A Partial Study of
Religion and Conscience
Within the Christian Tradition
In the Light of
Psychoanalytics Concepts

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The present work was intended as an analytic study of the various stages of conscience within a psychoanalytic context. However it soon became evident that a more synthetic, theologically oriented study would be a necessity if the many comprehensive psychoanalytic insights of Freud were to be appreciated. For only after at least outlining such a theological-psychoanalytic context would it be possible to meaningfully discuss such specific questions as conscience and its vissitudes within a more narrowly structured psychological framework.
Although psychoanalysis has presented a comprehensive theory of the mind as well as a technique for aiding persons with psychoanalytic problems, it also has a meaningful contribution to make to many other areas of man's activity, for example anthropology, sociology, and religion. This point is made forcefully by Freud himself in his discussion of lay-analysis and is more recently attested to and defended by Eiseler in his discussion of what he calls psychoanalysis and its relation to anthropic study areas.

In this short paper we will consider the question of conscience, particularly as experienced within the Christian religious tradition. This will be done in light of psychoanalytic concepts and with a view to critically evaluating the question at hand from both a religious-philosophical and psychoanalytic viewpoint. We should immediately state that such a study exhibits a complexity of dimensions and thus we are faced with a monumental task; hopefully the present study will serve more by way of a significant introduction than by establishing definitive conclusions.

As is well known Freud in Totem and Taboo among other writings, states that man has gone through a magical (or animistic) religious, and finally a scientific evolutionary stage of weltanschung. Unfortunately Freud's work exhibits a certain tendency toward reductionism; his conceptualization of religion and conscience is seen in light of their most primitive manifestations, that is, Freud tends to limit the possibility of any theological development of these concepts. However we may note that Freud is faithful to his psychological insights and that he would have had
to be a theologian, hardly a profession coveted by him, to see all
the implications of his findings and insights. Repeatedly in Totem
and Taboo he states that he is only contributing a partial analysis
of a complex phenomenon.

Briefly we may sum up Freud's notion of conscience (and
religion) from the following statements:

In just the same way, one might assume humanity as a whole, in its development through the ages, fell into
dates analogous to the neuroses, and for the same
reasons - namely because in the times of its ignorance
and intellectual weakness, the instinctual renunciations indispensables for man's communal existence had only been
achieved by it by means of purely affective forces. The precipitates of these processes resembling repression
which took place in prehistoric times still remained
attached to civilization for long periods. Religion
would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of
humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it
arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to
the father.3*

And of conscience he states:

"The institution of conscience was at bottom an embodiment
first of parental criticism, and subsequently of that of
society; a similar process takes place when a tendency
towards repression develops out of a command or prohibi-
tion imposed in the first instance from without."4

From these excerpts we can see that for Freud the religious con-
science is basically the product of an oppressive superego, and
that religion as an institution arises out of a sense of guilt
(the primal crime) with a sense of submission which concomitantly
evokes the need for a father authority figure.

*Freud in an article entitled "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices" states:

In view of these resemblances and analogies one might
venture to regard the obsessional neurosis as a pathological
counterpart to the formation of a religion, to describe this
neurosis as a private religious system, and religion as a
Many apologists of religion in answering Freud's criticisms have simply stated that conscience is not a product of the superego but a practical act of the intellect, judging the conformity or non-conformity of an act to a standard value system; and that religion is established by a philosophical inquiry into the existence of the First Cause with man's consequent contingency from which arises the bond (religion), the natural foundation of religion. Or to put their arguments in psychoanalytic terms, religion and conscience are essentially ego activities, essentially conscious in contradistinction to the unconscious id and/or superego. We must immediately state here, however, that it does neither psychoanalysis nor religion a service to imply that, if correctly understood, religion and conscience are ego activities, always were, and always will be and that no essential reconceptualization of the religious myth structure is needed. Such an attitude is to be blind to the clear evidence of contemporary man's areligious and secular stance as well as to the growing body of theological criticism evidencing the need for a secular, as opposed to a religious, theology.

What Freud has shown, and this applies both to man individually and collectively, is the necessity or perhaps inevitability of the stages and "myths" that man must experience if he is to reach mature consciousness; that is, the magic and omnipotent thinking of the pre-oedipal (animistic beliefs) stage; the emotional ambivalence, the independence and passivity of the universal obsessional neurosis. The essential resemblance would be in the fundamental renunciation of the satisfaction of inherent instincts, and the chief difference in the nature of these instincts, which in the neurosis are exclusively sexual, but in religion are of egoistic origin.
the oedipal stage (home religiosus); and finally the mature critically conscious level of the genital stage (scientific man). Thus according to Freud substantial emotional maturity precludes religious preoccupations, and this is because, as stated above, he emphasizes religion's primitive origins and likens religious practices to pre-oedipal and oedipal neurotic traits.⁹ We should state, however, that Christian and particularly Catholic religionists have given evidence of obsessive compulsive patterns in their religious ritual, their formulation of doctrine, and their practical everyday teaching on such topics as conscience and sin.¹⁰

As stated, Freud sees the God thesis as essentially a result of a primal father projection which is reinforced by the child's emotional ambivalence and repression in response to its own father or father figure. The consequent religious situation he summarized as "God alone is strong and good; man is weak and sinful."¹¹ Now if one accepts Freud's thesis as developed in The Future of an Illusion, Totem and Taboo and other works, it becomes increasingly difficult to "rescue" the God of religion and consequently the religious conscience from Freud's indictment. In fact all too often many of the arguments advanced to establish man's contingency (God's absolute omnipotence and man's weakness), his dependence on God's will, his weakness, guilt (God as absolute incomprehensible goodness, which attribute
often seems to serve as the norm for ascertaining man's sinfulness), and final mortality have the surprising, and for some, disconcerting effect of predisposing contemporary western man to appreciating many of Freud's criticisms and conclusions.\textsuperscript{12} This is admittedly a strong statement, needing a great deal of amplification. For our present purpose we can at least state that an impasse has been created by Freud's arguments in reference to religion meaningfully understanding psychoanalysis and vice-versa.

There are signs, however, that the impasse is not permanent. Eric Fromm, for example, attempts a new approach to religion in his \textit{Psychoanalysis and Religion},\textsuperscript{13} where he speaks of a humanistic religion. This thesis has not received much discussion in theological literature, possibly because of its lack of theological structures. Many contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians\textsuperscript{14} offer us a new context in which to understand religion, and it is the present thesis that this \textit{could be done} in the light of \textit{and not despite} Freud's insights. They have stated, for instance, that man has passed from a sacred to a profane world outlook, from a "holy" to a "secular" approach to life. Further germane to their insights is the basic emphasis upon man's incapacity to make definitive statements about God and a reassertion of the Biblical emphasis on God as dynamic. He is, as the book of
Revelation tells us, "The Lord God almighty who was, and is and is to come." (Ch. 4,8) And working within this context it is possible to see man as a creature becoming more strong, more mature, 
more independent, in a sense, of "needing" God; and this independence can be seen as a consequence of and insight into what the Christ reality means. Contemporary Christ-theology is highly incarnational. This means that the Christ figure is seen not solely or primarily in terms of an offering for the expiation of sin and guilt, but rather as a positive statement about the significance of man and matter and the ultimate importance of mature interpersonal love relationships. Conscience in this framework is not a submission to an unseen and feared authority, but a personal awareness of the profound significance of man and matter. Conscience would be the dimension of man's mental activity which would point out the areas in life where man must search for, respond to, as well as create meaningful values. It would be a man's capacity to see the real import of mature love in his life, and thus to "see" God as ultimately personally experienced only in and through love for others. God, as John the evangelist repeatedly states, is love - and he is encountered not by some mystic oceanic feeling, but by a mature personal conscious validation. And since mature man is maturing man, this personal validation grows in significance and value; its touchstone is not primarily dogmatic or moralistic injunctions, but the growth of consciousness.

A significant percentage of contemporary theologians are stating that even the word "God" should be done away with; a few
go so far as to state that God is dead. Insofar as this new approach enables one to conceptualize the possibility of a religionless Christianity, insofar as this theology evidences that traditional conceptualizations of God and man have become so absolutized in former myth structures as to be meaningless to contemporary man, it is receiving a growing audience among Christians. It is this writer's opinion that what is valuable in the new theology is its appreciation that Christianity must have a "theology" that is both secular and profane, just as she expressed herself through the religious myth structure in her theology when her priests and theologians were products of a religious weltanschung. Such a theology is "learned" from the world and from its historical developments, not in a philosophically relativistic sense but in the sense that growth in consciousness is growth in truth.* A theology that states that a radical personal honesty and continuous struggle against personal and collective illusions in the search for collective and personal unity is the most necessary preparation for beginning to understand a "God" who as a personal being relates to man. A personal being who profoundly respects man and creation, not a paternalistic despot, a being jealous of man's independence and accomplishments, a God alienated from his own world, testing and taunting men with commands for obedience. A secular theology would posit a secular and a profoundly personal conscience, as delineated previously. Such a theology does not have as a goal, in any sense, proving God's existence or the truth

*Man's grasp of truth is, at best, only an approximation; and
or falsity of science. It states that Christianity can survive and pass beyond the "religious" phase of man's development and still be Christianity and be meaningful. It is a theology that states that the best way, if not the only way, to love God is to love man; that states that to depreciate man is no service of God.20

In the light of these recent developments we may note that just as Freud's perceptive criticism of the God of religion as particularly reflected in popular piety as well as in his analysis of its primitive origins shows that such a God is hardly a "God" at all, so the more contemporary theological insights at least offer a positive framework within which a "God" is possible yet a framework which is not primarily concerned with God's demonstrability. (This statement has significant psychoanalytic import, as will be explained shortly.) The God thesis of secular man and the conscience of secular man do not in any sense have to have the negative notes of father projection and superego deformation about them. Again, just as the projected father image is an impossible God for scientific man,21 so too the personal God who respects man is a possibility - a possibility precisely because men are coming to need him less and less as they are growing up.

Growing up in psychoanalytic terms is substantially advancing beyond the pre-genital responses, oral, anal, and oedipal, of childhood, with all their concomitant illusions, by achieving an integrated and expanded ego interpersonal response capacity.22

religious dogmatic "truth" is no exception to this. Man's historical development, insofar as it enables us to know man more completely enables us to further appreciate, if necessary re-formulate, and understand religious truth.
It was Freud and the psychoanalytic movement which has enabled contemporary western man to appreciate the full significance and necessity of this growing process. (This is not to deny that many men do not seem to have developed sufficiently even to perceive the problems at hand.) Nevertheless, the omnipotence and magical thinking that colors pre-oedipal stages, the emotional ambivalence, the guilt, and death fears which are present in the oedipal conflict and finally the substantially mature independence of the genital stage are necessary developments in man's psychic evolution and the psychoanalytic study of this evolution is profoundly beneficial for contemporary man. What we previously described as contemporary advances in theology, as a demythologizing process, as a growing up of man is paralleled to these psychoanalytic stages. In theological terms, personal psychoanalysis might be described as a demythologizing process. In this sense the analysand must leave magic thinking behind him, he must strive to understand the ambivalences of a father-authority image, he must learn how to accept the reality of death without letting this event produce a fear of life, and if his God is inextricably emotionally bound to these stages, if conscience is the product of an oppressive superego producing neurotic obsessive compulsive compliance, then such a conscience should be brought to the light of ego awareness and activity and such a God relegated to the realm of illusion. Working within such a context we may theorize that much of contemporary atheism is not a definitive refusal to limit the possibility of truth — a stand which would reflect a great deal
of omnipotent thinking - but is rather a rejection of illusion.

However for the analyst to believe or have as a measurable criterion of successful analysis the disavowal of God on the part of the analysand would involve more than a psychoanalytic judgment. It would be disposing of an analysand's myths while prohibiting future conscious growth in certain areas. Unfortunately this approach is not uncommon.* Yet it involves a theological and not a psychoanalytic judgment; for an a priori prohibition of the possibility of belief in God would in fact be to state, using the present context as an example, that it is not possible to have a secular theology of God nor is it possible for a believer to have a secular and scientific conscience. Such statements are theological conclusions demanding theological training and are in no sense psychoanalytic statements. Psychoanalysis can and has and

*Although not precisely the issue, but related, Eissler in the work quoted above makes the following statement: "In my opinion, acceptance of this episode [the scriptural story of Abraham] makes it impossible for a devout person even to take upon himself the responsibilities of a psychiatrist." (p. 432) He further states: "If the New Testament is really God's word, it is ludicrous to perform research in a laboratory, or to build a plant or arm a nation; instead, every good Christian should strive to submerge his mind in prayer, reducing his contact with reality to the minimum necessary for his survival.... The historical process has pushed the churches - and, with them, religion - to the wall, because inherently church and science are incompatible." (p. 439) It is unfortunate that a text which shows such incisive awareness of many of the crucial problems facing psychoanalysis today, and among them religious structures, particularly Roman Catholic ones, should make such theological judgments as these quoted with such a dearth of theological awareness, and with such absoluteness of conviction that they can only be regarded as "primitive theology."
must continue to help man mature, help him free himself from illusion and constraint as well as point out legitimate criteria for mature emotional responses. And in so doing it will, unfortunately meet with strong and constant resistance from established structures, not the least of which are those of homo religiosus.

What psychoanalytic insights have helped to make evident is that expanded consciousness in the service of mature interpersonal relationships within the setting of a radically technological, and therefore secular, world is to be man's new weltanshuung. Implicit in the psychoanalytic goal of growth in both individual and collective consciousness is the awareness of the communal dimension of man, a new degree of complexity-consciousness* which will evidence itself in social awareness and personal responsibility (i.e., conscience). Within this new context we would then be able to join with Freud in his hope for a mature humanity when he writes that men

by withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth,... will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone.25

* a term introduced by P. Teilhard de Chardin. See footnote 23.
REFERENCES


6. Freud, Sigmund, Totem, op. cit., p. 100 ff.


9. For a work which develops this point, with many specific references to Freud's work cf. *Freud The Mind of the Moralist* by Philip Reiff, The Viking Press, New York, 1959, p. 257 ff. (However the work lacks an appreciation of the role of structure in the question of religious phenomena.)

10. For an introductory criticism and analysis of such practices and religious patterns by Roman Catholics cf. "Some Reflexions on Superstition and Credulity" by Magdalen Griffin; "Freedom and the Individual" by Rosemary Houghton; and "Contraception and War" by Archbishop Thomas Roberts, S.J. found in *Objections to Roman Catholicism,* ed. M. de La Bedoyere, J. B. Lippincott Co., New York, 1965. An analysis of some of these issues as developed in the recent Vatican Council will be found in *The Open Church* by Michael Novak, Macmillan Co., New York, 1964. For a liberating and yet authoritative study of many of the problems involved.

*Note inversion of numbers*


12Cf. Cox, op. cit., for a study of contemporary western man's impatience with metaphysics. (My own experience as a teacher of Roman Catholic theology at Manhattan College has led me to this conclusion.)


14Cf. supra footnotes 7 and 8.


17We have in mind here the distinction between "real" versus "notional" assent as developed by John Henry Newman in his Grammar of Assent (1870), Doubleday & Company, New York, 1955. We might state this in psychoanalytic terms by saying that "real assent" reflects conscious ego motivation while "notional assent" would be something similar to the defense of rationalization or intellectualization - conscious reasons or propositions yet not actually the factors operative in a person's beliefs or practices.

18"The New Theology" in New Yorker, November 13, 1965, p. 63 (three part article) and the two following articles, psychological
