The Quest for Spirituality: A Psychoanalytic Approach

Ching-wa Wong

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

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Abstract

The relationship between psychoanalysis and religion is often said to be antagonistic, as Freud famously claims that religious beliefs are but a product of irrationality generated by our infantile phantasies. Recently, however, the philosopher John Cottingham suggests that religious faith is not only compatible with, but in fact supported by psychoanalytic theory, as both of them are motivated by a need for self-discovery, and that a synthesis of the two is possible as long as we take religious practice as indicative of the creative and benign power of human phantasy. Following this psychoanalytic defence of religion, in this paper I shall attempt to further explore the function of phantasy in a person's quest for spirituality. I argue that in order to attain the kind of synthesis between religion and psychoanalysis that Cottingham recommends, we must first examine the conditions under which a religious faith goes astray because of the baneful effects of a person's persecutory anxieties, so much so that his religious belief is formed out of defence and self-misrepresentation. Conversely, a genuine quest for spirituality is more likely to consist in the person's loving and hopeful attitude. Finally, I propose that this way of distinguishing between genuine and defensive religious faiths will have profound implications for a naturalist approach to religion informed by psychoanalytic theory.

As a renowned critic of civilization, a naturalist who presumes no rational character of human nature, Freud is often thought to be promoting a damaging view of religion for believers. Religion, he tells us, owes its origin to primitive peoples' belief in 'the omnipotence of thought', plus mankind's oldest wish for the father's protection against the child's helplessness. But as all these are projected outwards to a God-like being and given various forms of rationalization, Freud warns us that religious beliefs are mere illusions that give no compensation for the hardship of life. Just as the Oedipus phase is to be outgrown by maturity where the reality principle is dominant, it is necessary for the religious phase to be replaced by the scientific one; so argued Freud (1912-13; 1927c; 1930a).

The question remains, of course, whether anyone who is impressed by psychoanalytic theory must end up following Freud in being anti-religious. Granted his view that there is a close connection between religion and human irrationality, or that between our beliefs in God and our infantile phantasies, are we to say religious faith must have no positive role to play in human life? Taking up this line of inquiry, John Cottingham recently made a very interesting suggestion that religion, broadly understood as a set of 'spiritual activities' which 'aim to fill the creative and meditative space left over when science and technology have satisfied our material needs' (2005:3), can be psychoanalytically defended on the ground that it exhibits the beneficial functions of human phantasy (2005: 69-73; 2012: 123-5) The suggestion seems to me valuable, not only because it is an innovative way to defend the value of religion, but also because it demonstrates how such a naturalist worldview as endorsed by psychoanalysis can be reconciled with religious faith. In this paper, I argue that such a project of synthesizing psychoanalysis with the religious quest for spirituality is not only possible but in fact worth pursuing. I shall first evaluate Cottingham's arguments for the proposed synthesis, and then proceed to suggest what more considerations need be taken in order to complete his project.

1. Cottingham's Defense of Religion

Cottingham considers religion as essentially an internal journey of self-transformation, a process aiming at the fullness of the self as a result of what one *does* in religious life, and not of what one *believes*. He compares this conception of religion with the pre-Renaissance notion of 'spiritual exercises', the aim of which 'was not merely intellectual enlightenment, or imparting of abstract theory, but a transformation of the whole person, including our patterns of emotional response' (2005:5). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to give a full assessment of his philosophy of religion. But what is relevant for my purpose is his idea that, if it is practice and not theory that

concerns religion, and if it is self-transformation and psychological well-being that one aims at in being religious, there is indeed not much point for philosophy and psychoanalysis to cast doubt on the *truth* of religion—for this should not be the concern of true believers at all.

Why then should we resist the idea that a religion can be is justified only by its truth? It is worth quoting Cottingham's thesis of 'the primacy of praxis' in this connection:

> This envisaged process of internal transformation, in contrast to the intellectual business of evaluating propositions, seems to me fundamental to understanding not just the nature of spirituality, but also that of religion in general. What holds good for any plausible account of the tradition of spiritual exercises also holds good more generally for any *true understanding* of the place of religion in human life: we have to acknowledge what might be called the *primacy of praxis*, the vital importance that is placed on the individual's embarking on a path of practical self-transformation, rather than (say) simply engaging in intellectual debate or philosophical analysis. (ibid.; emphasis added)

Implicitly, typical seminar room debates over those issues like the existence of God, the problem of evil, or the moral character of God, are missing the point on the present account. These are irrelevant to a meaningful understanding of religion, because truly religious *faith* does not encompass a theory which is to be vindicated or refuted. Religious life involves a progression of knowledge, not because it is an intellectual engagement, but because it is about our knowledge of the *self* in which emotions play a vital part, a kind of knowledge that resists intellectualizing (ibid., 11). A further consequence of this view is that there is no need to take religious expressions literally. This is because, as a means to transforming the person, religious language often is used metaphorically or figuratively to capture the emotive dimension of religious experience. It will be inappropriate to blame people for following the teaching of the Bible, for example, just because those ideas like genesis or resurrection are literally at odds with our scientific knowledge.

It is on such a conception of religion that Cottingham's project of synthesizing it with psychoanalytic theory becomes possible. If we treat Freud's theoretical notions as heuristic tools by which to interpret patterns of human behaviour, and take seriously his claim that the mind is not transparent to itself, it appears that religion is quite in line with psychoanalysis in being a business of human self-discovery. Although it is well acknowledged that Freud's own view of religion is a deflationary one,

Cottingham argues that this need not be what a psychoanalytic thinker is forced to accept.

2. Phantasy, Illusion, and the Theory-Theory of Religion

It is thus understandable why Cottingham thinks the tension between psychoanalysis and religion can be promisingly *defused* even in face of Freud's criticism of religion as a mere illusion. He reminds us that on Freud's usage, an 'illusion' is different from a 'delusion', and is not necessarily false (ibid., 66, *n*20). This gives rise to a distinction between the kind of harmless phantasy in religion and the neurotic's belief in magic, one which is comparable to Wittgenstein's distinction between 'faith' and 'superstition' (ibid., 66). But more than that, Cottingham has a more interesting response to Freud within the frames of psychoanalytic theory. His suggestion is that, if we follow the ideas of two other prominent psychoanalytic thinkers, Donald Winnicott and Carl Jung, religious phantasies may be considered as a kind of symbolic thinking, without which human creativity and the integration of self would not be possible. The lesson to be drawn here is that from a psychoanalytic point of view, 'Freud's dismissal of the religious impulse as infantile fails to recognize the imaginative and symbolic role of religious modes of thought and expression, and their possible role in the healthy development of the human person'. (ibid., 70) After all, even if religious symbols are products of phantasy, they can still be good for maintaining psychological health, integrating, as it were, the conscious and the unconscious in a such way as to attain the fullness of the self.

The disagreement between Freud and Jung asides (cf. Freud, 1912-13: 146*n*, 150-1*n*), this psychoanalytic response to Freud's religious deflationism seems to very interesting in being able to highlight the role of phantasy in a person's good life. But before assessing its strengths, I think it is necessary to point out that the Winncott/Jung thesis is a more a supplement of Freud's theory than a *criticism* of it, as Freud's account of religious illusion is directed not so much to religious symbolism as to the 'system of thought' and institution that it produces. If my argument succeeds, it can be shown that Freud's theory does not in fact contradict Cottingham's view of religion at all.

To start with, let us consider why Freud in the first place would call the religious illusion a bad thing. Perhaps the following paragraphs from *The Future of An Illusion* are helpful:

> What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions. But they differ from them, too, apart from the more complicated structure of delusions. In the case of delusions, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. Illusions need not necessarily be false….Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality. (1927c: 31)
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> We can now repeat that all of them [i.e. religious doctrines] are illusions and insusceptible of proof….Of the reality value of most of them we cannot judge: just as they cannot be proved, so they cannot be refuted. (Ibid.)
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> 'Well then, if even obdurate sceptics admits that the assertion of religion cannot be refuted by reason, why should I not believe in them, since they have so much on their side—tradition, the agreement of mankind, and all the consolations they offer?' Why not, indeed? Just as no one can be forced to believe, so no one can be forced to disbelieve. But do not let us be satisfied with deceiving ourselves that arguments like these take us along the road of correct thinking. If ever there was a correct case of lame excuse we have it here. Ignorance is ignorance; no right to believe anything can be derived from it. *In other matters no sensible person will behave so irresponsibly or rest content with such feeble grounds for his opinions and for the line he takes.* It is only in the highest and most sacred things that he allows himself to do so….Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanour. (Ibid., 32; emphasis added)

It is easy to misread Freud here as promoting an old-fashioned nineteenth century scientism, a sort of 'ethic of belief' once attacked by William James—that you have no right to believe in anything unless you have enough evidence for it. But here I think we need to place more emphasis on the notion of 'dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanour', which is a different issue from that of the evidential basis of belief. What matters, the argument goes, is that you allow yourself to believe in one case and not the other, when the evidential bases of both are equal. The charge here is that the religious believer can enjoy no *internal consistency* in his Weltanschauung. The question that concerns Freud is not whether the religious illusion can turn out to be true, but whether such a believer is a victim of undue rationalization.

So is it that Freud attacks religion merely because it is an illusion? Or it is that he is attacking the person's dubious Weltanschauung produced by the religious illusion? Answers to these questions must be made with reference to his comparatively more favourable attitude towards the illusion produced by art. The following account of artistic illusion is illuminating:

> In the exercising of an art it [i.e. psychoanalysis] sees once again an activity intended to ally ungratified wishes—in the first place in the creative artist himself and subsequently in his audience or spectators. The motive forces of artists are the same conflicts which drive other people into neurosis and have encouraged society to construct its institutions….The artist first aims to set himself free and, by communicating his work to other people suffering from the same arrested desires, he offers them the same liberation. He represents his most personal wishful phantasies as fulfilled; but they only become a work of art when they have undergone a transformation which softens what is offensive in them, conceals their personal origin and, by obeying the laws of beauty, bribes other people with a bonus of pleasure….Art is a conventionally accepted reality in which, thanks to artistic illusion, symbols and substitutes are able to provoke real emotions. Thus art constitutes a region half-way between a reality which frustrates wishes and the wish-fulfilling world of the imagination—a region in which, as it were, primitive man's strivings for omnipotence are still in full force. (1913j: 187-8)

What strikes us here is that Freud takes art as an illusion produced by wishful phantasies, which is symbolic in character and an effective means to self-expression. If anything, this description of artistic illusion implies a non-aggressive and harmless way to handle our instinctual desires—much in the same manner that Cottingham's ideal religious quest for spirituality works. Although Freud regards art as a mere consolation, providing transient pleasure but not totally effective in eliminating our pain (1930: 81), he never suggests that it should be replaced by a scientific Weltanschauung; indeed, he treats it as a real alternative to religion which in a sense is necessary (ibid., 75). The question to be asked is: why these different attitudes towards artistic and religious illusions?

An answer suggests itself, and it is that art does not provide a worldview to be criticized. While being essentially a process of projection along which our wishes are being gratified, art nonetheless produces no belief-system to rule the conduct of our life. Art is an isolated area where the pleasure of imagination is collective felt by

artists and appreciators, and it claims no authority in regulating *other* aspects of our life. But religion's reign is different, because it is both comprehensive and demanding intellectual unity. Its special authority lies, according to Freud, in a process of 'system construction', an instance of 'secondary revision' in virtue of which people—albeit falsely—make sense of their otherwise unconnected and unintelligible ideas (cf. Freud, 1912-13: 95). In other words, Freud has a strong criticism of religion because he thinks it embraces a shaky theory of the world produced by illusion. And yet he need not take illusion as a bad thing in itself—what is bad is the kind of undue rationalization or 'theorizing' of the illusion.

It is thus clear that when Freud launches his attacks on religion, he is targeting *a conception of religion as theory,* something that Cottingham finds quite unattractive according to the 'true understanding of religion'. The two's views do not in any way contradict each other, for Freud is attacking the *folk theory* of religion from the general masses, while Cottingham is defending a more or less *idealized* conception of religion which may not be generally endorsed.

3. Two Models of Illusions

Given these considerations, we may see in a new light how the conception of illusion, via a perception produced by phantasy, should figure in our overall account of the religious quest for spirituality. On my argument above, there are two models of illusion with which Freud provides us: one being *the Worldview Model,* as is illustrated by animism and religious doctrines; the other *the Self-Expression Model,* as can be found in the cases of art and literature. Exactly why some types of phantasies would result in systems of thought or worldviews is a question to be further investigated. But that much can be said of them: their capabilities to produce worldviews require a lot of intellectual works; and once they take the guise of being *objective reasons* for the belief in some supernatural power or the existence of God, they start to claim authority over the regulation of people's moral, social, political, and scientific outlooks. In virtue of such power in shaping our second reality, we can say the Worldview Model of illusion is an elaboration of the Marx's notion of ideological self-misrepresentation.

Since these are not the features of a good religion by Cottingham's standard, I venture to say his idealized case of religious faith relies primarily on the Self-Expression Model. When he borrows from Winnicott the idea that 'playing' is a source of creativity, he probably has in mind a kind of illusion similar to artistic imagination, so much so that he follows William Weissener's idea that '[the] man without

imagination, without the capacity for play or for creative illusion, is condemned to a sterile world of harsh facts without color or variety' (2005: 69-70). Then in the place where Jung's notion of religious archetypes is discussed, Cottingham stresses the essential role of religious symbolism in the person's struggle for 'internal balance and integration' (ibid., 70); and he warns us that the Jungian approach never is concerned with the intellectual question of a transcendent reality as posed by religious realists (ibid., 72). Since what these arguments target is the person's strike for the growth of the self, the idealized quest for spirituality so recommended has nothing to do with a religious doctrine which claims to discover an objective and transcendent reality, and which claims to have moral, social, political, and scientific authorities over the general masses. Such a spiritual quest is, in a sense, *wholly personal*—as a piece of work of art is.

Unexpectedly, then, it turns out that Cottingham's conception of religious faith have some strong anti-fundamentalist and liberal implications, with which quite some religious believers may disagree. The interesting thing is, once the anti-fundamentalist and liberal character of this view is made clear, Freud will appear more on Cottingham's side, and the Freudian arguments against religion can be shown to be directed to the fundamentalist and authoritarian version of religion only. The consequence of this is: if we are to complete Cottingham's project, there need be some criteria by which we distinguish between this allegedly bad version of religion, which both Cottingham and Freud attack, and the good version of it, which they tend to support.

4. Genuine and Defensive Religious Faiths

The criteria required cannot help but be psychoanalytic. For, on the present approach as advocated by Cottingham, people have spent too much intellectual energies on the question of God which, on Kant's view, allures human understanding (ibid., 72). Over-intellectualizing the topic of religion will also have the consequence of undervaluing the roles of human emotions in the religious contribution to the good life. By contrast, the psychoanalytic approach can show us how phantasy leads a person astray in his search for a meaningful life, as well as the favourable emotive conditions under which happiness and faith converge. For this reason, I shall in this final section make a psychoanalytic proposal about how to distinguish between genuine and defensive religious faiths, with a view to fleshing up Cottinhgam's model of good religious practice.

The characterization of good religious faith, however, is a much neglected topic as far as psychoanalytic literature is concerned. So maybe it is helpful to rely on the works on psychoanalytic *moral psychology* with a view to developing a rudimentary account. Here I have in mind the moral psychology presented in Chapter VII of Wollheim's *The Thread of Life* (1984), which I think can give us a guide to distinguishing good morality from bad morality. According to Wollheim, our sense of morality is a sheer product of irrationality that we inherit from the development of the superego. Because a child is helpless against the parent whom he takes to be aggressive and threatening, in phantasy he is motivated to devour and so destroy the parent. But this gives rise to a further phantasy that the parent is residing in his body, watching and controlling him in such a way that he cannot do what is forbidden to him. In this way, morality as a system of rules and obligations is a mere price we pay for our persecutory phantasies. But instead of going down to the conclusion that morality need be totally removed in our search for the good life, Wollheim also suggests that we can take up a broader conception of it as comprising not only obligations, but also the subject matter of *values*, which he takes to be originating in the phantasy of the ego-ideal and perpetuated by our loving attitude.

Wollheim's proposal of a revised and yet broader conception of morality seems to me able to demonstrate an optimistic view about the progress of civilization from the psychoanalytic point of view. To be sure, the narrow conception morality, as followed by the general masses, is too bad a thing for the enhancement of a person's life. And yet there are pretty interesting examples of some *good* persons who, not being totally restrained by a sense of obligation, can continue to maintain good relationships with others, and also see the world as pleasant and lovable. The Wollheim view does not take these persons as more rational, but argues that they embrace a good sense of morality because of the power of love and the effects of some benign phantasies.

Applying this argument to our topic, it can be said that in the bad version of religion, the person who embraces his religious illusion nonetheless cannot free himself from persecutory anxieties, just as a person who submits himself to the rule of the superego can never get rid of the fear and horror he once experienced in the father-child relationship. In excessively intellectualizing his religious phantasies, and abusing religious authority over others, such a believer shows himself to be haunted by the fear of death, by the obsessive longing for the father's love, and by his own aggressive instincts. If anything like this can be said of the bad religion, should we also attribute the softening power of love—the power, that is, to phantasize a good world which is union with oneself—to Cottingham's ideal quest for spirituality? I find

that is not only possible, but in fact required by his psychoanalytic approach to religion.

5. Conclusion

Very briefly, then, this is my conclusion. A defensive quest for spirituality is different from a genuine quest not because one is illusive and the other is not. On my argument above, both are illusive and are products of wishful phantasies. What matters is that the defensive quest is filled up with the forces of the bad images of the self, the father, and the natural world, so much so that its only motivation to flee from such badness. A genuine quest, by contrast, sees the connection between the self and the world as guaranteed by the (phantasized) goodness of the world, and in its motivation we find a loving and hopeful attitude towards life. So if we are to make sense of Freud's criticisms of religion, there may be a need to argue that the intellectualizing, dogmatizing, and politicizing of religious ideas are in fact motivated by the need for defense. They are also self-defeating in giving no peace of mind for the believers. And if we are to make sense of Cottingham's idealized conception of religious quest for meaning, we need also to argue that such a quest shares with artistic illusion the power to produce pleasure, plus a perception of the world as filled with value. More work will be needed if we are to support these arguments by real world examples. But I find such a task forced on anyone interested in the psychoanalytic approach to religion, and no less so for Cottingham either.

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