality. Freud was, nonetheless, quick to adapt his theoretical perspective on the connection between obsessive behavior and pathological religiosity to one of his well-known case histories, that of the Wolf Man. Sergei Pankejeff was under Freud’s treatment between 1910 and 1914 after suffering from several incidents of seduction in childhood (Freud identified him as “Wolf Man” after a dream about white wolves). The young Russian’s early years were dominated by oedipal castration anxieties that led to outbreaks of obsessive neurosis. Freud observed that the Wolf Man was able to evade those anxieties by succumbing to religious piety under the influence of his mother, a devout believer herself. Religion offered an alternative narrative to the child, and helped him sublimate his sadistic drives: the Bible stories of his mother, in particular those focused on the passion of Christ, afforded Pankejeff valuable opportunities to restrain his sexual impulses, and formed a safe haven from his guilt. “The untamed and fear-ridden child became social, well-behaved, and amenable to education.”²⁴ The Wolf Man case thus presented the deep affinity of religion with neurotic practices, and illustrated, in line with Freud’s later analysis of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*, the subtle ways in which religion achieves its educational purposes and helps the individual regain control over his unsocial tendencies.

The paradigms of the religious as ‘infantile,’ ‘neurotic,’ and ‘illusionary’ were all openly discussed in Freud’s corpus and formed the basis for his critical analysis of the human condition. There is, however, another source for the negative evaluation of religion in Freud, one that Freud portrayed only cautiously. As noted in several previous works on his theory of religion, Freud’s perception of the category of the religious is colored with the rationalistic prejudice toward the religious believer as feminine.²⁵ The covert structural affinity in the

²¹ Ibid., 119, emphasis mine.

²² Ibid., 125-126, emphasis mine.

²³ For more criticism of Freud’s relatively short and “problematic... formula,” see in Ricoeur, 232-233.

²⁴ Freud, *Infantile Neurosis*, 115.

²⁵ Schreber’s fantasy of feminine jouissance and its religious horizon is discussed in Santner’s *My Own Private Germany*. For more on the complex of femininity, homosexuality, and religion (mostly in connection with Freud’s

modern Western imagination between the devout believer, as powerless, passive, and compliant, and the woman (both are also condemned for their emotional behavior and lack of adult and autonomous rational character), was briefly noted in Freud's essay on masochism, where "unconditional obedience" was characterized as a "female situation."²⁶ This unholy superstition was indeed extensively thematized in the famous Schreber case history, where femininity was mentioned specifically in association with religious faith. Reading Schreber's *Memoirs*, Freud declared that Schreber's delusions were composed by two main, distinct yet inherently connected features. The first was Schreber's religious tendency, the second his feminine transformation. After his second mental crisis, the German judge, originally "a doubter in regard to God," turned into a devoted believer, correspondingly to a profound change in his ascetic character that precipitated feminine sexual enjoyment. Schreber, simply put, was changed by his illness twice: from a man to a woman and from a doubter to a believer. These changes were deeply linked. Schreber's religious attitude was a feminine attitude. Schreber "took up a feminine attitude towards God; he felt that he was God's wife."²⁷ This was the image Freud encouraged of the religious believer—that of a submissive, devoted woman.²⁸

complicated attitude toward his Jewish identity), see in Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* and Geller's *On Freud's Jewish Body*.

²⁶ Freud, *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, 162.

²⁷ Freud, *Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia*, 32.

²⁸ The Wolf Man case is also marked by the feminine impulses and bisexuality of the patient.

B. Attempts at Reconciliation

Freud's critique of religion represented for many a new psychological foundation for modern secularism, alongside that of Marx, Nietzsche, and Feuerbach. As noted by Philip Reef,

Confronting religion, psychoanalysis shows itself for what it is: the last great formulation of nineteenth-century secularism, complete with substitute doctrine and cult—capacious, all embracing, similar in range to the social calculus of the utilitarian, the universal oscillatory of Comte, the dialectical historicism of Marx, the indefinitely expandable agnosticism of Spencer.²⁹

Peter Gay's *A Godless Jew* (1987) has been seen to offer a paradigmatic interpretation of Freud along those lines. On his way to writing his biography of Freud, Gay was first partly invested in protecting the secular Freud and his science from a growing emphasis on the importance of Freud's Jewish heritage to his life's work (Gay insisted on underlining the *godless*, rejecting the *Jew* from Freud's famous parable).³⁰ Yet, for Gay, the stakes of the argument were much higher: Gay's Freud was a key player in the last crucial battle over the essence of modernity between science and its "enemy,"³¹ religion; a battle that began with Newton and Copernicus. In this war, "victory [was] not yet at hand."³² At that delicate hour, a great danger was posed by all those "attempts at reconciliation, or at least redefinition of the great conflict,"³³ in which religion was granted its own legitimate and autonomous "branch of mental life"³⁴ side by side with science. Freud, with his unreserved criticism of the religious experience and, more importantly, his insistence on the unbridgeable divide between scientific truth and religious illusions, was crucial to the ongoing war against religious faith. Freud's critique of the oceanic feeling in *Civilization and Its Discontents* in particular subverted any glimpse of reconciliation, especially of those mild-hearted bourgeois atheists who tended to lapse and ask for God's help in time of need.³⁵

²⁹ Rieff, 257.

³⁰ For an extensive bibliography on the subject, see Gilman, 3ff.

³¹ Gay, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ The impact of Freud's critique of religion was not restricted to the intellectual history of psychoanalysis. Some of Freud's immediate successors found in his clinical insights on religion an indispensable source for their

Despite Gay's laborious effort to create an insurmountable rupture between psychoanalysis and religion, many sought in Freud's work a different, more compliant, attitude toward religion. Jules Masserman, for example, already in the 1950s, found in Freud's corpus some justification for the inherent value of our *Ur*-delusions (religion among them) as defense mechanisms against neurotic anxiety, concluding that "delusions, in a deeply humanitarian sense, are indeed sacred."³⁶ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, in *The Birth of the Living God* (1979), similarly argued for the importance of private representations of god for one's wellbeing.³⁷ Complementary arguments were pursued outside psychoanalytic circles as well. Hans Küng, the Swiss priest and theologian, called in his *Freud and the Problem of God* (1979) for the restructuring of Freud's critique of religion. Besides his main concern to defend Christian belief, Küng struggled to show that Freud's work is not directed against "genuine, healthy, true religion[s],"³⁸ i.e. Christianity, but only against unenlightened, primitive, 'false' religiosity. Freud. Küng hinted, chose an easy battle: he misleadingly focused on "the distorted religion of the masses" while neglecting "the truly sublime examples of religion, those heights scaled by a St. Francis, Buddha, or Meister Eckhart."³⁹

Meissner's influential criticism of Freud's theory of religion in *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (1984) is one of the important examples of this tradition. Meissner viewed Freud as a victim of his nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific *Weltanschauung*. A student of the Helmholtz school, Freud, Meissner claimed, was committed to a "highly reductionistic and mechanistic view of man's mental life,"⁴⁰ which prompted his insistence on exploring religious phenomenon "only in terms of his pathological model."⁴¹ From Freud's narrow theoretical perspective, religion could not be analyzed as a legitimate medium of human reality; it had to be reduced to a side effect of the economic calculation of human needs, drive

therapeutic work. Otto Fenichel, for example, already in 1938 was able to attest that as "his patients progressed in their analyses, they became gradually liberated from their religion." Helene Deutsch similarly explained a failure of one of her treatments by the fact that her patient, a Catholic nun, "remained within her religious order." Cited in Blass, 618.

³⁶ Masserman, 333.

³⁷ For recent attempts to reconcile psychoanalytic theory and practice and authentic religious experience, see in Eigen, *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*; Symington, *Emotion and Spirit*; Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic*. For Freud's Jewish identity, see Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*; Oring, *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud*; Rice, *Freud and Moses: The Long Journey Home*.

³⁸ Küng, 156. For another attempt at dialogue between Christian theology and Freud, see in Scharfenberg, *Sigmund Freud and His Critique of Religion*.

³⁹ Kovel, 73. Rempel, alternatively, claimed that "one of the principal weaknesses of Freud's critique..." is that it is "not so much a critique of religion per se, but a critique of Christianity, especially modern European Catholicism." Rempel, 236.

⁴⁰ Meissner, 192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

behavior, and unconscious motivations. In place of Freud's outmoded positivistic theoretical structure, Meissner identifies "other perspectives... [which] have emerged to enrich and expand the original Freudian perceptions...[and] which promise a considerably more penetrating and nuanced account of religious experience."⁴² Instead of Freud's "reductive posture,"⁴³ Meissner found in Winnicott's developmental model new, inspiring opportunities for the healthy and productive reintegration of religious experience into psychoanalysis. He focused in particular on Winnicott's concept of transitional phenomena and "its role in structuring the area of illusion,"⁴⁴ which allowed psychoanalysis to reflect on the diverse ways religion is constitutive in the development of "the most mature, integrated levels of psychic functioning."⁴⁵

Meissner's *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* manifested a certain frustration and theoretical perplexity in the attempts to integrate religious practice—as a fundamental and meaningful human experience—back into Freud's psychoanalysis.⁴⁶ Whereas Masserman, Rizzuto, and others struggled to whitewash Freud's critical theory of religion, Meissner's unequivocal criticism of Freud's theoretical framework, and his decisive endorsement of object-relations theories, exhibited a dead end of the Freud-religion debate. The wishful fantasy to reconcile Freud and religion could have been realized, according to Meissner, only at the expense of some changes in the Freudian theoretical infrastructure. Meissner, to put it differently, revealed a razor-sharp dichotomy that the readings of Freud's theory of religion encountered until recently. One had to choose: either religion or Freud's version of psychoanalysis.⁴⁷

Yet alongside the wish to find a place for faith in the psychoanalytic corpus, recent years have witnessed an increasing focus on the broader cultural insights of Freud's theories of religion and Judaism. Interested less in the question of the (non)legitimacy of religious faith, recent works have focused on the valuable clarifications that Freud's critical project had to offer to the humanities writ large. In contrast to deliberate attempts to mitigate Freud's deep critique of religious practices and faith, there is a wish to understand the role of religion on the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ And in that agrees with the thrust of the argument of Gay and Rieff, yet not with their conclusion.

⁴⁷ Stefan Zweig, Freud's close friend and biographer, was honest enough to acknowledge that challenge at the end of his controversial biography of Freud: "This hunger of the soul for faith can find no nutrition in the harsh, the cold, the severe, the matter-of-fact sobriety of psychoanalysis.... It can supply us with facts, with realities, but never with philosophy. *That is its limitation*" (Zweig, 358, emphasis mine).

cultural level. More than a discussion of the psychology of the believer, and instead of judging religious faith or recommending it as a healthy and necessary illusion, those works inquire into religion's critical role in human history and civilization, aiming at a psychoanalytic interpretation of modern society and its relations with religion.

This shift in Freud's readership (which should be recognized as part of the growing interest in theology in post-secular literature) was partly inaugurated by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses* (1991). Yerushalmi's fresh reading of Freud's last unconventional work on religion and Judaism provoked multiple responses, which found inspiration in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) for the reinterpretation of Freud's psychoanalytic project.⁴⁸ Freud's theory of religion constituted a point of departure for theoretical engagement with other realms of human experience: Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses*, Richard Bernstein's *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (1991), and Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996), for example, located in *Moses* a new and revolutionary theory of tradition; Jan Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian* (1997) and Eric Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (2001) propounded an ethical theory that reinterprets the relation between law and violence in Freud; Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History* (1988)⁴⁹ uncovered a new foundation for a psychoanalytic theory of history; and Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* (1997) and Sander Gilman's *Freud, Race, and Gender* (1993) offered a reinterpretation of his theory of gender, sexuality, and racism. Boyarin and Gilman clearly exemplified this new perspective on Freud's theory of religion: instead of interpreting religion vis-à-vis Freud's theory of sexuality, both made his theory of religion an entry point to a radical postcolonial critique of Freud's position regarding his view of sexuality, his reaction to anti-Semitism, and his perception of science.

In the following, I aim to expand further this line of interpretation and propose to locate, in Freud's early theory of religion in *Totem and Taboo*, an important theoretical basis for a possible psychoanalytic critique of popular eschatological notions (both religious messianism and secular theory of historical progress).⁵⁰ In my reading, Freud's analysis of religion, along with its criticism of religious faith and practices, entails a vision of an endless historical tension

⁴⁸ Some of them followed (even if only in spirit) on Edward Said's well-known recommendation to read *Moses and Monotheism* as late style. The book, Said insists, offers "not resolution and reconciliation... but, rather, more complexity and a willingness to let irreconcilable elements of the work remain as they are: episodic, fragmentary, unfinished (i.e., unpolished)" (Said, 28).

⁴⁹ Originally published as *L'écriture de l'histoire* in 1975 and thus prior to Yerushalmi's book.

⁵⁰ For Freud's theory of history in *Totem and Taboo*, see in Bettelheim and Streibel (eds.), *Tabu und Geschichte*.

that subverts the rational thesis of historical progress and precludes a reconciliatory end to history.

C. *Totem and Taboo*: Religion, History, and Ambivalence

To shed light on Freud's theory of religion, one should start at the beginning, the true beginning of Freud and his own history. *Totem and Taboo* is a book about a beginning that marks the gravity, the unchallenged command of a beginning. It is a "dream,"⁵¹ that makes manifest the latent forces that rule history from the onset of civilization.

To all appearances, *Totem and Taboo* outlined a theory of religion that essentially reiterated the famous Comtean positivistic doctrine of religious evolutionism. Propounding a modern theory of euhemerism, the book allegedly depicted a linear historical development of religion from the material, primitive totem religion—the first form of father-surrogate organization—to the monotheistic universal ideal god. Anticipating the rationalistic tenor of Freud's theory of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*, *Totem and Taboo*, the argument goes, set forth a decade and a half earlier a theory of religion in which new, modern religions were better than the old, primitive ones. Here Freud elaborated on the gradual "process of development"⁵² from the primitive totemic religion to higher, rational forms of religion to monotheism, which, at the end of *The Future of an Illusion*, had to give way to "our god Logos."⁵³ *Totem and Taboo* thus only repeated the famous triadic development of animism-religion-science under the auspices of psychological development: it traced the development from the "uninhibited" primitive to the "inhibited" neurotics,⁵⁴ from the beginning of the deed to thought.⁵⁵

However, despite the easily discernible similarities, Freud's theory of history added a vital ingredient to the rationalistic narrative that subverted the vision of Auguste Comte. There was a fundamental "tension of ambivalence"⁵⁶ at play that generated a different kind of theory of history.

Ambivalence was notably introduced to clinical jargon at the beginning of the twentieth century by Eugen Bleuler, one of Freud's early significant supporters in the Viennese scientific community. The term was coined originally to describe a phenomenon of contradictory feelings

⁵¹ Lacan, 122.

⁵² Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 147. In the words of Phillip Rieff, "*Totem and Taboo* is a thoroughly evolutionist treatise, but Freud's evolutionism was uniquely and pessimistically focused on the permanent limits of development" (Rieff, 202).

⁵³ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 54.

⁵⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 161.

⁵⁵ Freud explained the reference to mental structures in his history of religion, by claiming that otherwise "there would be no progress in the field and next to no development" (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 158).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

toward the same experience. At that stage, the convergence of conflicting emotions suggested the possible existence of two separate levels of consciousness and was part of Bleuler's theory of psychological splitting in schizophrenia. Freud, however, adapted Bleuler's concept to his theory of normal development: ambivalence registered the basic and universal conflicting feelings that structured the oedipal drama.⁵⁷ In the period of 1908-1912, in a series of case studies, Freud found that while a "chronic co-existence of love and hatred, both directed towards the same person and both of the highest degree of intensity,"⁵⁸ was "a special peculiarity of neurotic people,"⁵⁹ an acceptable degree of contradictory attitudes of love and hate, specifically in the child's relations to his father, were part of normal development.⁶⁰ Over the years ambivalence became a key concept in psychoanalysis, and part of the explanation of melancholia,⁶¹ drive formation,⁶² social organization,⁶³ and in the context of this work, of history and religion. Shortly after the publication of *Totem and Taboo*, in *Thoughts for the Time of War and Death* (1915), Freud finally recognized ambivalence as a "law,"⁶⁴ "a very remarkable phenomenon," which, even if it was "strange to the lay public,"⁶⁵ constituted major parts of psychic reality.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud's "tension of ambivalence" came to the fore in the act that started history, i.e., in the drama of the primal father. Based on Darwin's hypothesis of the primal hordes as the prehistoric form of human collective organization, Freud speculated that in the beginning mankind was organized in small tribes in which "a violent and jealous father...keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up."⁶⁶ At one point, the suffering sons who were subjected to endless restrictions united and killed the father. To celebrate their victory, their escape from slavery, the brothers prepared a totem meal in which they devoured the murdered father. The sons, however, realized quickly that the new

⁵⁷ For Freud's different conceptualizations of ambivalence, see Bergler, *Three Tributaries to the Development of Ambivalence*; Gruber and Miller, *On Ambivalence*.

⁵⁸ Freud, *Obsessional Neurosis*, 239, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ Freud, *The Dynamic of Transference*, 106-107.

⁶⁰ Freud, *Schoolboy Psychology*.

⁶¹ Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 250.

⁶² Freud used ambivalence as a technical term to indicate the final stage in the development of the instinct, when the instinctual impulse's "opposite may be observed alongside of it" (Freud, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, 131).

⁶³ Freud, *Group Psychology*, 102.

⁶⁴ Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 293. Ambivalence was not only structuring the psychical landscape and theory of development. Via his drive theory, Freud found ambivalence to be fundamental to the fabric of psychical action: "It is very rarely that an action is the work of a single instinctual impulse (which must in itself be compounded of Eros and destructiveness). In order to make an action possible there must be as a rule a combination of such compounded motives" (Freud, *Why War?* 201).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 141.

situation entailed not only complete freedom, but a burden of guilt. The excitement of the deed gave way to strong feelings of remorse. “They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too.”⁶⁷ As a result, in what would famously become known as the son’s *deferred obedience*, they decided to revoke the deed by reinstituting the basic coercive reality that the father had enforced earlier: the sons resurrected the father in the image of the totem animal, and renounced the fruits of the murder “by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free.”⁶⁸ The imaginary reinstitution of previous reality constituted the human civilization. In that respect, human history began as a consequence of the sons’ ambivalence between two basic contradictory tendencies: rebelliousness and guilt. The remarkable combination of hate and love, the wish to kill the father and the remorse for having done so, was at the core of the first organized community. The tension between guilt and rebelliousness, a productive tension, brought about the first form of religion and the first law of the prohibition of incest.

Whereas in *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* Freud could have only assumed an analogy between the religious and the neurotic, Freud’s theory of mind, in particular the oedipal complex, laid the basis in *Totem and Taboo* for a *structural identity* between the two phenomena. These were not “some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics” as the subtitle of the book so cautiously proposed, but “the return of totemism in childhood” as the title of the last, decisive chapter asserted. The book identified a “trace of the origin” of religion and neurosis in “one particular source”:⁶⁹ both were elaborated responses to guilt. Indeed, the formulation of the identity of the totemic and the oedipal complex was founded on Freud’s notion of ambivalence. When considering the totemic system in the context of the Little Hans case (and of Ferenczi’s similar report on Little Árpád), Freud recognized that both the totemic and the oedipal complex “offer valuable points of agreement: the boy’s complete identification with his totem animal and his ambivalent emotional attitude to it.”⁷⁰ In the same way that the child during the oedipal stage is ambivalent toward his father, loving and hating him, simultaneously afraid of his power and admiring him, the primitive religious believer was ambivalent toward the totem animal. On that basis, Freud claimed that “the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 131.

totemic system...was a product of the conditions involved in the Oedipus complex.”⁷¹ Religion on the cultural level, and the oedipal complex on the individual level, were grounded in basic ambivalence. The religious believer hated and loved the primal universal father, felt guilty for the murder and rebelled against his laws; the individual, every individual, hated and loved his personal father.

The ambivalence between guilt and rebelliousness (at the core of religion), however, was not a momentary contradiction but a structural one. The first religious organization only allayed the tension between guilt and rebelliousness that was “too great for *any contrivance* to be able to counteract it.”⁷² The emotional overflow, the essential contradiction, never stopped acting:

Let us assume it to be a fact, then, that in the course of the later development of religions the two driving factors, *the son's sense of guilt and the son's rebelliousness*, never became extinct. Whatever attempt was made at solving the religious problem, whatever kind of reconciliation was effected between these *two opposing mental forces*, sooner or later broke down, under the combined influence, no doubt, of historical events, cultural changes and internal psychical modifications.⁷³

The murder unleashed an endless struggle into history. In the Freudian formula, the sons’ sense of guilt and the sons’ rebelliousness became two antagonistic *forces* with a *formative* function. The interaction between the two ensured the constant production of different ways to manage the horrors of the primal murder. Ambivalence was much more than an accident of conflicting emotions: ambivalence was at the core of historical time. The basic antagonism of religion pushed civilization onward: the antagonism of guilt and rebelliousness ceaselessly introduced new religious systems, new forms of civilization. Ambivalence *never ended*: paganism and monotheism were but examples of the inventive interplay of history, in which guilt and rebelliousness contracted time after time to bring about new forms of civilization. For Freud, Christianity thus only amounted to a new point of agreement between the forces of history, a new resting point of the ambivalence of history. It was “an *alternative* method of allaying...guilt that was first adopted by Christ.”⁷⁴ In the Freudian formula, the Nietzschean

⁷¹ Ibid., 132.

⁷² Ibid., 145, emphasis mine.

⁷³ Ibid., 152, emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 153, emphasis mine.

preeminence of guilt was mitigated by a subtler theory of religion in which guilt and rebelliousness structure religion *together*: the killing of Christ was indeed an act of atonement, but it was also an act of rebellion, in which the sons deified one of their own. In Freud's words: "a son-religion displaced the father-religion."⁷⁵ However, even Christianity was only a temporary solution for the essential contradiction of history. Other forms of religious organization had to appear, as there was no system that was able to truly eradicate that eternal tension.

To sum up, for Freud, the ambivalence of guilt and rebelliousness is the motor behind history. History is not following abstract ideals of reason; it is not a response to changes in the means of production, nor the conclusion of Kant's liberal notion of human "desire for honor, power and property."⁷⁶ Freud's history, instead, unfolds as a result of a fundamental and eternal conflict of opposing emotions that forces civilization to change, to produce new modes of social organization. Every change realigns previous social systems, yet no change puts an end to the eternal opposition of the forces at the heart of those systems. The religious impulse of guilt and rebelliousness is the immanent force at the core of human civilization. When things changed in history, when one period of history replaced another, this shift occurred at the level of the religious organization. Here, cultural institutions and political power structures are conditioned by their relations to a deeper, and ultimately fundamental base. *Totem and Taboo*, in that sense, is not a history of religion but Universal History as a history of religion.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁷⁶ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, 44.

D. Freud, Schelling, and the (non)Teleological Design of History

Totem and Taboo's theory of the evolution of history manifested a basic idealistic structure at the heart of the early psychoanalytic project.⁷⁷ Freud, "an immediate heir of German classical philosophy,"⁷⁸ however, incorporated critical changes into the eschatological framework of Kant, Hegel, and Schelling. He adopted the basic paradigm of German Idealism's philosophy of history (and nature) into his psychoanalytic theory of history and religion, but subverted its basic tautological structure. In the following, I propose a rereading of Freud's theory of history and religion in light of the philosophy of nature of Schelling, the closest to Freud among the proponents of German Idealism,⁷⁹ in order to highlight the basic anti-eschatological essence of Freud's theory of religion.

Despite Freud's consistent, ardent refusal to recognize the resemblance of his psychoanalysis to Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*,⁸⁰ his theory of the history of religion and civilization in *Totem and Taboo* echoed a basic Schellingian formulation. Building on Odo Marquard's work on the theoretical influence of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* on Freud's theory of mind, where he notably claimed that "*Psychoanalyse—kann man sagen—ist eine 'entzauberte' romantische Naturphilosophie, darum denkt sie in der Art dieser Naturphilosophie*,"⁸¹ I claim that the deep influence of Schelling on Freud is found exactly where both are looking at the same place—at the historical evolution of nature and religion based on a fundamental notion of drive antagonism.

The similarities between Freud and Schelling start with the fact that both thought of history and nature as legitimate realms for idealistic or psychological structures. Schelling applied the idealistic paradigm to nature, believing that "Nature should be Mind made visible";⁸² Freud applied his theory of individual psychology to the history of civilization and translated the totem system to infantile neurotic behavior. Both thinkers had the same intuition about the

⁷⁷ Freud's debt to German Idealism was recently well established in the work of Matthew C. Altman and Cynthia D. Coe, who claim that "in a self-consciously scientific project, Freud engages the major themes of nineteenth-century German philosophy, but he modified them in such a way to articulate the doubts that have preoccupied us over the last century, especially doubts regarding the possibility of rational progress and transcendence of our animal nature" (Altman and Coe, 197).

⁷⁸ Cavil, 392.

⁷⁹ On Freud and Schelling, see also in Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, and more recently in Fitches, *The Foundation of the Unconscious*, and McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*.

⁸⁰ Already in his 1890 *Psychical (or Mental) Treatment*, Freud recognized Schelling's prominent place in the romantic philosophy of nature, only to immediately disavow any connection of that unscientific method of healing with psychoanalysis. Freud, *Psychical (or Mental) Treatment*, 282, fn. 2.

⁸¹ Marquard, 163.

⁸² Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 41.

activity of nature and history: for Schelling, nature acted as a “subject,”⁸³ as an “absolute activity,”⁸⁴ in which the powerful contradiction between two eternal conflicting drives produced the manifold of natural phenomena. Freud found that civilization and religion should be defined as an ongoing activity of forces, in which the powerful contradiction between the forces produced the manifold of historical phenomena. Nature as visible *Geist* was analogous to Civilization as visible collective mind: both were evolving in history via a struggle of unconscious conflicting forces. Moreover, in the same way that Schelling found a natural phenomenon, i.e., matter, to be “forces attracting and repelling through action and reaction,”⁸⁵ or in other words, a product of unconscious natural forces, Freud thought of the religious phenomenon, for example, Christianity, as a *new* meeting point of the unconscious contradictory historical forces.⁸⁶ For both, the individual phenomenon—matter in Schelling’s theory of nature and specific religious organization in Freud’s theory of history—was formed by unconscious conflicting *forces*. Judaism and the totem system, exactly like mammals or planets, were like a “whirlpool,”⁸⁷ or a temporary resting point in an eternal struggle of the unconscious powers of history and nature.⁸⁸

There is, however, one fundamental difference between Freud’s and Schelling’s theories of evolution that marks the deep, critical change that Freud brings into the idealistic scheme.

For Schelling, in line with the Aristotelian *Physis*, the conflicting powers of nature were working in compliance with the *master plan of creation*. The drives produced reality according to a concept that governs everything, as “Nature *can* produce nothing but shows regularity and purpose, and Nature is *compelled* to produce it.”⁸⁹ Schelling—and here he was very close to Hegel—discerned hierarchic relations between different stages (*Potenzen*) in nature. He organized nature in an ascending order that started with inorganic objects, evolved to organic

⁸³ Schelling, *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 202.

⁸⁴ Schelling, *First Outline*, 13.

⁸⁵ Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 143.

⁸⁶ “The very deed in which the son offered the greatest possible atonement to the father brought him at the same time to the attainment of his wishes *against* the father. He himself became a god....” (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 154). Moreover, for Schelling the forces of nature contradicted each other in the same way Freud fashioned historical ambivalence. Following Kant’s *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling argued that nature is based on the contradiction of “forces attracting [*anziehender*] and repelling [*Zurückstoßender*] through action and reaction” (Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 143). In a later formulation, those contradictions were delineated as expanding and limiting forces, very much in line with the general definition of the Freudian rebelliousness and guilt (*ibid.*, 187).

⁸⁷ Schelling, *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 206.

⁸⁸ Marquard, 163, emphasis in text. On the deep relevance of the romantic theory of nature to psychoanalysis, see Vermorel and Vermorel, *Was Freud a Romantic?*

⁸⁹ Schelling, *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, 194.

matter and then to reason as the ultimate purpose of ‘nature as subject.’ His combination of unconscious tension and organized nature marked his unique position between the romantic vision of nature and rational idealism: Schelling indeed acknowledged the fundamental place of ambivalence in nature but at the same time insisted on harnessing that contradiction to nature’s meta-design. His nature was based on unconscious conflictual activity, but there was still an abstract fundamental structure that controlled its development.⁹⁰ The ultimate aim of nature was reason, despite the supposedly conflictual behavior of specific elements.

In opposition to Schelling’s program, Freud’s theory of history and religion affords no organizing principle. If Schelling’s philosophy of nature is built on a teleological system and organized by its purpose, exactly in parallel with Kant’s *An Idea for Universal History* or Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History*, Freud is very careful not to identify any organizing concept for his history of religion. Freud accepts the basic idealistic model of nature—history is built out of a productive contradiction of unconscious forces that structure in their meeting points the manifold of religious phenomena—but he rejects the meta-structure of the system that German Idealism holds to be fundamental to any theory of history and nature. There is no organizing concept; history is not compelled to move toward reason or freedom, but only to find new solutions to basic emotional and endless tension. History, for Freud, is an attempt at reparation that is not moving toward something, but away from something—it is not moving toward reason, but away from guilt. There is no purpose to the history of religion but to find new ways to govern the pain of the eternal guilt that the primal murder inflicted on civilization.

Thinking of history in terms of his theory of drive conflict, Freud asserted that this conflict was indeed an endless struggle, without any hope for final reconciliation. In that sense Freud was indeed a scion of nineteenth-century positivism: he adopted the architecture but not the conclusions of German Idealism’s philosophy of nature. His theory of history and religion is a chimera: its head is that of Schelling, its tail is that of Helmholtz.

Moses and Monotheism, Freud’s last important attempt to offer a psychoanalytic theory of history and religion, further articulated that argument in his discussion of the transition from Judaism to Christianity, where Freud acknowledged that the shift from one period of history to

⁹⁰ Joseph Esposito located six different schemes of nature in Schelling’s work that signal his growing commitment to structured positive development: “we can say that the development of his thinking during this time proceeds from the concrete and piecemeal to the more abstract and architectonic” (Esposito, 87). Christopher Lauer finds rationality to be a constitutional factor in nature’s development as reason becomes the end of nature (Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*).

another might help society handle the emotional distress of guilt better, but at the same time could induce regression in other basic characteristics of that society.

The Christian religion did not maintain the high level in things of the mind to which Judaism had soared. It was no longer strictly monotheistic, it took over numerous symbolic rituals from surrounding peoples, it reestablished the great mother-goddess and found room to introduce many of the divine figures of polytheism.... *Above all, it did not, like the Aton religion and the Mosaic one...exclude the entry of superstitious, magical and mystical elements, which were to prove a severe inhibition upon the intellectual development of the next two thousand years.*⁹¹

Although Christianity, according to Freud in *Moses*, offered a better, effective way to manage the guilt of the murder of Moses and the primal father, it also represented a decline into superstition and “magical elements.” The new religion offered an effective solution to the religious impulse of history, but degenerated society into primitive reality. It moved away from guilt, but did not promise reason or freedom or any other kind of improved access to the End of History.

⁹¹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 88, emphasis mine.

E. Religion and Anti-Messianism

Freud's theory of religion includes a principal element of anti-messianism, one that is crucial to his theory as a counter-Enlightenment project. His harsh criticism of the religious illusions inoculated his psychoanalysis against all hopes of redemption of modern Christian eschatology and Jewish messianism. Yet Freud was extremely effective in dealing with all kinds of eschatological imagination. His concept of the religious impulse and theory of ambivalence entailed an endless struggle between emotions, and promised the impossibility of an end to history. Whereas Kant postulated a gradual progress of mankind and foresaw the reconciliation of all negation in the perfection of reason, there was no progress in Freud's history, only an ongoing tension between contradictory forces. And whereas young Schelling insisted on a rational meta-design, and Hegel declared that the "application of the principle of freedom to worldly reality...is the long process that makes up history itself," Freud detected within history an endless Sisyphean effort that could only engage, yet never end, the decree of an insurmountable beginning.⁹²

My claim is that Freud's theory of religion subverted one of the cornerstones of the Enlightenment. His insistence on a fundamental religious impulse of history disputed Kant's and Hegel's unreserved trust in the gradual progress of history. It uncovered the basic eschatological essence of the German philosophical tradition and committed reality to an immanent theory of (non)development. Freud was not a modern knight of the Enlightenment as Gay, Rieff, and so many others wished to believe. And it is his critique of religion that manifested that point most clearly. Freud fought against the rational theory of progress with his critique of religion. He was able to reject "the wishful fantasy of the Messiah" precisely by accepting religion into his worldview. There is no end to history, asserts Freud, because of the fact that human civilization is essentially and ultimately religious. The religious impulse, based on an endless contradiction at the core of human civilization, promised an endless history *without* illusions of redemption.

Like Benjamin, Rosenzweig, and Kafka, Freud witnessed how the promises of progression degenerated in the first half of the twentieth century to the horrific reality of "the infinite perfectibility of mankind."⁹³ And while the Frankfurt School so convincingly illustrated the

⁹² Hegel, 21.

⁹³ Benjamin, 260.

disastrous nature of the rule of reason, Freud posited a different history for modernity, devoid of hopes for progress. The ideal of reason, whose disastrous culmination in history was witnessed by the twentieth century, could now have looked toward religion, the Freudian formulation of religion, to be saved. Even in his most optimistic work, *The Future of an Illusion*, where Freud presented his version of modern Enlightenment, he was very cautious to endorse any kind of rational solution to history. Recommending wholeheartedly “our god logos,” Freud still distanced this reality of the perfect rational society to an “unforeseeable future, and a new generation of men.”⁹⁴ While many focus on the promise of science, I suggest that Freud was cognizant of the problems of rational eschatology and was careful to dissociate reason from history and make that perfect society an abstract ideal, a regulative idea, and not a concrete historical reality. Freud, no doubt, was a man of science. But, in my view, his vision of the past did not allow his science to be the only solution: civilization was condemned to be neurotic and religious, yet this was not only an analysis of a disease but a possible prescription of a cure.

Hegel’s famous notion of the End of History as the absolute sovereignty of reason promised the final institution of inner harmony in civilization. This reality would bring about, in Freudian terms, the peaceful reconciliation of the essential opposition of guilt and rebelliousness. In a deep sense, it would indeed represent an end of civilization; or otherwise put, an end to the impulses that govern historical phenomena. Yet, from a Freudian perspective, mankind had faced such a reality in the remotest past. A reality without guilt had indeed existed. It ruled in the history of the individual, prior to the oedipal complex, and in history, prior to the murder of the primal father. And in both cases, this guiltless reality emulated a primitive reality. For the individual, an ambivalence-free psyche defines the newborn child, or alternatively, the mental rupture of the psychotic. Similarly, to arrive at that point of reconciliation of guilt and rebelliousness history would not need to move forward, but backward, to the Darwinian tribe of humanlike. For civilization, the End of History represents a prehistoric reality.

At this point, Freud’s theory of religion and history well resonates with the basic insights of the Bataille-Kojève debate on Hegel’s notion of the End of History. In his eminent *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1980), Kojève discerned a basic inconsistency in Hegel’s theory of the End of History. Hegel’s philosophy of history postulated that the development of Spirit in history is dependent on human action, which functions as the middle ground between

⁹⁴ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 54.

universal necessity and the individual will. Action for Hegel is indeed the defining characteristic of the subject, as the being that negates the given, opposes the object. Yet, for Hegel, Kojève deduced, the End of History marks the end of that movement of progression, and metaphysically, the end of Action: “the end of human Time or History—that is the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical individual—means quite simply cessation of Action in the full sense of the term.”⁹⁵ In the End of History, subjectivity as negation disappears in absolute knowledge, and the need to improve in history disappears as well: Action, the most essential feature of humanity, becomes obsolete. In simpler terms, for Kojève the End of History entails “the disappearance of Man.... Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given being.”⁹⁶ Humanity, as Kojève’s Hegel agrees with Freud, faces a return to nature: if the final arrest of Freud’s ambivalence restores the prehistoric tribe, Hegel’s end of activity transforms the subject into an animal. For both, activity/ambivalence indeed mark the essence of humanity, but Freud alone is loyal to the radical implications of this defining essence and refuses to postulate its end.

In his notes to the second edition of the book, Kojève’s Marxist/anticipatory tendencies gave way to his later liberal optimism: “The Hegelian-Marxist end of History was not yet to come, but was already a present, here and now.”⁹⁷ The world had attained its perfection: “all the members of a ‘classless society’ can from now on appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them.” Kojève’s later enthusiasm with the “‘American way of life’”⁹⁸ signifies, it appears, a possible degeneration of Hegel’s End of History thesis as propounded by the Right Hegelians. Freud’s project, I argue, constitutes, alongside to Bataille’s theory of “Unemployed Negativity” in his *Letter to X* (1937),⁹⁹ an important corrective to the conservative conclusions of some Hegelians: Freud’s theory of history entails, like Hegel’s, endless activity, yet, in opposition to the Right Hegelians, Freud refuses to identify, even theoretically, a possible end to that activity, and thus is able to resist its catastrophic implications. There is no end to history, I argue with Freud, and for that reason, reality can never be perfect. With Nietzsche, Freud is able to condemn “the belief that one is a latecomer

⁹⁵ Kojève, 159, fn. 6.

⁹⁶ Kojève, 158, fn. 6.

⁹⁷ Kojève, 160, fn. 6.

⁹⁸ Kojève, 161, fn. 6.

⁹⁹ In my reading, Freud is closer to Bataille’s definition of the post-historical reality via his concept of “‘unemployed negativity.’” For Bataille, the end of the Hegelian activity did not end all activity, but only the positive, objectifying activity, and gave way to the superior “negativity empty of content.” His focus on objectless and structure-less activity at a fundamental feature of post-Hegelian history well resonates (despite important differences) with Freud’s description of ambivalent history (Bataille, 297).

of the ages... [as] paralyzing and depressing.”¹⁰⁰ Here, the wishful fantasy of those looking at the present with satisfaction is replaced with a persistent call for action.

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 104.

Epilogue

In the beginning, the earliest beginning of the psychoanalytic project, Freud was only able to offer a transformation of one's "hysterical misery into common unhappiness."¹⁰¹ Pondering these mild, weak hopes for change in light of his later work on religion and history, I would like to suggest that Freud was neither weak nor helpless, as many claimed later, but soberly honest. Salvation was not possible, and the End of History was only a "wishful fantasy," leaving the therapists with small hopes for human mental health. In the world of the twentieth century, this radical anti-messianism could have offered despair but also, perhaps, a different kind of redemption.

¹⁰¹ Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, 305.

Bibliography

- Altman, C. M. and Coe, C. D., *The Fractured Self in Freud and German Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- Assmann, J., *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- Bakan, D., *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1958).
- Bataille, G., "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel," in: *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Botting, F. and Wilson, S. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
- Benjamin, W., "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in: *Illuminations*, trans. Zohn, H., ed. Arendt, H. (New York: Schocken Books, 1988).
- Bergler, E., "Three Tributaries to the Development of Ambivalence," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 17: 173-181 (1948).
- Bettelheim, C. P. and Streibel, R. (eds.), *Tabu und Geschichte: zur Kultur des kollektiven Erinnerns* (Wien: Picus, 1994).
- Blass, R., "Beyond Illusion: Psychoanalysis and the Question of Religious Truth," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 85: 615-634 (2004).
- Boyarín, D., *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- Caruth, C., *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
- Cavell, S., "Freud and Philosophy: A Fragment," *Critical Inquiry*, 13: 386-393 (1987).
- de Certeau, M., *The Writing of History*, trans. Conley, T. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- Derrida, J., *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Prenowitz, E. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- Eigen, M., *The Psychoanalytic Mystic* (New York: Free Association Books, 1998).

- Esposito, L. J., *Schelling's Idealism and Philosophy of Nature* (London: Associated University Press, 1977).
- Ffytche, M. *The Foundation of the Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Freud, S., *Psychical (or Mental) Treatment* (Vol. 7). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Strachey, J. (24 vols.), hereinafter abbreviated S.E. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1890]).
- Freud, S., *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*. S.E. (Vol. 9) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1907]).
- Freud, S., *Character and Anal Erotism*. S.E. (Vol. 4) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1908]).
- Freud, S., *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*. S.E. (Vol. 10) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1909]).
- Freud, S., *Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*. S.E. (Vol. 12) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1911]).
- Freud, S., *The Dynamic of Transference*. S.E. (Vol. 12) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1912]).
- Freud, S., *Totem and Taboo*. S.E. (Vol. 13) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1913]).
- Freud, S., *Some Reflections on Schoolboy Psychology*. S.E. (Vol. 13) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1914]).
- Freud, S., *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*. S.E. (Vol. 14) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1915]).
- Freud, S., *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. S.E. (Vol. 14) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1915]).
- Freud, S., *Mourning and Melancholia*. S.E. (Vol. 14) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1917]).
- Freud, S., *From a History of an Infantile Neurosis*. S.E. (Vol. 17) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1918]).
- Freud, S., *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. S.E. (Vol. 18) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1921]).

- Freud, S., *The Economic Problem of Masochism*. S.E. (Vol. 19) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1924]).
- Freud, S., *The Future of an Illusion*. S.E. (Vol. 21) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1927]).
- Freud, S., *Civilization and Its Discontents*. S.E. (Vol. 21) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1930]).
- Freud, S., *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. S.E. (Vol. 22) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1933]).
- Freud, S., *Why War?* S.E. (Vol. 22) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1933]).
- Freud, S., *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*. S.E. (Vol. 23) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1939]).
- Freud, S. *Letters*, trans. Stern, T. and Stern, J., ed. Freud, E. L. (New York: Basic Books, 1960).
- Freud, S. and Breuer, J., *Studies in Hysteria*. S.E. (Vol. 2) (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1893]).
- Gay, P., *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
- Geller, J., *On Freud's Jewish Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- Gilman, D., *Freud, Race, and Gender* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
- Graubert, D. N. and Miller, J. S. A., "On Ambivalence," *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 31: 458-464 (1957).
- Hegel, G. W. F., *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Rauch, L. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988 [1840]).
- Kakar, S., *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Kant, I., "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in: *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. Nisbet, H. B., ed. Reiss, H. C. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1784]).
- Kojève, A., *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. Nichols, H. J., Jr., ed. Bloom, A. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

- Kovel, J., "Beyond The Future of an Illusion: Further Reflections on Freud and Religion," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 77: 69-87 (1990).
- Küng, H., *Freud and the Problem of God*, trans. Quinn, E. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
- Lacan, J., *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Grigg, R. (New York: Norton, 2007).
- Lauer, C., *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010).
- Marquard, O., *Transzendentaler Idealismus, Romantische Naturphilosophie, Psychoanalyse* (Cologne: Dinter, 1987).
- Masserman, J., "Faith and Delusion in Psychotherapy: The Ur-defenses of Man," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 110: 324-333 (1953).
- McGrath, S. J., *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- Meissner, W. W., *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
- Nietzsche, F. W., *Untimely Meditations*, trans. Hollingdale, R. J., ed. Breazeale, D. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1876]).
- Nietzsche, F. W., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Del Caro, A., ed. Del Caro, A. and Pippin, R. B. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1883]).
- Oring, E., *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).
- Rempel, M. H., "Understanding Freud's Philosophy of Religion," *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 5: 215-242 (1997).
- Rice, E., *Freud and Moses: The Long Journey Home* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
- Ricoeur, P., *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Savage, D. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
- Rieff, P., *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).
- Rizzuto, A-M., *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

- Said, W. E., *Freud and the Non-European* (New York: Verso, 2004).
- Santner, E. L., *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- Santner, E. L., *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- Scharfenberg, J., *Sigmund Freud and His Critique of Religion*, trans. Dean, O.C., Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).
- Schelling, F. W. J., *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Harris, E. E. and Heath, P. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1797, 1803]).
- Schelling, F. W. J., *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, K. R. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004 [1799]).
- Schelling, F. W. J., "Introduction to the Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature, or, On the Concept of Speculative Physics and the Internal Organization of the System of this Science," in: *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Peterson, K. R. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004 [1799]).
- Symington, N., *Emotion and Spirit: Questioning the Claims of Psychoanalysis and Religion* (London: Karnac, 1994).
- Vermorel, M. and Vermorel, H., "Was Freud a Romantic?" *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 75, 101-118 (1986).
- Yerushalmi, Y. H., *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
- Young-Bruehl, E. and Bethelard, F., "The Hidden History of the Ego Instincts," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 86: 823-851 (1999).
- Žižek, S., *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).
- Zweig, S., *Mental Healers*, trans. Paul, E. and Paul, C. (New York: Ungar, 1932).



Published by the European Forum at the Hebrew University
Jerusalem 91905, Israel

Tel: (972 2) 588-3286

Fax: (972 2) 588-1535

E-mail: ef@savion.huji.ac.il

www.ef.huji.ac.il