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# When Throne and Altar are in Danger: Freud, Mourning, and Religion in Modernity

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# When Throne and Altar Are in Danger: Freud, Mourning, and Religion in Modernity

*Diane Jonte-Pace*

## **Psychoanalysis and Religion: Asking Questions about Life, Theory, and Culture**

What can be said about the complex relationship between psychoanalysis and religion?<sup>1</sup> I've found it useful to address this question from three perspectives: life, theory, and culture. These are inevitably intertwined, but can be separated, at least heuristically. The "life" perspective focuses on the founder of psychoanalysis, examining Freud's Jewish background, the significance of his Catholic nanny, the meaning of his beloved collection of antiquities (the gods and goddesses of the past), the impact of Viennese anti-Semitism, and the sources of his personal rejection of religious belief.

The "theory" perspective leads to the texts of psychoanalysis—into Freud's psychoanalytic writings on religion and the writings of his followers. The best known of Freud's are *The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Moses and Monotheism*, and *Totem and Taboo*, but there are many other shorter and lesser known texts on religion, myth, ritual, and belief. Focusing on these leads toward an inquiry into Freud's career-long fascination with the interpretation and critique of religion, into contemporary applications of psychoanalytic theory to religious phenomena, and into questions about whether newer variants of psychoanalytic theory can offer productive readings of religious phenomena and experience.



The “culture” perspective leads toward other sorts of questions. Here we encounter inquiries into whether, for example, a psychoanalytic or “therapeutic” worldview has replaced an earlier “religious” worldview; questions about the impact of modernization on religion and on the emergence of psychological ideas; questions about the adoption of psychoanalytic methods in religious contexts like pastoral care and counseling; questions about the evaluation (and reevaluation) of religious experience in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM); and questions about the ways both religious and psychological practices can support human transformation and healing.

Intense debates have marked the scholarship in each of these three areas. Let me mention just a few of these controversies. Interpreters of the “life” have variously acclaimed or denounced Freud as Christian, as Jewish, as religious, and as anti-religious. Oscar Pfister famously said “a better Christian there never was.”<sup>2</sup> Yerushalmi, Klein, Rice, and Bakan find Jewish themes, issues, and moral teachings embedded in every part of his work.<sup>3</sup> Ana-Maria Rizzuto explores and critiques the psychodynamics of his atheism in *Why Did Freud Reject God?*, finding his anti-religious stance deeply neurotic or problematic.<sup>4</sup> Yet Freud, calling himself a “godless Jew,” presented his atheism as a sign of psychological health.

Among scholars of the theory as well, opinions are diverse and debates are heated. Some argue that Freud is best seen as a critic of religion who mounted an enlightenment-based attack on religious illusion.<sup>5</sup> Others, such as Ricoeur and Kung, suggest that psychoanalysis can purify religion of infantile or authoritarian elements.<sup>6</sup> Some see the theory as contributing to immorality; others find Freud an exemplary moralist.<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that the antagonism between psychoanalysis and religion is a thing of the past;<sup>8</sup> others still seek reconciliation between religion and psychoanalysis by focusing on developments in object relations theory and self-psychology.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars interested in cultural perspectives exhibit a similarly broad range of views: Peter Gay argues that “we all speak Freud today,” and Peter Homans suggests that psychoanalysis is the dominant discourse of modernity.<sup>10</sup> Philip Rieff critiques the “triumph of the therapeutic” in contemporary culture.<sup>11</sup> For Frederick Crews Freud is insignificant, “dead,” or dangerous.<sup>12</sup> For James Dittes, Freud’s psychological teachings are spiritual, wise, deeply religious; for Paul Vitz, psychoanalysis encourages narcissistic self-absorption and contributes to dangerous anti-religious ideologies.<sup>13</sup> In relation to feminism we find similar debates: for some feminist theorists psychoanalysis is irredeemably sexist; for others it provides an insightful analysis of cultural misogyny.<sup>14</sup>

How can we make sense of these polarized and often vituperative debates? One way to trace a path through the labyrinth of diverse interpretations of



life, theory, and culture is to acknowledge that Freud is a complex and often ambivalent thinker. There are “many Freuds,” and there are good reasons for the debates over whether Freud is religious or not, Jewish or not, moral or not, and “dead” or not. More significantly, however, these polarized positions can be understood from a larger perspective. It is my position that the relation between psychoanalysis and religion is best viewed in interpretive terms. Psychoanalysis can be seen as an analysis of the way that individuals and cultures mourn the losses associated with religion that modernization brings. It is a discourse that, at times, critiques religion, and at other times, defends religion. At its best, however, it steps back to interpret the impact of the loss of religion through a profound inquiry into the mourning and melancholia produced by the loss of religious foundations and communities.

### Masterplot and Counterthesis: Many Freuds

I have argued that Freud develops a dominant argument that is critical of religion at the same time that he develops a thesis that subverts, interrupts, or interprets his dominant argument.<sup>15</sup> I call these positions “masterplot” and “counterthesis.” Sometimes the masterplot constructs an anti-religious argument while the counterthesis constructs a religious or quasi-religious argument. This tension between masterplot and counterthesis is not simply a manifestation of an internal contradiction or an anticipation of the polarized debates that would later erupt. Rather, in its most developed form it points toward insightful reflections on or analyses of what it means for a culture to lose its religious foundations. In some texts the counterthesis interrupts the masterplot as if Freud were not fully aware of where the ideas were taking him; in other texts Freud explicitly acknowledges the limitations of the masterplot and hesitantly or playfully develops alternate analyses. At times these alternatives are not fully developed: pointing in provocative new directions, they remain incompletely articulated.

The book containing Freud’s most dramatic critique of religion, *The Future of an Illusion*, for example, also contains the counterthesis in the form of a religious subtext. Freud develops, in a sense, a grand religious vision in his often quoted appeal to “Our God Logos.” He defines this God as Reason or Rationality, a good translation of the Greek “Logos.” I have no doubt that Freud knew that the early Christians described Christ as Logos, Divine Reason, or the “Word” of God. His text thus offers a post-Christian replacement for a Logos theology centered on Christ as Word of God. Here, what I’ve called the counterthesis is quite consciously developed. In other texts it is more tentatively suggested but not fully investigated. Framing the paradoxes



in Freud's work on religion as masterplot and counterthesis provides a way to articulate and tolerate the contradictions and ambiguity we encounter. There is no need to join the battle over whether psychoanalysis is friendly or unfriendly toward religion. It is both. And more significantly, it often moves beyond the toleration of ambiguity, beyond a stance that holds the contradictions in creative tension, and toward interpretation and analysis.

As I've pointed out elsewhere, the interpretive counterthesis is especially visible in three clusters of themes in Freud's work.<sup>16</sup> One cluster involves maternity, mortality, and immortality; another involves Judaism and anti-Semitism; the third involves mourning and melancholia. These clusters are often associated with what Freud called the "uncanny," and with death and loss. The counterthesis frequently exposes the presence of the maternal body in fears and fantasies about loss, death, and the afterlife. *The Future of an Illusion*, for example, describes religious ideas about life after death as a "home in the uncanny" (a "Heim" in the "unheimlich") at the same time that it describes male anxiety about women's genitals as a fear of an "uncanny home": an "unheimlich Heim." In this text maternity and the fantasy of immortality are intertwined; loss, death, and the mother are inseparable.

In this chapter I'll pursue this tension between masterplot and counterthesis in Freud's work as a way of asking what can be said about our primary question, the relation between psychoanalysis and religion. In this process I'll attempt to integrate the three perspectives differentiated above—life, theory, and culture. My thesis is that Freud can best be understood as a theorist who analyzes the loss of religion in cultures and individuals by exploring the dynamics of mourning and melancholia. I'll draw from some of Freud's well-known texts on religion and from some that are rarely brought into conversation with religion. And I'll pursue some trajectories in the work of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers, Peter Homans, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler.

### **Freud and the Loss of Religion: Defensive Panic, Mourning, and Melancholia**

In the 1927 essay called "Fetishism," Freud addressed one of his favorite themes: the denial of the male child in his first encounter with sexual difference. He speculated that the child sees the nude body of his mother but refuses to acknowledge that she does not "possess a penis." This child imagines, in Freud's reconstruction, "This cannot be true . . . if a woman had been castrated then his own possession of a penis was in danger." Speculating



further Freud proposed, “in later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger.”<sup>17</sup>

These are typical Freudian speculations. They integrate almost all the classic psychoanalytic themes: a focus on the male child and his incestuous interest in his mother, a focus on the penis and on castration anxiety, and an extension of this body-based anxiety into the cultural arena. If the changes associated with modernity involve challenges to thrones and altars, as they surely do, then Freud’s speculations here make both modernity and its discontents oedipal and phallogocentric.

Judith Butler has noted that the problem of loss emerges vividly when established narratives begin to falter. If narrative once functioned as a way of containing loss, she asks, what happens when the religious narrative that has underwritten historical development fails?<sup>18</sup> Freud’s words provide one suggestive psychodynamic answer to Butler’s question (we shall encounter other answers as well). The endangered “throne and altar” are cultural institutions, political and religious structures, whose instability evokes anxiety. Freud portrayed throne and altar as fragile stand-ins for the phallus, at risk through the mere presence of the one whose phallus is perceived as absent: woman/mother. His analysis emphasized the phallogocentrism of politics, law, and religion. Freud’s interpretation of the panic that emerges when throne and altar are in danger hints at the way that castration anxiety is intertwined with misogyny in the social arena: men get worried about dangers involving women—especially women’s bodies—when social institutions or grand narratives are threatened. In Freud’s analysis, unconscious misogyny amplifies or underlies the state of panic over religious and social instability.<sup>19</sup>

In his speculations on thrones and altars Freud might have been reflecting on the effects of his own work in promoting religious and social instability and the castration anxiety, misogyny, and anti-Semitism that might follow: he had started writing his most famous critique of religious belief and morality, *The Future of an Illusion*, just a few months prior to writing these words about thrones and altars in the essay on “Fetishism.” And he finished *Future* just a few weeks afterwards.<sup>20</sup>

“Fetishism” and *Future* function as paired texts. Freud’s treatise on the fragility of faith is closely linked to his interest in the fragility marked by the fetish. The link is theoretical, chronological, and cultural: it includes Freud’s religious and cultural context—his Jewishness, his ambivalence about his Jewishness, the Roman Catholic anti-Semitism of Vienna where he lived and worked, the process of secularization that he considered inevitable, and the critique of Christian belief he had mounted in *The Future of an Illusion*



and other writings. He knew his work was likely to be criticized, rejected, and dismissed as the work of a “godless Jew.” He knew that one of the responses to the social, cultural, and religious changes that made up the process of modernization was a kind of defensive panic and that it was likely to be associated with misogyny and xenophobia. Clearly Freud was not simply critiquing religion by celebrating the dangers to altars associated with modernity, secularism, or assimilationism. Rather, he was interpreting psychological and social reactions to such dangers.

This is not Freud’s only foray into this territory. I’ll turn to another set of responses to loss and change, and to another set of paired Freudian texts. These texts address a different response to dangers to “thrones” and “altars” in a modernizing world: rather than defensive panic, these texts explore mourning and melancholia. I see these texts as Freudian reflections on the tension between masterplot and counterthesis.

In 1915, Freud wrote several essays on death, loss, and mourning. Among these are “Mourning and Melancholia” and “On Transience.” These are intertwined texts: “Mourning” was the more theoretical analysis of loss intended for an audience of fellow psychoanalysts and scientists; “On Transience” focused on the same themes but addressed a more general set of broadly humanistic readers.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud looked at the similarities and differences between the process of grieving or mourning, and its more intense, painful, and pathological variant, known to the medical community of his era as melancholia. Both, he argued, originate with the loss of a loved object or ideal: they are “reactions to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one: one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”<sup>21</sup> His definition was broad: it included cultural losses, losses of ideals like freedom and equality, losses of landed identities associated with emigration, and religious losses.

Melancholia, he argued, differs from mourning in several ways. First, it involves a deeper ambivalence in the relationship to the loved object. The lost object is both loved and hated.<sup>22</sup> Second, this ambivalence is internalized in a struggle resulting in a dual or conflicted sense of self and a loss of “self-regard.”<sup>23</sup> Third, while mourning is mainly conscious, melancholia can be primarily unconscious.<sup>24</sup> Fourth, while mourning is typically a reaction to a specific loss, melancholia may be a result of a more general sense of loss, including a feeling of fragmentation from having been “slighted, neglected, or disappointed” many times.<sup>25</sup> Fifth, hinting at the notion of the death instinct he would develop more clearly a few years later, Freud argued that melancholia “overcomes the instinct that compels every living thing to cling to life,”



although at the same time, it involves an intense fear of death.<sup>26</sup> Finally, he stated, the pain associated with mourning comes to an end, but the pain of melancholia is extended endlessly. Melancholia can be said to be a more extreme, protracted, ambivalent, difficult, painful form of mourning. For the most part, Freud seemed to suggest, mourning, a progressive disinvestment from a lost object, is healthier and in some sense preferable. But there's an ambivalence in his stance. I'll come back to this point.

Let us turn to "On Transience," a short essay composed at the request of the Goethe Society in Berlin for a commemorative volume issued in 1916. The volume was called *Das Land Goethes (Goethe's Country)*. It contained contributions from well-known artists, writers, and poets. In his essay, Freud discussed, less systematically but more poetically and dramatically, the same material presented in "Mourning and Melancholia." He framed an analysis of two distinct reactions to loss within a personal narrative and an account of a cultural tragedy. He referred even more directly to the cultural context hinted at in "Mourning and Melancholia," by alluding explicitly to the tensions between assimilationism and traditionalism for Jews in Germanic culture. He elaborated on the melancholic reaction to loss by introducing the themes of the refusal to mourn and the demand for immortality. Here he seemed (and I emphasize *seemed*) to privilege mourning over melancholia by critiquing the melancholic response. But as we shall see, the thread of ambivalence appears here too.

Freud began the essay for *Goethe's Country* with an idyllic memory of a lovely stroll through the countryside: "Not long ago, I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet."<sup>27</sup> This peaceful walk was quickly disturbed: Freud's friends found themselves unable to feel pleasure in the beauty of the landscape. The poet "admired the beauty of the scene" but "felt no joy in it." Disturbed "by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction . . . all that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom."<sup>28</sup>

Freud offered an interpretation of his companions' dark attitude: "the idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease." He described the reaction of his friends as a "revolt . . . against mourning"<sup>29</sup> and a "demand for immortality."<sup>30</sup> He added, "since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience."<sup>31</sup> Transience and mourning are thus posed as oppositional to immortality and stability or stasis. This description of the rejection of transience and change, the demand for immortality and the revolt against



mourning remains consistent with "Mourning and Melancholia," but it extends the analysis Freud had written a few months earlier: the troubled friends experience a withdrawal of libido from the object (the countryside), a premature, anticipatory grief, and an insistence on the immortality of the object.

Then he shifted the narrative from his friends' melancholic revolt against mourning. He offered what seems to be a superior alternative, an example of good mourning: he argued that we must accept "the transience of all things." He disputed the poet's view that the "transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth." The impermanence of beauty, and of life itself, should neither diminish the beauty nor obstruct our experience of pleasure: the inevitability of death and loss increases the value of the objects we love. To experience this is to be able to mourn; the ability to mourn makes possible the ability to love, to feel pleasure, to enjoy beauty.

Freud situated his account of the walk with the poet and his theory of transience in the context of the war occurring in Europe as he wrote the essay. In 1915, he wrote: "my conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later war broke out. . . . It destroyed not only the beauty of the countryside through which it passed . . . but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization . . . and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races."<sup>32</sup> The war led, in other words, to a dramatic encounter with the transience of valued objects and ideals. While deeply saddened by the loss of much that he valued, Freud remained hopeful. Grieving over the loss of what had perished, he noted that the period of mourning would eventually end. He looked forward to the cessation of mourning and the subsequent creation of new achievements, structures, and ideals: "when once the mourning is over . . . we shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before."<sup>33</sup>

In his remarks on the dashed hopes of a final triumph over "differences between nations and races" there may be hints of the hope for an end to tensions associated with anti-Semitism. Writing to the broad audience of readers of the Goethe Society's volume, Freud may have been expressing an assimilationist desire to maintain an enlightened or rational sense of Jewish identity while, at the same time, unreservedly accepting the valuable parts of Germanic culture.<sup>34</sup> His analysis of the tensions between his own position and the reactions of his hiking companions can be read as an account of the tensions between German and Jew, between anti-assimilationism and assimilationism among Jews, or even as an account of conflicting internal desires.



This text reflects Freud's careful observations of his own conscious and unconscious processes during a period of anticipated and actual loss. This text and its companion text were intricately overdetermined. Both were written as Freud approached his sixtieth year—he believed (erroneously, of course) that he had only a year or two to live. They were written shortly after his infamous break with Jung, an experience of disillusionment and loss nearly equivalent to the death of a beloved friend. They were written during a war when he feared for the survival of his two conscripted sons as well as for the survival of psychoanalysis itself. In addition, these texts were written during the period that has been called a “modern crisis of culture” when codes of gender identity and religious identity in Vienna had undergone dramatic shifts. These texts represent both a documentation of a period of grief and loss and a profound meditation on that process of loss.<sup>35</sup> To borrow Freud's own vocabulary of 1927, they represent analyses of dangers to “Throne and Altar.”

This short essay expresses a nearly Buddhist acknowledgment of the impermanence of all things. And it provides a cultural and personal framework for Freud's reflections on loss. By situating his speculations in the context of the walk with his friends, the war, and the shattering of pride in the achievements of civilization, Freud gave specificity to the remarks he made in the companion text about mourning as a reaction to “the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one.” The text also articulates a deep ambivalence—by giving his companions—the taciturn friend and the poet—the melancholic role, and giving himself the mourning role, he explored the two positions with depth, empathy, and insight.

Explicitly he identified himself as the progressive, optimistic mourner, rather than the resistant melancholic. But his friends may represent, in a sense, not only his actual hiking companions (Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas Salome, according to Von Unwerth<sup>36</sup>), but also his own melancholic self. As I hinted earlier, an ambivalence appeared in “Mourning and Melancholia,” as he alternately privileged one stance, then the other. There he stated that melancholics have remarkable abilities to understand the self, the other, and the world. The melancholic is “like Hamlet.” The melancholic has a “keener eye for the truth than other people” and “has come pretty near to understanding himself.”<sup>37</sup> Reflecting a widespread trope in the Western literary and philosophical tradition of the melancholy but insightful, poetic, or artistic soul (Schiessari 1992), Freud pondered, “we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind.”<sup>38</sup> By



describing the melancholic in terms of his “keener eye for the truth,” Freud, who surely saw himself as one with a keen eye for truth, expresses a partial and subtle identification with the melancholic poet. There’s an interesting tension between his descriptions, in both of these texts, of the preferred path of the healthy mourner and the wise, self-knowing, but unhealthy path of the poetic melancholic.

Freud’s question about why such truth and self-understanding is particularly accessible to the melancholic is reminiscent of the iconic question he posed to pastor and psychoanalyst Oskar Pfister in 1918: “Why was it that none of all the pious ever discovered psychoanalysis? Why did it have to wait for a completely godless Jew?”<sup>39</sup> Freud’s remarks in “Mourning and Melancholia” reflect a notion of the Jew—particularly the secular or assimilating Jew—as one with both a keener eye for truth and a melancholic disposition. In addition, these remarks hint at an association we will examine shortly: the loss of religion and the discovery of psychoanalysis. Creativity and discovery, we’ll suggest, emerge out of loss, mourning, and melancholia.<sup>40</sup>

The ambivalence here between mourning and melancholia reflects some of the tension between masterplot and counterthesis: Freud cannot simply be situated as one who celebrates the social changes associated with the loss of religions and religious ideals. Rather he is better viewed as an interpreter of those losses. The ambivalence and the interpretive stance evident in his writings can also be traced in the work of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers Peter Homans, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva who offer thoughtful psychoanalytic commentaries on the psychological and cultural responses to the loss of religion. These commentaries provide a way of linking life, culture, and theory in asking about the relation of psychoanalysis and religion.

### **Contemporary Psychoanalytic Theories of Loss: Mourning or Melancholia?**

Peter Homans has argued that “Psychoanalysis arose as the result of a long historical mourning process . . . for lost symbols and the communal wholeness they organize in the West.”<sup>41</sup> His theory, developed in *The Ability to Mourn*, *Jung in Context*, and *Symbolic Loss*, suggests that the rapid and traumatic loss of “common cultures” in the context of modernization leads to social individualism and psychological disorientation. Those who are truly “able to mourn” are capable of a kind of introspection that permits an understanding and articulation of this social and psychological disorientation. Homans calls this “introspective analytic access.”



In Homans's view, Freud's psychoanalytic ideas emerged out of the introspection and individuation that followed his loss and mourning of traditional communal and religious structures. He argues that Freud developed a remarkable ability to observe and recount the processes and contents of the unconscious, and that his theory of the mind was based on his introspective investigations of the unconscious, initiated by the processes of loss and mourning. Psychoanalysis introduced a systematic method that, for some, escalated this process by further promoting introspection, individuation, and a psychological worldview in the West.

Homans thus finds Freud's psychoanalytic formulations emerging directly from the loss of religion in the context of modernization, from his loss of a sense of a common culture, from his remarkable "ability to mourn," and from his introspective probes into his own mourning psyche. Other theorists and historians have developed related arguments. Le Rider, for example, suggests that while a whole generation of Viennese modernists—Freud, Wittgenstein, Herzl, Schnitzler, and others—lived through the experience of "the fading and loss of traditions," especially religious traditions,<sup>42</sup> Freud was the figure most capable of observing and theorizing the experience of that grief and loss. Schorske argues similarly that Freud functioned as both a culture breaker and a culture maker within the context of European modernity. Homans is thus not alone in making this sort of argument about Freud, loss, religion, and culture. But the Homans thesis is unique in its analytic stance and its linkage of life, culture, and theory. To put this thesis into terminology we borrowed earlier from Freud, we might say that Freud successfully, and without castration anxiety or defensive fetishistic panic, encountered dangers to "Throne and Altar," articulating how we react consciously and unconsciously to those dangers. It was Freud's ability to mourn the losses of symbolic thrones and altars, and to observe and describe that process, that gave rise to the creative ideas constituting psychoanalysis.

In a sense, we might say, extending Homans's thesis, that all moderns (or postmoderns or late moderns) are in mourning. Butler's question about the failure of narratives that contain loss can be answered more broadly: all of us have experienced symbolic loss, which we may or may not be able to mourn successfully. Psychology and individualism are products of the more or less successful mourning of those losses. The shift that gave rise to psychoanalysis can be seen as one piece of a larger (mournful or melancholic) sociohistorical shift that continues to shape us today.<sup>43</sup>

In Homans's view, Freud was a masterful mourner of personal, religious, and social losses, and a masterful observer of the process of mourning. And, most significantly, for Homans, Freud was able to transform his mourning



into a culturally significant creative product, psychoanalysis. Freud's question to Pfister mentioned above—"Why was it that none of the pious ever discovered psychoanalysis?"—is relevant in this context. Homans's answer, of course, would be "Precisely! The loss of religion led to mourning, and the mourning to introspective probes which in turn led to the discovery of psychoanalysis." I find Homans's thesis convincing and compelling. Yet there are some threads missing in this tapestry. Let me try to trace these threads, starting with a noticeable gap in Freud's personal ability to mourn. We've seen one of these threads in Freud's ambivalence about whether to privilege melancholia or mourning. Another can be seen in the dramatic contrast between Freud's complex and insightful interpretations of the psychodynamics of loss in the texts of 1915 and his numb response to another loss—the death of his own mother.

Freud's mother lived to age ninety-five. She died in 1930, just nine years before Freud's own death. When she died, Freud wrote to his friend and colleague Ernest Jones. He said "I will not disguise the fact that my reaction to this event has . . . been a curious one . . . there is no saying what effects such an experience may produce in deeper layers, but on the surface I can detect only two things: an increase in personal freedom, since it was always a terrifying thought that she might come to hear of my death;<sup>44</sup> and secondly, the satisfaction that at last she has achieved the deliverance for which she had earned a right after such a long life. No grief otherwise."<sup>45</sup> He reiterated the phrase "no grief" in a letter to another friend a day later: "No pain, no grief, which is probably to be explained by the circumstances, the great age and the end of the pity we had felt at her helplessness."<sup>46</sup>

These statements of his lack of grief were, of course, in letters, not in theoretical texts. But Freud's reiterated description of his reaction—"no grief"—may point toward something deeper. It echoes a very similar remark in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where he described a son's reaction to the death of *another* mother. This is the child who developed the famous game of "fort" and "da," here and gone, presence and absence, or disappearance and return, involving a spool and a string. He wrote, "When this child was five and three-quarters, his mother died. Now that she was really 'gone' . . . the little boy showed *no signs of grief*."<sup>47</sup> The child was Freud's grandson; the mother his daughter Sophie. Although Freud grieved deeply at his daughter's death, both he and his grandson reacted to the deaths of their own mothers with "no grief."

Grief is the same word translated as "mourning" in "Mourning and Melancholia," *Trauer*. By saying that he experienced no grief, "*kein Trauer*," Freud is saying that he did not mourn. We've seen that among the characteristics



of melancholia are the refusal to mourn (a refusal of “*Trauer*”), and a demand for immortality. Is Freud’s lack of grief at the death of his mother a sign that his reaction is melancholic rather than mournful? Is this a demand for maternal immortality? I’ve argued elsewhere that unconscious desires for immortality are closely linked to fears and fantasies of unions with mothers. Freud’s description of melancholia in 1915 provides an uncannily accurate portrayal of his reaction many years later to his own mother’s death.<sup>48</sup>

Some critics, like Ana-Maria Rizzuto, have found Freud’s expression of “*kein Trauer*” pathological, misogynist, indicative of serious problems in his early relationship with his mother, and symptomatic of problems in his theories of psyche and culture.<sup>49</sup> In my view, however, Freud’s response to his mother’s death, rather than being idiosyncratic, pathological, and misogynist, might represent a widespread experience. Is there a sense in which we’re all melancholics in relation to mothers? Melancholia is said to involve many experiences of separation from and temporary losses of the mother, many experiences of having been “slighted, neglected, or disappointed.” What maternal relation escapes these separations or disappointments? Other markings of melancholia seem to apply as well: deep ambivalence and anxieties about death and immortality,<sup>50</sup> for example. Is it possible that the difficulty in mourning the mother is virtually ubiquitous, and that it is linked to the “dangers to throne and altar” that Freud outlined in the essay on the fetish?<sup>51</sup>

Freud, Kristeva, and Butler may be able to help us think through this riddle. Their work suggests that we cannot fully mourn our mothers because we must not fully identify with them—and that our melancholic stance toward maternal loss shapes our experience of other losses as well, the religious losses constituting modernity in particular. In Freud’s formulation mourning results in the formation of an identification with the lost object. In this process internal psychic structures are created or built up as memorials to lost objects. Identifications are established “with the abandoned object” through the growth of new psychic structures.<sup>52</sup> Freud’s rhetoric describing this process is poetic: “the shadow of the object falls upon the ego.”<sup>53</sup> These identifications constructed out of shadows and absences lead to the growth of structures within the ego, and to changes in personality. In this process, Freud explained, “an object which was lost is set up again inside the ego . . . an object cathexis is replaced by an identification.”<sup>54</sup> The resulting identifications and structures are the basis of what we know as character: “this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego . . . it makes an essential contribution towards building up (of) ‘character.’”<sup>55</sup> Absences become presences, shadows become structures, not unlike the healing that occurs through the creation of scar tissue—wounds become scars,



which are the marks or memories of losses. In Freud's analysis the process is complete and closure is attained when the lost other is recreated as character or ego structure through this identificatory process: the ego acts as a memorial or monument or scar covering the wounds that created its structures.<sup>56</sup>

Freud's theory of mourning as identification suggests that to successfully mourn the mother would be to identify with her, to become her. Julia Kristeva argues that we cannot identify with or become the mother because the separation from her is necessary for the birth and continuity of the self.<sup>57</sup> The "abjection" of the maternal, in her terminology, is crucial to the formation of selfhood.<sup>58</sup> For Kristeva the abjection of the mother inevitably involves an abhorrence of the feminine. It sets up an inevitable misogyny or matriphobia that may remain deeply unconscious. In a Kristevan reading, Freud's inability to grieve or mourn the mother is an inability we all share. The melancholic response to the separation from the mother is part of what gives rise to the self.<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler takes Kristeva's point further. She argues that it is "the incorporative logic of melancholia that founds the very possibility of the ego and its psychic topography. Melancholia is the precondition for both the ego and the work of mourning. It creates a realm of traces open to signification."<sup>60</sup> Butler's and Kristeva's formulations lead to a melancholic conclusion: In some arenas we cannot reach the closure or resolution that a "good mourner" reaches. We are all melancholic mourners of lost mothers and lost religions, with a melancholia that resists closure, identification, and stable internal character development, a melancholia that remains ambivalent, conflicted, and unresolved.

Yet this unresolved melancholic ambivalence need not entrap and imprison. Eng and Kazanjian, editors of *Loss*, reflecting on the tension in Freud's thought between mourning and melancholia, defend melancholia.<sup>61</sup> They suggest that in mourning, the past is dead, while in melancholia the past remains alive. They defend melancholia as a continuous and creative engagement with loss and its remains, arguing that a sustained engagement with the remains of loss may be necessary to creative engagement with the future.<sup>62</sup> Like Kristeva, they see modernity as inevitably melancholic, yet they also discover in melancholia a valuable creativity, toleration of ambiguity, and sense of continuity with the past.

## Returning to Psychoanalysis and Religion

Let us return to the question with which we began, the question of the relation of psychoanalysis and religion. We've seen that Freud cannot be simply viewed as a critic of religion, nor simply be reconceptualized as a defender



of religion. Rather, Freud is better envisioned as a thinker with a deep ambivalence about religion and its loss, an ambivalence that is both personal and theoretical. His ambivalence is expressed in conflicting statements and formulations: he constructs a masterplot critical of religion and a counterthesis that defends religion. More importantly, however, the counterthesis tolerates the ambiguity and moves on to interpret the loss of religion, generating a theory of how we mourn and fail to mourn in relation to “dangers to altars.” Freud’s own contradictory positions on religion can best be framed as an analysis of how individuals and cultures respond to the loss of religion: Freud’s readings of dangers to thrones and altars, and his analysis of transience, mourning, and melancholia, articulate interpretations of the psychological and cultural effects of religious loss and change, interpretations that are carried forward by contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers like Homans, Kristeva, and Butler.

Homans finds Freud a successful mourner and a successful guide through the unconscious terrain of loss, grief, and creativity recovery. He sees psychoanalysis as a theory of and from mourning, i.e., a theory that interprets the experience of mourning, and a theory that emerged out of the experience of loss and mourning. Kristeva’s perspective focuses more on melancholia. She shows that Freud was sometimes unable to mourn. Her work suggests that he may have been a better mourner of losses in the social and religious arena of modernity than he was of mothers. In a Kristevan reading, Freud himself is melancholic, and psychoanalysis becomes a theory of and from melancholia.

A focus on life, theory, and culture attentive to paired texts like “Fetishism” and *Future*, or “Transience” and “Mourning,” thus allows us to see the relation of psychoanalysis and religion not as a story of polarized debates but as a story of loss and the interpretation of that loss. Entrapment in polarized debates over the value or danger of psychoanalysis, entrapment in controversies over whether psychoanalysis is a critique of religion or a defense of religion is, in a sense, a symptom of the defensive panic that “a grown man may experience” in Freud’s essay on fetishism. And this defensive panic in the face of dangers to “throne and altar” is, in essence, the inability to mourn religion. The capacity to tolerate ambiguity, on the other hand, is a capacity on the cusp between mourning and melancholia, both of which, in my view, are adaptive and non-pathological. Psychoanalysis is best understood not as a cultural product that challenges, competes with, or destroys cultural products like religion, but as a method, a practice, a process that articulates how we mourn or how we are melancholic, a process that aids us in tolerating the ambiguity associated with loss and change, a process that carries us toward



the creativity and insight that can be the product of successful engagement with loss, whether mournful or melancholic.

This reading of psychoanalysis is echoed by Roy Schafer in a now classic essay, "The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality."<sup>63</sup> Schafer describes psychoanalysis as the integration of a tragic and an ironic vision. The vision is tragic in seeing human experience pervaded by ambiguities, unanswerable questions, inescapable conflicts. In this vision the past cannot be undone, wishes and desires remain unfulfilled. Yet, at the same time, psychoanalysis is ironic in bringing a sense of detachment from the tragic, a capacity for reflective adaptation and deliberative acceptance. Schafer's description of the psychoanalytic tragic vision and its ironic amelioration, in my view, embodies both the mournful and the melancholic positions. The tragic vision is melancholic; the ironic echoes Freud's analysis of mourning. And both positions are expressed in turn in one of Freud's final essays, "Analysis: Terminable or Interminable."<sup>64</sup> The interminable is the tragic/melancholic position; the terminable is the ironic/mournful position. The ambiguity between the two—terminable and interminable, tragic and ironic—leaves us on the cusp between mourning and melancholia. Thus psychoanalysis not only maps the process of mourning and melancholia, offering a theory of how we respond to loss, but it also embodies those processes in its vision of reality: mourning becomes psychoanalysis.

Mourning and melancholia both permeate our culture in powerful ways today. Attempts to give voice to a deep sense of the losses that have shaped our culture in the past century are evident not only in the work of the psychoanalysts but also in the work of architects, filmmakers, novelists, and artists. It is my view that these culture-makers, to use a term of Peter Homans,<sup>65</sup> are asking the kinds of questions that Freud posed in his remarks on dangers to thrones and altars. Nichanian states it clearly: "there is no art without mourning."<sup>66</sup> The work of these artists and culture-makers provides a deeper answer to Butler's query about the absence of narratives that "contain" loss.

### Containing Loss in Narrative

A recent film, Pedro Almodovar's *Talk to Her*, illustrates well this cultural meditation on losses, mourners, and melancholics by offering a narrative that "contains loss." In this film two men mourn the women they love. Both women are comatose as a result of traumatic injuries: both are in the uncanny realm between the living and the dead. Both men, we learn, are also mourners of earlier losses. Benigno mourns his mother; Marco mourns a woman he loved and lost: he cries whenever he sees or hears beautiful art or music, because he cannot share it with her.



The story is complex and nuanced. The mourner and the melancholic slide into one another. But Benigno is primarily a melancholic and Marco a mourner. Benigno's melancholia leads him to try to merge with his beloved—through sex, through fantasies, and through death.<sup>67</sup> Marco is able to live, to leave behind both of the lost women he mourns, and to love someone new. He is finally able to experience cultural forms of beauty without tears. And he takes on the identity of Benigno: mourning merges into melancholia. The film is self-reflexive: it asks how culture, art, film, and silent/unconscious women function as narratives that “contain loss” and to transform melancholia and mourning into new creations.

In many ways Almodovar's film reflects the themes we've addressed here: His alternating differentiation and merging of mourning and melancholia echoes Freud's own speculations. His questions about the role of cultural loss—and of cultural creativity as response to loss—echo Peter Homans's questions. His location of the source of Benigno's melancholia in the loss of the mother echoes Kristeva's insights. Much of Almodovar's work is about how we find meaning in the midst of the losses that characterize modernity. Many of his earlier films, like *Dark Habits* (1983) and *Matador* (1986), were explicitly anti-religious and politically/sexually subversive. His later work, *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999), and *Talk to Her* (2002) turned toward religious and existential themes—life and death, resurrection and forgiveness, love, meaning, and morality. Without explicitly using the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, his filmic questions represent a contemporary meditation on how we respond to “thrones and altars in danger.”<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. This chapter extends ideas originally published in my *Speaking the Unspeakable: Misogyny, Religion, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). I am grateful to the University of California Press for permission to develop these ideas here.

2. Heinrich Meng and Ernst Freud, eds. *Psychoanalysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister*. Trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

3. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Dennis Klein, *Jewish Origins of the Psychoanalytic Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Emmanuel Rice, *Freud and Moses: The Long Journey Home* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1958).

4. Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).



5. Peter Gay, *Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Meaning of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987).
6. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970); Hans Kung, *Freud and the Problem of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).
7. Paul Vitz, *Psychoanalysis as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994); Philip Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harpers, 1966).
8. Ernest Wallwork, "Contemporary Perspectives on an Old Antagonism," in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, ed. Joseph Smith (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
9. Rizzuto, *Birth of the Living God*; Celia Brickman, *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
10. Peter Gay, "Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud," *Time* 153, no. 12 (29 March 1999): 64–91; Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
11. Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*.
12. Frederick Crews, ed. *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
13. James Dittes, "Teaching Freud's Teachings," in *Teaching Freud*, ed. Diane Jonte-Pace (New York: Oxford, 2003), 258–70; Vitz, *Psychoanalysis as Religion*.
14. Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing, and Women* (New York: Random, 1974).
15. Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable*.
16. Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable*.
17. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition (SE) of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 21: 153.
18. Judith Butler, "Afterward: After Loss, What Then?" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 467–74: 469.
19. Freud extends this analysis in other texts. In a footnote to a 1909 text he suggested, "the castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-Semitism: even in the nursery boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis . . . this gives them a right to despise Jews. And there is no stronger unconscious root for the sense of superiority over women" ("Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy," SE 10: 36 n. 1).
20. *The Future of an Illusion* was begun in the spring of 1927, finished by September, and published in November 1927 (SE 21: 3); "Fetishism" was finished in August 1927 and published almost immediately (SE 21: 149).
21. Freud, SE 14: 243.
22. Freud, SE 14: 256.



23. Freud, SE 14: 246.
24. Freud, SE 14: 245.
25. Freud, SE 14: 251.
26. Freud, SE 14: 246.
27. Freud, SE 14: 305.
28. Freud, SE 14: 305.
29. Freud, SE 14: 306.
30. Freud, SE 14: 305.
31. Freud, SE 14: 305–6.
32. Freud, SE 14: 307.
33. Freud, SE 14: 307.
34. See Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, trans. Rosemary Morris (New York: Continuum, 1993), 205.
35. Peter Homans, “We (Not-So) Happy Few: Symbolic Loss and Mourning in Freud’s Psychoanalytic Movement and the History of Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalysis and History* 1 (1998): 69–86; Peter Homans, ed. *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning at Century’s End* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).
36. Matthew Von Unwerth, *Freud’s Requiem: Mourning, Memory, and the Invisible History of a Summer Walk*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
37. Freud, SE 14: 246.
38. Freud, SE 14: 246.
39. Meng and Freud, *Psychoanalysis and Faith*, 63.
40. A melancholic position may be evident in other sites in the correspondence with Pfister as well, especially if we focus on the denial of transience/impermanence and the insistence on immortality as key markers of melancholia. Freud’s words to Pfister: “My creation will live forever” (Meng and Freud 1963) and his desire, expressed in “The Question of Lay Analysis,” to create a social state for a secular cure of souls (Freud, SE 20), hint at this aspect of melancholia. I am indebted to Bill Parsons for this observation.
41. Homans, *The Ability to Mourn*, 4, 13.
42. Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*, 294.
43. Eric Santner, in an analysis of the “crisis of investiture” (by which he means disruptions in social roles and status), from which both the Nazi “final solution” and the paranoid and messianic fantasies of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber (Schreber 1903) emerged, suggests that Freud’s psychoanalytic theory represented an alternate reconstruction of this crisis: Freud was particularly sensitive to the crises and disruptions of modernity (Santner 1996: 17). Not unlike Homans, Santner sees fascism and psychoanalysis as opposite responses to the crises invoked by modernity.
44. The “terror” over the thought that his mother “might come to hear of (his) death” was shared by other members of Freud’s family. According to letters between Freud and his nephew Samuel in 1925, Amalie Freud could not tolerate hearing about any death in the family. Through a familial conspiracy of silence she was



protected from the knowledge of several deaths over many years. Family members explained: "We made a secret of all the losses in the family" (Clark 1980: 481).

45. Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud, Life and Work*. 3 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–1957), 162. Poor health prevented his attendance at the funeral. His daughter Anna had become his emissary to public events and ceremonies.

46. Jones, *Sigmund Freud* (1957), 162.

47. Freud, *SE* 18: 16.

48. Donald Capps suggests that C. G. Jung and Erik Erikson (along with psychologist William James and phenomenologist Rudolf Otto) experienced traumatic separations from their mothers which led to lifelong struggles with melancholia (Capps 1997). This melancholic disposition, in Capps's view, directed these men inexorably toward a psychological, introspective, and highly individualized encounter with religious ideas. Extending Capps's thesis, one might expect to find a similar relationship with the mother in Freud's case, since Freud clearly shared this approach to religion with these four thinkers. Freud's response to his mother's death would seem to confirm this application of Capps's thesis to Freud's case. Capps's provocative analysis might be expanded further into an analysis of cultural change in modernity: we might ask what sorts of social changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced these men and these mothers, leading to the emergence of these introspective individualized theories of religion.

49. Rizzuto, *Birth of the Living God*.

50. Freud, *SE* 14: 251.

51. Freud's discussion of the misogynist panic experienced by "grown men" in the encounter with dangers to throne and altar would seem to suggest that misogyny is a male reaction to cultural instability. Others have pursued the same line of thought: Margarete Mitscherlich (1985) has argued that the sources of xenophobia and anti-Semitism lie specifically in castration anxiety and that men are therefore primarily responsible for prejudice and racism of all types. There may be some truth to this in a world where power is phallic and men are the keepers of that power. But Freud's speculations on melancholia challenge this formulation. His discussions in "Mourning and Melancholia" and "On Transience" suggest that another response to loss lies deeper than castration anxiety; that this response is common to both women and men; and that this response involves a memory of necessary but traumatic separations or "abjections" from a mother who cannot be fully mourned. If melancholia in response to a lost mother is virtually universal, and if melancholia and misogyny are closely related, then misogyny is not simply a male failure, because mourning the mother is a problem for all of us. Misogyny may be deeply embedded in our psyches as well as our cultures. Transformation will be impossible unless we can begin to acknowledge our complicity in these patterns.

52. Freud, *SE* 14: 249.

53. Freud, *SE* 14: 249.

54. Freud, "Ego and the Id," *SE* 19: 28.



55. Freud, SE 19: 28–29.

56. This can happen culturally as well as psychologically. Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. becomes an elaborate scar over the wound of the losses associated with Vietnam: "The character of the [community] contains the history of those [lost] object choices," as Freud put it ("Ego and the Id," SE 19: 29, my brackets). We become, psychologically and culturally, what we have lost; the shadow of the lost object becomes the content and structure of the ego (see Homans and Jonte-Pace 2006).

57. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

58. Diane Jonte-Pace, "Julia Kristeva and the Psychoanalytic Study of Religion: Rethinking Freud's Cultural Texts," in *Religion, Society, and Psychoanalysis: Readings in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Janet Liebman Jacobs and Donald Capps (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 240–68; Diane Jonte-Pace, "'Legitimation of Hatred or Inversion into Love': Religion in Kristeva's Re-Reading of Freud," *Journal of Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 10 (1999): 17–35.

59. My own mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease. There's a sense in which this lack of closure is very personal for me: she's here but not here; she's present but absent; she's both *fort* and *da*, to use Freud's vocabulary.

60. Butler, Judith, cited in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

61. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 4.

62. Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 4.

63. Roy Schafer, "The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 51 (1970): 279–97.

64. Freud, SE 23.

65. Homans, *Ability to Mourn*.

66. Marc Nichanian, "Catastrophic Mourning," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 99–124: 99.

67. Alice, Benigno's beloved, comes back to life as a result of her pregnancy and childbirth. Although her child dies, she is reborn: she gives birth to herself, in a rebirth conceived through Benigno's melancholia. I am indebted to Amy Pace for this observation.

68. Does the art resolve the grief? Does it cover the loss? Some have suggested that art has replaced religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a source of meaning and community. Butler postulates that in the contemporary era "community does not overcome loss . . . community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community" (Butler 2003: 468). Perhaps belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss, and by its memorialization in structures, art works, and films. In this sense, loss may become the condition and necessity for a certain sense of community.



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