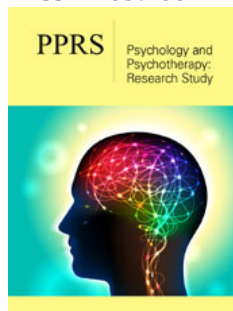


# Religion in Psychoanalysis Following Jacques Lacan

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ISSN: 2639-0612



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**Submission:**  July 24, 2023

**Published:**  August 15, 2023

Volume 7 - Issue 3

**How to cite this article:** Twardella J\*. Religion in Psychoanalysis Following Jacques Lacan. Psychol Psychother Res Stud. 7(3). PPRS. 000661. 2023. DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000661](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000661)

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## Abstract

There is still a widespread view that psychoanalysis is critical of religion, indeed, is a form of criticism of religion. This is a problem not least in relation to the treatment of patients who profess belief in a religion. In the present essay, a proposal is made as to how psychoanalysis can be linked to an understanding of religion that regards religion as a universal phenomenon. In doing so, it draws on the one hand on considerations of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and on the other hand on considerations of the German social psychologist Ulrich Oevermann. The different approach to dealing with religious patients, which becomes possible on the basis of this understanding, can be seen as a further step in the professionalization of psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis; Religion; Professionalization; Jacques lacan; Ulrich oevermann

## Introduction

The relationship between psychoanalysis and religion remains controversial. This can be traced back to the fact that Sigmund Freud, the founding figure of psychoanalysis, had a highly ambivalent relationship to religion. On the one hand, he was part of a religious tradition by which he was strongly influenced, that of Judaism on the other hand, he broke with this tradition at a young age and, as a scientist, saw himself in conflict with every form of religion-only to deal with religious issues repeatedly [1,2]. This was from a scientific perspective, but in a way that makes clear how much Freud was influenced by Judaism and what enormous importance he attached to religion in the present, not least in order to understand it. Thus, his last major writing on religion, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (Moses and Monotheism) is also a contribution to the understanding of National Socialism [3]. In the public perception, this ambivalence has been largely erased, Freud is primarily regarded as a critic of religion. This is mainly due to the fact that in his writing *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (The Future of an Illusion) he had defined religion as something infantile, like a child's faith [4]. Many psychoanalysts also see Freud primarily as a critic of religion, although he wrote in a letter to Oskar Pfister that in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* he had only communicated his "personal attitude" [5]. The views formulated there were no part of the analytic doctrinal edifice. Psychoanalysis was instead an "impartial methodology". In the psychoanalytic cure, religion could be discussed and it could be asked what underlies the analysand's religiosity-for example, the longing for a protective power. Ultimately, however, it is up to the analysand how he deals with this longing and how he "satiates" it. Despite this comment, psychoanalysis is commonly perceived as being in conflict with religion, and it is not uncommon for analysts to have difficulty with the religiosity of their patients [6].

## Following Jacques Lacan

Against the background of Freud's difficult relationship with religion, the question arises whether there has been any clarification of the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion over time. One of the attempts to redefine this relationship comes from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He will be discussed in more detail in the following. Clarifying Lacan's remarks on the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion, however, is not easy, since, like so much of what Lacan said and wrote, they are allusive, ambiguous, not very

systematic, and only weakly grounded. As Elisabeth Roudinesco has written in her extremely insightful study of Lacan's biography and work, Lacan's development was determined by his taking ideas from art, philosophy, and linguistics and trying to make them fruitful for the theoretical discussion of psychoanalysis, including ideas from Kojève, Hegel, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, and Jakobson [7]. In this respect, his self-description as a "Bricoleur" seems quite apt: "All the things I have touched are things I have put together from this here and from that there" [8]. And instead of thinking it through in more detail, he did not infrequently present "this and that" in a tone suggesting depth, sometimes playful, sometimes murmuring. In the following, an attempt will be made to take up Lacan's reflections on the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion and to bring them into a systematic context. The intention is not a new Lacan exegesis, but rather to put some of his ideas on a well-founded basis by connecting them with considerations of other authors, especially with theoretical arguments of the German social psychologist Ulrich Oevermann, his theory of professionalization as well as his structural model of religiosity. In my opinion, it is not very plausible to continue Lacan's reflections on religion in the direction of a theory of religious experience [9]. For this would amount to relegating Lacan to a subject-philosophical paradigm. This, however, was precisely to be overcome by structuralism. In contrast to this, I will try to continue Lacan's reflections with the help of thinking rooted in structuralism, namely that of Oevermann's, in order to arrive at a "sustainable" definition of the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. I would like to refer to an interview that first appeared in 1975 in "Les Lettres de L'Ecole" and in 2006 in German translation in the volume *Der Triumph der Religion* (The Triumph of Religion) [10]. It contains Lacan's reflections on religion in concentrated form.

### Educate as an Untenable Position

It is remarkable that Lacan, in the said interview, does not deal with religion at all at first, but, in a first step, deals with certain activities, among which is "analyzing". That is, the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion is not considered, as is quite often the case, as that of two interpretive systems that are presented as competing with each other, but as one of different practices. Lacan's remarks refer back to Freud, who in his writings on the doctrine of treatment had put forward the thesis that there are some "impossible professions," among which besides that of the pedagogue and that of the politician is also that of the analyst. The professions are "impossible" because with them, according to Freud, "one can be sure from the outset of insufficient success" [11]. It should be noted at this point that these professions also enjoy special attention in sociology and are assigned to a certain grouping, one that since Talcott Parsons (and others) have been called "professions". These professions are characterized by the fact that in modern societies they are practiced on a scientific basis, free from state control. In their place is control by a professional association, as well as internal control through the professional's commitment to a specific ethos. Paradigmatic for the group of these professions is that of the doctor [12]. Lacan takes up Freud's thesis

and speaks of an "untenable position" (61) in which those who either educate, govern, or analyze find themselves.

How does Lacan justify the thesis of "untenability"? Is he, like Freud, arguing with reference to uncertain success? Lacan first makes his case in relation to pedagogical action. In doing so, he starts one level lower than Freud, namely on the level of the goals that are to be achieved by pedagogical action (and by which success can first be judged). On the one hand, pedagogical action is intentional, i.e., it is directed toward certain goals, but on the other hand, the actors themselves are hardly aware of these goals: "People don't really know what they want when they educate." (62). The following can be added: This definitely applies to the pedagogical routine. Occasionally, however, this routine gets into a crisis. Then, according to Lacan, the pedagogical actors suddenly become aware that they do not know what their goal is, and they become afraid. In order to overcome this and solve the crisis, images of human beings would be constructed to guide pedagogical action. The pedagogical practitioner then believes that he knows what kind of person he should "make" his counterpart, the adolescent.

But this is an illusion: "In truth, man is not necessarily educated. He does his education all by himself" (62)

According to Lacan, the position of the pedagogue is "untenable" because, on the one hand, education is necessary, but on the other hand, it is not in the pedagogue's hands whether education occurs, since this ultimately depends solely on the counterpart, the adolescent. It can be stated: Lacan argues with a contradiction that is of fundamental importance for pedagogical action: Education is a practice in which at least two subjects are involved, someone who educates and someone who is educated, and regardless of whether the one who educates acts routinely and without a clear objective or has constructed an image of "the human being" in a crisis to which he subsequently tries to orient his actions- it ultimately depends on the one who is to be educated to what result this process leads. In this respect, it can be said that Lacan's justification of the "untenability" of pedagogical action amounts to the same thing as Freud's: the result of pedagogical action-whether with or without a conception of the goal-is uncertain. From the point of view of professionalization theory, it can be added that this applies both to "natural" pedagogical action in the context of the family and to the action of those who have made pedagogy their profession, practiced on the basis of science. With regard to professional pedagogues, it can furthermore be said that although their actions are also characterized by routines over long stretches, they do not reflect on their goals only in times of crisis, because they are expected to be able to continuously account for the goals of their actions. Nevertheless, it is also true for professional pedagogical practice that the outcome depends on the adolescents, since they ultimately educate themselves [13].

### Analyze as an Untenable Position

While pedagogical action has "always" existed, because the older generation was "always" faced with the task of educating the younger in order to ensure social reproduction, analytical action

is relatively new. That is why there is no comparable tradition of reflection of analytic as well as pedagogical action. Nevertheless, according to Lacan, the “untenability” of the position of the agent has been made conscious and highlighted not by pedagogues, but only by psychoanalysts. It is astonishing that Lacan does not deal with the third untenable position, that of the politician, but with science. It, too, is in an untenable position. How does he justify this assertion, which goes beyond Freud? Lacan argues here in a similar way as before: Like the pedagogues, the scientists ultimately do not know what they are doing. The reason for this, however, is not that they-like the pedagogues-are unclear about the goals of their actions; rather, they would have no idea with regard to the consequences of their actions. Like the pedagogues, the scientists would also occasionally get into a crisis, namely when they become aware of possible consequences of their actions. Then, according to Lacan, they enter a state of anxiety. He cites research with bacteria as an example: Only in rare moments do scientists become aware that this could threaten the existence of all life on earth. From a sociological point of view, it is plausible to consider scientific action as a professional one, which is characterized by basic contradictions. From this perspective, however, it should be noted that scientific action is on a different level from that of the other professions: Analytic action, indeed, medical action in general, as well as that of the legal profession and that of educators, lies on the level of practice, indeed, is a practice, precisely one that is based on science, in which methodized knowledge is thus used to solve practical problems. Psychoanalysis is also not a science but is instead a practice based on science.

Unlike other professional practices, science is action-relieved. It operates on the premise of being free of pressure to act and reflects on the basis on which professional practices take place. Its task is thus, among other things, to reflect on those scientific premises on which professional practices are based when these are no longer suitable for solving the problems that arise in practice [14]. Finally, as far as the “untenable position” of psychoanalysis is concerned, professionalization theory explains it with reference to a structural problem: the mediation of science or theory and practice cannot-in all professions-be subsumption-logical, not-as Oevermann puts it-“engineered” or standardized, since the analysand is an individual, a person with his or her own particular history [15]. In contrast, Lacan argues ontologically, as it were: Analysts, he argues, deal with “the real,” but this is something that “does not go” (67). And that which “does not go” is precisely “the real”: “That which goes is the world. The real is that which does not go” (67). In order to understand this rationale, Lacan’s distinction between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real would have to be addressed at this point. However, this would require a separate treatise and is not possible within the framework given here [16]. Therefore, it will be proposed to go back to sociology and translate the relation between the symbolic and the real, as Lacan understands it, into the relation between language and the non-identical, as it is conceived by the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and, following him, by Oevermann: The real is-like the non-identical-something that cannot be grasped by the means of language, at least not

directly. Whereas in the other professions routines always reassert themselves and crises occur only sporadically, analytic practice, according to Lacan, is permanently in crisis, and this is because it is constantly trying to get at the real, to verbalize it, i.e., to find a linguistic expression for it. Because of this, analysts may actually be constantly in a state of anxiety and, in order to pursue their work, would need to be “powerfully armored against anxiety” (67)

## Religion as a Universal Phenomenon

Now to the second step, that of defining the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. When the title of the interview speaks of the “Triumph of Religion”, this gives the impression that Lacan assumes that both psychoanalysis and religion are in a relationship of competition with each other, in a contest from which in the end an instance or a function emerges as the winner. But Lacan ultimately leaves open the question of whether he actually sees it this way, only stating that if a competitive relationship were assumed, it must be made clear that religion “cannot be killed” (69). In other words: Religion is a universal phenomenon. Its universality is based on its function, which according to Lacan is to give meaning to things and in this way to provide comfort. This universality is underlined by Lacan’s assertion that it is absurd to think that science and its progress would diminish the things to which religion is able to give meaning. Rather, the opposite is the case: Through the progress of science, these things increase, “the real” grows-and with it the expectation of religion to provide meaning. It is also at this point that Lacan owes an argumentation with which his theses could be supported. Once again, however, it is possible to draw on considerations from sociology, namely the justification of the universality of the problem of probation and the structural model of religiosity as developed by Oevermann [17].

This is derived from the constitutional conditions that are fundamentally given for every practice. Oevermann sees life practice as characterized by the fact that decisions have to be made that appear to be meaningful, that is, that can be justified. Oevermann speaks of the contradiction between the “obligation to decide” and the “obligation to justify”: On the one hand, decisions have to be made-one cannot not decide-but on the other hand, these decisions have to be justified, which, however, is ultimately not possible at all, because otherwise they would not be correct decisions at all. Rather, it would be a matter of continuing routines, i.e., repeating a decision that was made in the past and has proven itself. If, however, a routine cannot be continued, but rather a crisis has occurred, a “correct” decision is required. But this can no longer be justified with reference to a routine that has proven itself. Rather, it is taken into an open future. But it also requires a justification-not least so that it can be made with certainty at all and subsequently acted upon with certainty. But where can such a justification, where can a meaning, come from? According to Oevermann, this is the universal problem of probation, which arises under the condition that arbitrary decisions cannot be tried out because life is finite. And ultimately, not only individual decisions, but the entire history of a practice must be able to be judged as meaningful and consistent in itself. For this, however, a myth, a “myth of probation” is needed.

Traditionally, religions provide such a myth by answering three questions: "Where do we come from? Who are we? And where are we going?" This structure, he said, is universal, meaning that even those who do not believe in any religion must answer these three questions. Thus, if religions have lost their power of persuasion under the conditions of secularization and are no longer able to provide the certainty needed to make decisions, the problem of probation does not dwindle, but rather comes to a head, since it must now be answered individually, without the help of traditional religions. And while traditional religions can rely on various sources of evidence, especially an evidence through communalization, the question arises as to what an individual can rely on when creating an individual probation myth [18].

### Christianity as "The True Religion"?

Lacan continues his argument by stating that psychoanalysis, unlike religion, is historically a relatively recent phenomenon, a product of modern culture, or more precisely, of a "malaise in culture" (71). Psychoanalysis is, he provocatively points out, a symptom. Less pointedly, it can be said: it arose in the face of symptoms that arose in the culture of modernity and deals with them. Against the background of this distinction, Lacan concludes that the future of psychoanalysis is uncertain. The question is not whether it will "triumph" over religion, but simply whether it will continue to endure and "survive." Religion, on the other hand, will continue to exist. Yes, it could even be that it ultimately triumphs over psychoanalysis, because it can "Drown" everything in the meaning it creates (72). It is irritating that Lacan does not leave it at these general remarks on religion and on the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis, but in the following he comes to talk about Christianity, which he calls "the true religion" (73).

How is this to be understood? It is difficult to say, especially since Lacan gives no justification for this claim. Is it due to the fact that he grew up in a Christian home, indeed, in a Christian tradition, that is, an expression of a traditionalism in which one's own tradition is seen as the only beatific one? This is contradicted by the fact that Lacan left this tradition relatively early on and no longer saw himself as a Christian, but as an atheist. How is it possible, from an atheistic point of view, to single out one religion from the multitude of all religions and to call it "true"? Is there a certain philosophy of religion in the background, for instance that of Hegel? As is well known, Lacan dealt intensively with Hegel, especially with the "Phänomenologie des Geistes" (Phenomenology of Mind) [19]. Did he also receive Hegel's Philosophy of Religion, in which Hegel ascribes a special status to Christianity insofar as he claims that it is the absolute religion in which the concept of religion is realized? or is Lacan merely quoting a view of which he himself is not at all convinced? It is interesting that in the course of the interview a particular aspect of Christianity is singled out: The place that the Word or language has in it [20]. More specifically, the beginning of John's Gospel is quoted: In the beginning was the Word. The reason for this is that the interviewer points to a commonality: For Christianity and-as Lacan adds-also for Judaism, everything begins with language. According to the Bible, it is at the beginning, not only

according to the Gospel of John, but also according to "Genesis," the narrative of God's creation of the world. Likewise, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, the word, language, stands at the beginning. At this point, the interviewer presumably also refers to the fact that Lacan sought to place psychoanalysis on a linguistic foundation. Lacan adds that, in addition, the word stands at the beginning for psychoanalysis in two other respects: first, in relation to ontogenetic development. With reference to the Evangelist's formulation that "The Word became flesh", Lacan explains that man, when he comes into the world, is at first only flesh, but then acquires the ability to speak, so that the Word "becomes flesh". With this, however, the "drama" begins, because language has the ability to destroy man. But not only that: it also brings the possibility that people have a pleasure that only language can offer, that of "rejoicing". On the other hand, the word is also at the beginning of the cure, indeed, it is the medium of the "talking cure," of therapy. This is sought out in order to have that very pleasure that only language can offer.

With recourse to Oevermann's sociology of religion, it can be added that the process of secularization is already germinated in the story of creation as told in the Bible, insofar as the creator God also finds himself in an "untenable position". The evaluation which he carries out after each act of creation and which turns out positive every time - "And he saw that it was good" - presupposes namely that the result of the action was uncertain and it could also have failed. God, too, was therefore dependent on a counterpart who acted independently. But even if Judaism and Christianity are of special importance for the-as Max Weber put it-"occidental rationalization process", i.e. for that process which finally led to the formation of modernity, and psychoanalysis emerged from it, it is still questionable whether one can therefore speak of a "true religion".

### Conclusion

Freud's relationship to religion was characterized to a great extent by ambivalence. This is quite understandable; indeed, an unbroken relationship to religion is difficult to imagine under the conditions of modernity, modern pluralism, and the "Compulsion to Heresy". The universal problem of probation can be solved in modernity by recourse to a religion, but other solutions are also conceivable [21]. For the psychoanalytic practice it is important that it is not seen as being in conflict with religion, but as an "impartial method" which can also be applied to religious ideas and norms. For this, that definition of the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis can be a basis that Lacan made, who started from the "untenable position" of psychoanalysis. Precisely when the religiosity of the analysand becomes the subject of the cure, its outcome, its success, is uncertain. It is important to note that the recognition of the analyst's religiosity is independent of the tradition in which he or she stands. This can be a Jewish, a Christian, an Islamic ..... Yes, it can also be an individual myth of probation that becomes the subject.

The analysis then gets into a contradiction insofar as on the one hand the religiosity of the analysand is not dismissed from the



beginning as infantile, but is acknowledged, but on the other hand it is analyzed. This means that it is possible to ask which feelings are connected with certain ideas and practices, how they are embedded in the biography of the analysand, how they have developed and which psychological conflicts underlie them. It is a matter of bringing them to the surface, of understanding them in a way that is conducive to the analysand's autonomy. His autonomy can finally be brought to bear in different ways: By holding on to religious ideas and practices, by modifying them, or by the analysand separating from them. What is ultimately decisive is the gain in autonomy.

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