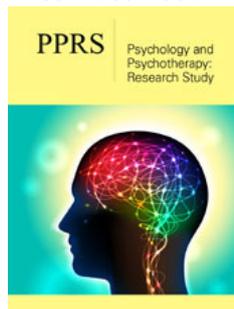


# Psychoanalysis and Islam: Freud's Remarks on the Islamic Religion in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism)

ISSN: 2639-0612



**\*Corresponding author:** Johannes Twardella, Department of Education Sciences, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

**Submission:**  September 19, 2022

**Published:**  November 07, 2022

Volume 6 - Issue 1

**How to cite this article:** Johannes Twardella\*. Psychoanalysis and Islam: Freud's Remarks on the Islamic Religion in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism). Psychol Psychother Res Stud. 6(1). PPRS. 000629. 2022. DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2022.06.000629](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2022.06.000629)

**Copyright@** Johannes Twardella, This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

**Johannes Twardella\***

Department of Education Sciences, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

## Abstract

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, hardly ever commented on Islam. Yes, Islam was not an issue for psychoanalysis for a long time. Because of the migration processes of the last decades and because of political Islam, this has changed. So, it is time to rethink the relationship between psychoanalysis and Islam. And it is obvious to start from Freud's remarks on Islam.

**Keywords:** Freud; Psychoanalysis; Islam; Monotheism; Judaism; Moses

## Introduction

Islam has long been a non-issue for psychoanalysis. Freud did deal extensively with religion in general as well as Judaism in particular, but he hardly commented on Islam. An exception are a few lines in the third part of the book *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism) [1]. These will be discussed below under the question of whether they can be the starting point for a psychoanalytic preoccupation with Islam. What perspective on Islam arises when Freud's statements are taken as a starting point, and what questions arise? [2] It will be shown that Freud makes insinuations, where it is not always clear what they aim at. At the same time, however, he provides a perspective from which a scientific study of Islam is still worthwhile today.

## Islam as a Case

Freud's writing *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism) consists of three parts. In the third part, entitled *Moses, sein Volk und die monotheistische Religion* ("Moses, his People, and the Monotheism") Freud writes under the heading *Difficulties* that his analysis of the Jewish foundation of religion should actually be supplemented by comparative studies. Due to a lack of expertise, however, he does not see himself in a position to do so. At best, he could briefly comment on Islam. With regard to Islam, he believes he has some knowledge. What does he say about him? Speaking about himself in the 3rd person, Freud writes.

*The case of the Mohammedan foundation of religion appears to him (p. 540).*

First of all, it should be noted that Freud does not formulate apodictically: He does not assert that something is actually as he perceives it to be, but only that it appears to him to be so. He thus makes it clear from the beginning that his remarks are hypothetical in character and are to be verified. They are not the result of an analysis that has already been carried out; rather, such an analysis is still pending. At best, they can be a starting point for such an analysis.

The subject is «the case of the Mohammedan foundation of religion.» By speaking of a «case», Freud makes clear to which methodological procedure he feels committed, namely a casuistic one. But of what is Islam a case. It is a case of something general, namely of «founding of religion». The question under which Islam would have to be considered is therefore that of its origin. And it would have to be answered by a genetic explanation. By speaking of «foundation of religion» Freud makes clear that certain explanations for the origin of Islam are out of the question for him. For in speaking of the «foundation» of a religion, it is implicitly assumed that Islam did not come into being through the action of a divine instance conceived as transcendent, through revelation, but that it is ultimately due to human action [3]. The formulation thus excludes a religious explanation for the emergence of Islam, makes clear the secular standpoint from which, according to Freud, an explanation would have to be offered.

Associated with the idea of a «foundation» is that there is a «founder.» This suggests that Freud has in mind an explanation for the emergence of Islam that focuses on a subject and its action. This rules out the possibility that the emergence of Islam is conceived as the result of a social interaction. Which subject Freud has in mind becomes clear by defining the process as a «Mohammedan foundation of religion»: according to Freud, the emergence of Islam goes back to Mohammed. It can be stated: The perspective Freud adopts on Islam is a secular one, indeed a scientific one, a casuistic one. This distinguishes between general, universal structures of the emergence of religions and the particularities of a case, here Islam. He is concerned with a genetic explanation of Islam, whereby Freud assumes that it ultimately goes back to a founder, to Mohammed.

### Freud on Judaism

Freud adds that the «Mohammedan foundation of religion» appears to him

*like an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish one.*

The «Jewish foundation of religion» is the subject of his writing *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism). In this Freud develops a complex explanation for the origin of Judaism. It begins by reflecting on the origin of Moses. For various reasons, it seems plausible to Freud to assume that Moses could have been an Egyptian who held a high position in the court of Pharaoh Akhnaton. Akhnaton is that pharaoh who for a short time enforced the idea of monotheism in Egypt [4]. Moses, Freud assumes, was a follower of this idea. After Akhenaten's death, when Egypt returned to polytheism, Moses wanted to save this idea and «chose» a people in Egyptian captivity for this purpose. This people, the people of the Israelites, he had freed from the captivity, but this took over by no means circumstantially the monotheism. It followed Moses into the desert, but there it worshipped a «golden calf». Finally, it moved into the country Canaan, «where milk and honey flow», but it left Moses behind and so Freud assumes- killed him. After the «taking of the land» it had then come to a fusion of the «religion of Moses» with the worship of the god Jahwe, an uncanny volcanic god. The religion of Moses, the abstract monotheism with

its prohibition of images, then tended to fall into oblivion, but in the end, surprisingly, it prevailed. How can this be explained?

### Islam as Repetition or Imitation?

Freud claims that the «Mohammedan foundation of religion» is an «abbreviated repetition» of the Jewish one. The talk of a repetition could be understood as if Freud assumed that simply the same thing happened again. But this is absurd, because Freud knew of course that nothing in history simply repeats itself. Freud, therefore, in no way negates what is special and unique about Islam but assumes that there are similarities between the Jewish and Islamic religious foundations. Since Freud remains abstract, it can only be surmised in what he saw these similarities: that a prophet appeared who proclaimed the idea of monotheism and solicited followers, initially meeting resistance. Then, however, the idea of monotheism ultimately prevailed. Now, according to Freud, the difference between the Islamic and the Jewish foundation of religion is that the former was «abbreviated.» In terms of time, this is obvious: the process of Judaism's emergence extended over several centuries, that of Islam over a few decades. But what effect did this have on the level of content?

*as whose imitation it appeared.*

If Freud just spoke of «repetition», he now speaks of «imitation». Imitation means that something existing is perceived and then copied or imitated. Again, it is difficult to say what Freud means concretely, since his formulation remains abstract.

Is he thinking, for example, of the account of Moses climbing Mount Sinai, receiving there the laws which, fixed on stone tablets, he brings to the Israelites? Does he see it as «imitation» when it is reported that Muhammad withdrew to a mountain, more precisely, to the cave of Hira, and there received the first revelation? [5] Note that Freud does not say that the «Mohammedan religious foundation» was an imitation of the Jewish one, but that it «appeared» as one. Freud thus sees the foundation of religion like the appearance of an actor on a stage. And this may either have been intended as an «imitation,» or it was not, but was perceived as an «imitation.» It remains open how Freud himself sees it. The only thing that can be stated is that he considers it possible that Mohammed oriented himself on Moses and acted intentionally in the way he knew from stories about him.

### Muhammad's Intention

*It seems, indeed, that the prophet originally intended to fully embrace Judaism for himself and his people.*

Freud goes further, albeit cautiously, with his conjecture. Caution is indeed called for, since Muhammad never explicitly expressed the intention of winning the Arabs to Judaism. Freud could base his assumption solely on the fact that a clear demarcation of Islam from Judaism did not take place until the Medinan phase of the prophecy. That is why Freud also speaks of the fact that the intention may have existed «originally». In the Meccan phase of prophecy, the idea of monotheism was proclaimed in all clarity and sharply demarcated from polytheism, both from that of the pagan religion and from that

of Christianity (which was understood as a deviation from the idea of monotheism). In this respect, there was a proximity to Judaism. Despite this closeness, indeed this selective agreement, however, it cannot be claimed with certainty that Muhammad «originally» wanted to win the Arabs over to Judaism [6].

## The Recovery of the Father

### *The Recovery of the One Great Primordial Father*

Freud had developed the idea of a primordial father in his writing *Totem and Tabu* [7]. In the background is the model of the psychic development of man with the Oedipus complex in the center. According to this model, the adolescent boy gets into a conflict with his father, because he wants to have the mother for himself and to unite with her. In doing so, the father stands in his way. In this constellation, the son's relationship with his father is characterized by a maximum of ambivalence: On the one hand he loves the father, on the other hand he hates him, precisely because of him the union with the mother is not possible.

Based on this model, Freud developed the idea of a primordial horde in which a primordial father has a prerogative over all women and all other men are in a position similar to that of the son in the Oedipal triad: they desire union with a woman, but this is not possible because the father does not allow it. While the Oedipus complex, according to Freud, is resolved on an imaginary level-the boy identifies with the father (and in this way adopts his norms and values)-what happens in the primal horde is what the boy imagines at best: the murder of the father. This took place, according to Freud, not as the act of an individual, but as that of a collective: all the sons were involved. Collective responsibility was expressed on a symbolic level in the form of a communal meal at which the father's corpse was consumed. Finally, the sons agreed on the incest taboo.

Psychologically, what is crucial is that the murder of the primordial father gave rise to a feeling of guilt among the sons. And out of this feeling of guilt, the father was idealized. The idea of an authority emerged, which was presented as being endowed with superhuman power. Thus, from Freud's point of view, at the beginning of religion there is a murder as well as a feeling of guilt resulting from it. This also applies to Judaism: According to Freud, it is a feeling of guilt that led to the monotheism that goes back to the Egyptian religion of Akhnaton. And this feeling of guilt resulted from the murder of Moses. The primordial father lived on as an imagined entity, first in the form of a totem, then in the form of deities thought to be similar to humans, and finally in the concept of the one monotheistic God. Freud understands both totemism and the Jewish foundation of religion as a «recovery» of the «primordial father». Islam, seen in this light, likewise appears as a «recovery» of the «primordial father». It had, according to Freud, enormous psychological consequences, because

*it brought about an extraordinary elevation of self-confidence among the Arabs.*

At this point, too, a comparison with the relationship between a child and its father may be helpful. Just as a child's self-confidence can increase by identifying with a powerful father, so too can

people's self-confidence increase when they imagine themselves in a relationship with, or can identify with, an all-powerful God [8].

*which led to great worldly successes,*

What successes is Freud thinking of here? Is he thinking of the early military successes, those conquests that led to a rapid expansion of Islamic dominion? Or is he thinking of the development of the Islamic high culture with its centers in Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba, Cairo and Istanbul etc.?

*but also exhausted itself in them.*

Again, only conjectures can be made as to what Freud might have meant. It is conceivable, for example, that his allusions are based on the distinction between societies whose development has come to a certain standstill and modern societies that are characterized by a permanent dynamic of change.

*Allah showed himself far more grateful to his chosen people than Jahwe was to his own.*

It is noteworthy that Freud applies the attribute of chosenness, usually used in connection with the Jews, to the Arabs. This suggests that he understands it in a structural sense: Chosen-ness is always present when a divine entity imagined as monotheistic stands in a specific relationship to a particular people, comparable to the relationship between father and son. When Freud says (with a certain ironic undertone) that Allah was «more grateful» than Jahwe, this means that he thinks of this specific relationship as one of reciprocity. However, he does not speak-as it is usual in the religions-about the fact that man should be grateful for what God did or still does for him, but the other way round: First the achievement of the chosen people took place. For this its God proves to be grateful by doing something for it. That Freud declares that the God of the Arabs has done more for this than Jahwe did «in his time» for the Jewish people, refers to the past in which Jews lived most of the time under foreign rule, were expelled, were exposed to hostilities and violence. But it is also obvious to think of the time in which Freud wrote these lines and in which the National Socialists in Germany used all means at their disposal to act against Jews or against people they defined as Jews.

## The Lack of Deepening

*But the inner development of the new religion soon came to a standstill.*

It becomes clear that Freud distinguishes between an external and an internal development. As far as the former is concerned, «worldly successes» set in. An internal development of Islam also took place at first: the religion differentiated itself into a multitude of different directions. But after a certain time, according to Freud, it came to a standstill. Freud was not the only one who held this view at the time. Nowadays, people usually argue in a more differentiated way and, above all, take into account that new developments were triggered by Islam's confrontation with modernity [9].

*Perhaps because it lacked the deepening that, in the Jewish case, the murder of the founder of the religion had caused.*

Freud formulates cautiously at this point as well, only poses a hypothesis («perhaps»). This hypothesis says that the «standstill» is due to a missing «deepening». If above the talk was of a «shortcut», Freud now speaks of a missing «deepening». Both-so it can be assumed-stand for the same thing, which is however differently linguistically grasped.

The reason for the «abbreviation» or the missing «deepening» is now explicitly mentioned: The deepening could have taken place if the founder of the religion had been murdered. So, on the one hand, something is repeated with the founding of the religion of Islam: As before in Judaism, the «primordial father» is «recovered» with the proclamation of the idea of monotheism. On the other hand, however, the one who proclaims this idea, the prophet, is not murdered as in Judaism. Consequently, in Islam there was also no reason for a feeling of guilt to arise. This could have led, as in Judaism, to an internalization and thus to a «deepening» of monotheism. But Mohammed died a natural death. Murder did not take place.

### Conclusion and Further Questions

In summary, Freud's brief but well-rounded remarks relate Judaism and Islam in a comparative manner. On the one hand, he starts from general considerations about the nature of religion, especially those concerning monotheism: the idea of the primordial horde, of the murder of the primordial father, which led to feelings of guilt. On the other hand, against the background of these considerations, he highlights the central difference: In both religions the «primordial father» was «recovered», but only in Judaism this was connected with a murder, the murder of the founder of religion Moses. Therefore, only in Judaism the monotheism was deeply anchored in the psyche of the believers, because only here a feeling of guilt developed, which was deepened and stabilized again and again-by the prophets [10].

What questions now arise when Islam is further examined from the perspective that Freud has roughly sketched with his remarks? If we start from the premise that with Islam a «recovery of the father» has taken place, the question can simply be asked what is then in Islam with the mother, more generally speaking, with the feminine. This question is of high topicality and was taken up by the French psychoanalyst Benslama F. He has formulated the thesis that Islam is essentially characterized by the repression of the feminine at the time of its genesis [11]. Furthermore, this premise raises the question of how the divine authority and the relationship between it and human beings are conceived in Islam. For the first aspect, it is relevant that, in distinction from Christianity and the idea that Jesus was the Son of God, it is explicitly negated that one may imagine God as a father.

For example, Sura 112 states that he «neither begat nor was begotten» [12]. On the one hand, the distance between God and man is increased in this way, the one God is moved to a greater distance, but on the other hand, it remains that the paternal qualities of sanctioning positively and/or negatively are attributed to him. With regard to the second aspect, the question arises

whether the relationship between God and man in Islam is thought of similarly to the father-son relationship in the Oedipal triad. Yes, the ambivalence that is central to the Oedipus complex seems to be just absent in the determination of the relationship between God and man as it is done in the Quran. [13] In place of a relationship of obedience that allows for ambivalence and provides space for the unfolding of autonomy is one that accentuates obedience [14].

Last but not least, against the background of Freud's thesis that monotheism was psychically anchored in Judaism by a feeling of guilt, the question arises as to how Islam was psychically anchored. The assumption that such an anchoring did not take place is absurd. But how did it take place? In an attempt to answer this question, it would first be necessary to examine how Muhammad succeeded in winning his listeners over to the Koranic message in the first place. By analyzing the Qur'an, we can find out which «methods» were used to-as Peirce CS [15] put it-«still doubts».

This investigation is not least important in order to understand the current crisis of Islam. For the crisis in which Islam finds itself since the confrontation with modernity consists precisely in the fact that certainties of faith have been lost and a search for new evidence has begun [16]. It has led, it can be noted, to various consequences, both constructive and destructive, both to new cultural achievements and, rather rarely, to hatred and violence [17]. In rudiments, then, Freud's reflections have already been taken up. It would be desirable if this were to happen more widely in the future.

### References

1. Freud S (1939/1974) Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion. In: Fragen der Gesellschaft. Ursprünge der Religion, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt, Germany, pp. 455-581.
2. Oevermann U (2000) Die Methode der Fallrekonstruktion in der Grundlagenforschung sowie der klinischen und pädagogischen Praxis. In: Kraimer, K (Ed.): Die Fallrekonstruktion. Sinnverstehen in der sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, Germany, pp. 58-156.
3. Seen from the internal perspective of Islam, Muhammad is not the founder of a new religion, Islam, but a prophet, or more precisely, the last prophet in a chain of prophets who have always proclaimed the same message.
4. The literature on Akhnaton is extensive.
5. Ibn I (1982), Mohammed D, Stuttgart, Deutschland, Twardella J (2021) Die Genese des Islam. Die Erzählung von der Entstehung des Neuen in der Mohammed-Biographie von Ibn Ishaq. In: Sozialer Sinn. Zeitschrift für hermeneutische Sozialforschung 22: 389-412.
6. The relationship of Islam to Judaism has been addressed early in Quranic studies.
7. Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker. In: Freud, S. (1974), Fragen der Gesellschaft. Ursprünge der Religion, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt, Germany, pp: 287-444.
8. The self-confidence, it can be added, was also fed by the fact that the idea of monotheism, after it had been relativized in Christianity by the idea of the Sonship of God by Jesus, was reasserted in a purified form. Yes, the self-confidence could pass over into the pride to represent the monotheism in pure form, as it had existed from the beginning.

9. Twardella, J (2004): *Moderner Islam. Fallstudien zur islamischen Religiosität in Deutschland*. Olms, Hildesheim, Deutschland, Germany.
10. It can be added that the social and political conditions were different in each case. The Jewish prophets appeared independently of political power, indeed as an antipole to it. Politics, the political success of the community, played no role in stabilizing religious convictions. This is different in Islam.
11. Benslama F (2017) *Psychoanalyse des Islam. Wie der Islam die psychoanalyse auf die probe stellt*. Berlin, Germany; Twardella J (2004) *Moderner Islam. Fallstudien zur islamischen Religiosität in Deutschland*. Olms, Hildesheim, Deutschland, Germany.
12. Paret R (1989) *Der Koran*. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart Berlin Cologne, Germany, pp. 439.
13. Jiko J (2004) Die Verleugnung der Ambivalenz. Monotheismus im Islam. In: *Psyche. Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendungen*, Deutschland, Germany 58: 26-46.
14. Twardella J (1999) *Autonomie, Gehorsam und Bewährung im Koran. Ein soziologischer Beitrag zum Religionsvergleich*. Olms, Hildesheim, Germany.
15. Peirce CS (1967) Die Festlegung einer Überzeugung. In: Peirce, Charles S.: *Schriften I. Zur Entstehung des Pragmatismus*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt M, Germany, pp. 293-325.
16. Twardella J (2021) Education and certainty: On the importance of education in fethullah M. Gülen's thinking. In: Gärtner C, Winkel H (Eds.), *Exploring Islam beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism: Sociological Approaches*. (1st edn), Springer VS, Wiesbaden, Deutschland, Germany, pp. 311-331.
17. Benslama F (2017) *Der Übermuslim. Was junge Menschen zur Radikalisierung treibt*. Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, Germany.