

PETER HOMANS:
Theology After Freud

Reviewed by
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An Iconic Reading of Freud

Homans, Peter: *Theology After Freud*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970, 254 pp.

As the gods die, theology struggles to save itself from a similar fate. Aware of the different maneuvers afoot to revitalize the theological enterprise, Homans' *Theology After Freud* suggests that theology, of the Protestant variety at least, be allowed to die. He does this in the hope that his reading of psychoanalysis can guarantee a new life and cultural significance to theological speculations and religious imagery. What happens to theology *after* it allows itself to experience Freud is the theme of the work. This is unquestionably a worthy aim, but one which is more hinted at than realized. The book contains some interesting theological-psychological speculations, and it has short asides of real merit, such as its study of behaviorism. But Homans builds his argument on what he calls a third reading of Freud, and it is this, the book's methodological model, which is the focus of my critique.

The author raises the question of a possible reinterpretation of, and thus a new meaning for, the theological terms "transcendence" and "immanence." To do this, Homans examines the notion of transference and the psychoanalytic meaning of phantasy. His procedure is to present the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich as the representatives of classic existential theology. Finding them wanting because of Niebuhr's mechanistic understanding of psychological development and Tillich's inability to free his theology from "oppressive imagery," such as "the God above God," Homans turns to Freud's study of phantasy, to the reality of the superego and ultimately to the possibility of a theology of nostalgia (immanence) and hope (transcendence). It should be noted in pass-

ing that there are alternate readings of Tillich's position along the lines of a theanymous model which avoid the impasse Homans comes to.

Homans then examines the psychology of religious experience as exemplified by the work of William James. He also treats Watson and the rise of American behaviorism, which Homans interprets as a flight from religious experience, that is, a flight from the superego and the world of internality. Within such a framework, Homans sees Freud as the re-presenter of internality. While Freud's work also confronts religious experience, it is not flight from internality but an analysis of transference via the tool of interpretation.

The author next turns to his thesis which is that there are three possible readings of Freud, a mechanistic, a dynamic and an "iconic." Since his focus is on the iconic or image reading, he interposes short studies on the contributions of Norman O. Brown, Bakan, Marcuse and P. Rieff, with footnote references and summaries (much too generalized) of the neo-freudian schools. His evaluation of Brown and Marcuse is incisive. He offers the critique that they ignore developmental and clinical considerations and thus present an apocalyptic reading of Freud. Such a stance is more congenial to utopian speculation than to the reality of clinical experience. (Utopian speculation rarely specifies how we are to arrive at a stage of things we would all dream of; and thus the primitive hope it arouses, when disappointed, gives birth to frustration and anger.)

The book provides many provocative ideas, but a serious shortcoming is its major thesis, an iconic reading of Freud. Consequently, there are many related misreadings of Freud throughout the text (e. g., reality principle and pleasure principle). These become more serious when viewed within his central approach.

A mechanistic reading focuses on Freud's use of concepts, such as "electrical-like" cathexis and "dam-like" libido. The obvious shortcomings of such a literal reading of Freud are mentioned! (How long, one wonders, will this be necessary?) A dynamic reading refers to psychoanalysis, understood as operative therapy addressing itself to developmental problems that result in neurotic repression. Somewhere beyond the mechanistic and dynamic is the iconic reading of Freud. To

reach this "higher reading," Homans discusses the function and role of phantasy and the reality of the superego. The iconic is proposed as that which will enable us to reach the most productive reading of Freud and which, in Homans' conviction, can give new meanings to the old theological categories of transcendence and immanence. (There is a Biblical injunction about new wine in old wineskins which theologians, unfortunately, tend to forget.)

As stated, to present this third reading, Homans must address himself to phantasy and to the superego, and it is here that he is at his weakest—not because there cannot be a new reading of the import and value of phantasy which can heighten its significance for the future; not because the analysis of transference does not free one from a rigid subject-object dichotomy as it alleviates the oppression of the primitive superego; but because he presents his "third reading" of Freud as a model capable of encompassing the psyche. When image reading becomes normative, the everpresent reality of a dynamic unconscious, repression/distortion, and the various functions of the superego become of little import. No wonder, then, that in the final pages of the book, Jung becomes the exemplar of this third and highest reading. And no wonder that an early Freudian and predominately Kleinian reading of the superego is presented as the contemporary understanding of this psychic model.

It is because the author's reading of the superego is primarily in terms of the early introjects and not as a mature self-observing system that phrases, such as "collapse of the superego," are possible without the necessary qualifications needed to save such statements from being nonsensical. Even an archaic superego is never collapsed. Rather, the bondage of the ego to a primitive superego, characteristic of neurosis, is left behind as more mature, and reality-oriented functions of the super-ego come to the fore under the auspices of an expanded ego. Projection, for example, is a mechanism of the ego and not, as Homans seems to imply, of the superego, and in that distinction lies the basis of therapy. Likewise, Homans' quotation from Wheelis' *Quest For Identity* shows, in my opinion, a rather serious misunderstanding of Freudian analysis. Had the author read Rieff more carefully, he would know that the goal of

analysis is to be able to live without cure systems or salvation hopes and yet to love and work, thereby overcoming nostalgic yearning, childhood fears and oedipal hate. This is the possibility of psychological man as Rieff depicts him. That there is a psychosocial modality to transference Erikson has made clear; but when analysis of transference becomes flight from the intrapsychic to the social, we have the reflections of philosophers such as Fromm. These approaches are not the main body of psychoanalytic thought; they are a flight from the inter- and intra-systemic world of the mind, a flight from which even Erikson, with his superb clarity, seems not able to save many American analysts.

Lastly, we note that phantasy (or reverie), the shibboleth for the newly arrived theologians of hope, simply cannot be isolated from its integral relation to the other psychic systems in Freud's psychoanalytic model of the mind. Homans seems strangely both aware and unaware of this fact. To approach phantasy in its own right, "with its own dignity," even for the supposed purpose of special study, is to open the door to obliterating any working understanding of the *dynamic unconscious*, of the influence of development on the structures of the psyche; and, explicitly in this work, to a Jungian reading of the mind. (This is not primarily a critique of Jung, but of the way he is introduced—in an assertive and unstudied manner to substantiate Homans' reading of Freud.) Because of such a reading, Homans cannot escape from the yearning-hope dilemma he poses in his final pages.

Homans is undoubtedly a man searching with deep concern. He has read and perhaps overread analytic commentators and the gamut of those existential authors who use the title psychoanalyst. Had he dialogued more with clinical psychoanalysts, he could never have written: "Dreams indicate that repression has not yet won the day." On the contrary, dreams indicate that repression operates; otherwise, there would be no dreams and no need of interpretation! The ego can learn to understand and to read the different levels which dreams present, and with this tool of interpretation, it can confront, as well as be comfortable with, the yearnings which are the forces behind dreams. In helping to close and heal the wound which nostalgia inflicts, psychoanalysis makes possible a different ex-

perience of yearning: one not in search of surrender, no matter
what its guise may be.

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