

# ‘OH MY GOD!’

Monotheistic Criticism and the Anthropological Basis of Religion: A Lacanian Approach<sup>1</sup>

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The Christian scripture and doctrine contained the basis  
both for violence and the condemnation of violence.  
Michael Gaddis<sup>2</sup>

When, at a press conference in Rome, October 29, 1974, Lacan is asked for his opinion about the relation between psychoanalysis and religion, he replies: “C’est en somme *ou l’un ou l’autre*” (“In the end, it is whether this or that”). But with the next question – ‘who, then, will win the battle?’ – he hesitates and admits that “religion will never go down”. Religion will even “triumph”, he adds. And after another moment of pause, he comes to an opposite conclusion concerning psychoanalysis: this won’t triumph at all. At the most, it will “survive” for a certain time.<sup>3</sup>

The critical relation of psychoanalysis – including Lacanian theory – with regard to religion seems to be rather complex. Capable of laying bare religion’s truth, this theory is at the same time aware of its incapability to reduce religion’s influence or replace it by any alternative. It has to admit that, once the repressed truth is revealed, both the revelation and its

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Gaddis (2005), *There is no Crime for Those who have Christ. Religious violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> “La psychanalyse ne triomphera pas de la religion ; la religion est increvable. La psychanalyse ne triomphera pas, elle survivra ou pas.” [...] “Oui, elle ne triomphera pas seulement sur la psychanalyse, elle triomphera sur beaucoup d’autres choses encore. On ne peut même pas imaginer ce que c’est puissant, la religion. J’ai parlé à l’instant un peu du réel. La religion va avoir là encore beaucoup plus de raisons d’apaiser les cœurs, si l’on peut dire, parce que le réel, pour peu que la science y mette du sien, la science dont je parlais à l’instant, c’est du nouveau, la science, ça va introduire des tas de choses absolument bouleversantes dans la vie de chacun. Et la religion, surtout la vraie, a des ressources qu’on ne peut même pas soupçonner. Il n’y a qu’à voir pour l’instant comme elle grouille ; c’est absolument fabuleux. Ils y ont mis le temps, mais ils ont tout d’un coup compris quelle était leur chance avec la science. La science va introduire de tels bouleversements qu’il va falloir qu’à tous ces bouleversements ils donnent un sens. Et ça, pour le sens, là ils en connaissent un bout. Ils sont capables de donner un sens, on peut dire, vraiment à n’importe quoi, un sens à la vie humaine par exemple. Ils sont formés à ça. Depuis le commencement, tout ce qui est religion, ça consiste à donner un sens aux choses qui étaient autrefois les choses naturelles.” (J. Lacan, « Conférence de presse du docteur Jacques Lacan au Centre culturel français, Rome, le 29 octobre 1974 », in : *Lettres de l’École freudienne*, 1975, n° 16, p. 13-14 ; J. Lacan [2005], *Le triomphe de la religion* précédé de *Discours aux catholiques*, Paris : Les Editions du Seuil, p. 79-80 ; the latter, also ‘official’ version is, for uncomprehensible reasons, ‘rewritten’ by J.-A. Miller ; he even dropped the

truth become the object of renewed repression. They will never stay uncovered at the surface of man's and society's consciousness. Yet, far from bringing solely psychoanalysis into discredit and proving its failure, this situation tells the condition *all* modern and post-modern criticism is in, as I showed elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> These are the limits of the condition, within which modern criticism has to operate. Going through the basic lines of Lacan's reflection on religion, I will try to show that this condition is more than simply a negative weakness of modern criticism. To be aware of this condition is the positive starting point of any modern criticism. Only then it will be able to remain in touch with the concrete reality in order, there, to perform a concrete criticism. Dealing with religion for instance, this kind of criticism will be able to detect what really is at stake in religion's persistence or survival today and what the real danger is hidden in that phenomenon.

### 1. Neutralising the Problem

How, then, Lacanian theory understands religion? The young Lacan is too much a Freudian (in the 'classical, all too classical' sense, as Lacan will notice later) not to start his reflexion with endorsing the orthodox Freudian position concerning religion. And this is why, already from the very beginning of his oeuvre, he deals with the same 'tragic' condition of modern criticism as evoked just now. In *Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927), Freud interprets religion as an "illusion" – an illusion which is far from being innocuous, since it is responsible for a huge amount of intolerance and abuse of power during almost its entire history. The 'raison d'être' of psychoanalysis, Freud explains, is to deliver modern man from this kind of treacherous chimeras. However, the more his essay progresses, the more Freud realizes that modern man, too, is bound fantasies and illusions, including religious ones. Which makes Freud end up with expressing, against religious belief, his 'belief' in the ideals of Enlightenment and modern science – which he does with an almost religious enthusiasm, as some critics noticed. Although not explicitly mentioned, this tension is perceptible in early Lacan too.

Things change when Lacan declares himself to be a 'real' Freudian, inviting all of the psychoanalytic movement to 'return to Freud'. Yet, rather than taken directly from Freud,

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entire first page of the press conference; the quote "C'est en somme *ou l'un ou l'autre*", comes from that page; for the entire version, see on the internet : <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/documents/1974-10-29.doc>.

<sup>4</sup> Marc De Kesel (2006), "Religion und/als Kritik", in: Marc De Kesel & Dominiek Hoens (Hg.) (2006), *Wieder Religion: Christentum im zeitgenössischen kritischen Denken (Lacan, Zizek, Badiou u.a.)*, Wien: Turia & Kant.

Lacan's 'solution' concerning religion, then, is borrowed from Lévi-Strauss.<sup>5</sup> For the latter, religion *as such* does not pose a problem, simply because from his structuralistic point of view, there is no substantial difference between religious and other kinds of culture. It is Lévi-Strauss who taught Lacan that, to understand what is at stake in culture or society, one should not approach it by focussing on the phenomena's meaning (their '*signifiés*'), but on the materiality with which these meanings are expressed. Not *what* a tribe is saying is important in order to understand what is essential in its social system, but *how* they say it or, more exactly, how the material elements of what is said, the signifiers, are put together. The *primacy of the signifier*: this is what Lacan has learned from Lévi-Strauss, and what made him rediscover Freud's dream- and joke-theory, his 'talking cure' and so many other aspects of psychoanalysis as bearing witness of the same primacy. This is to say, in Lévi-Straussian jargon, that both psychic and cultural reality must be considered as 'symbolic', i.e. as an autonomously operating exchange system of signs. So, an investigation of human reality requires first of all an observation and description of that symbolic system, not in order to look for the meaning the participants give to it, but to look how the signs constitute a system on their own, independent from the meaning the humans gave to it afterwards..

In this perspective, religion as such is no longer a proper problem. It is just a cultural reality among others, and cultural realities are no longer to be approached as bearers of meaning, as '*signifiés*', but only as '*signifiers*', i.e. elements constituting a structural composition holding in itself and, only because of this, producing effect on people. Of course, people suppose cultural realities to be meaningful *in themselves*, but 'sciences of the human' (*les sciences de l'homme*) should make abstraction of this, and consider them as autonomously operating reality, as 'symbolic' reality. So, all cultural realities are 'illusory' in a way, but this is not what matters. What matters is whether those illusions are *effective*, whether they 'work' and produce significant effects in reality, whether they produce what Lévi-Strauss calls "une efficacité symbolique".<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Praying/Cursing

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<sup>5</sup> It is a typically 'structuralist' solution, which René Girard describes as a "strategic retreat" ("retraite stratégique", in: René Girard [1978], *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, recherche avec J.-M. Oughourlian et Guy Lefort, Paris: Grasset, p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> See chapter X, entitled « L'efficacité symbolique », in : Claude Lévi-Strauss (1974 [1958]), *Anthropologie structurale I*, Paris : Plon, p. 213-234. See also : Markos Zafiroopoulos (2003), *Lacan et Lévi-Strauss ou le retour à Freud*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, p . 60-61.

Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Lacan puts a much more explicit emphasis on the problem of the *subject in/of* the symbolic. In fact, this underexposed issue in Lévi-Straussian thought has been one of Lacan's impulses to redefine psychoanalysis as an innovative theory of the subject. His point is that modernity forces us to understand human subjectivity and identity as primarily 'symbolic', as being the bearer/subject of signifiers, and that psychoanalysis delivers a theory to explain the by definition libidinal relation between the subject and the symbolic.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, according to Lacan too, we are bodily real beings. But since we are 'driven' by a polymorphous perverse libido which does not gain direct satisfaction from the real, we do not live on the level of the real. On that level, we are to be considered as a lack of being ("manqué-à-être")<sup>8</sup>, and the trick of our libidinal economy consists in repressing this real lack by replacing it by another, more livable lack, i.e. the lack by which the signifiers (and, more generally, the symbolic order) operate. This is the basic intuition of the entire Lacanian theory: human libido's real, unlivable lack is repressed/replaced by a livable symbolic one, i.e. the lack as operating principle of the symbolic.

This has far-reaching implication for how to consider the human 'self' or his identity. For it is on the very locus of the lack the symbolic rests on, that our libidinal economy imagines to be a 'self', i.e. to be identical with itself en to fully rest in itself. The locus of this lack is the 'ground' ('bearer', 'hypokeymenon', 'subjectum') of our identity – or, more exactly, of what we *imagine* to be our identity. It is the *symbolic* 'ground' of our *imaginary* identity, as put in Lacan's conceptual apparatus. Human identity is the effect of an (imaginary) identification with an image, an 'other'. The imaginary ego, however, is only possible thanks to identification, not with the image of the other, but with what the others *tell* we are, with signifiers. This 'alienation' in the symbolic – this being subjected to the symbolic, to the Other (as Lacan puts it) – is the positive condition of possibility for the imaginary ego. In the final analysis, the latter is based in a 'lost' point that even escapes the symbolic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The human libidinal being is both (passively) *subjected to* the symbolic and (actively) the subject of the symbolic. Psychoanalytical theory offers a specific (i.e. libidinal) logic to clarify and outline that paradoxical relation.

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<sup>9</sup> Concerning the constitution of the human subject, one can say that the infant, born as a *selfless* libidinal being and unable to find any 'self' in the real, is forced to find it in the symbolic universe of signifiers. In a first *imaginary* phase, it will imagine itself to be the sense ('*signifié*') of all the senseless signifiers it is confronted with in his environment. It is *his majesty the baby's* time: instead of feeling the 'lack of being' it *really* is, the infant unconsciously supposes that lack to be located with the others and does *as if* it is itself the very answer and solution to the other's lack. That lack is experienced as the other speaking senseless signifiers and the infants imagines himself being their sense. Here, identity is based on a *denial* of the lack in the other. After a time, this procedure cannot but fail, if only because the child experiences that the other does not simply live for the child

So, on the conscious level, man (imaginarily) supposes to coincide with himself and to be the owner of his identity. But in times of mental troubles when he is hurt in his very 'self', he feels his imaginary ego staggering. And it is then, he spontaneously cries for the Other he is subjected to. Even if, on the conscious level, he supposes himself to cry for someone personal, on the unconscious level, he is addressing to the signifiers supporting his libidinal economy. 'O my God' is by far the most occurring shape of that cry. My ego, losing ground beneath his feet, cries for the Other, unconsciously supposing that the Other does (or does not, and, thus, should) support me in the moment my ego fails in doing so.

Here, we meet the libidinal condition of praying and cursing. The god to whom I address by saying 'Oh my God' is not primarily the confessional God religion says prayers are addressed to. From a Lacanian perspective, it is the Other, the symbolic order in its quality of being my identity's support. When the latter fails in giving ground to my libidinal economy, my imaginary ego cries explicitly for the signifier's support *as such*.

This is why, in the sentence 'Oh my God', God is indeed 'mine'. This is in fact not contradictory to God's universal character. Of course, I address myself to a universal god, the god as the support of the entire universe. But, as the imaginary logic learns, I want a singular and privileged link with that god; for I want him to sustain my failing imaginary ego. In a way, that praying/cursing shows the repressed libidinal condition of my 'self': because, on the level of the real, this self does not exist, it has to be supported by signifiers, by the Other, whom is directly addressed to in cases when the imaginary ego threatens to break down.

It makes no difference either when the prayer 'Oh my God' is uttered, not by an 'I' but by a 'we'. The libidinal – and, thus, symbolic – ground of a collective identity is not different from an individual one. In a Lacanian perspective, identity is by definition social, and even 'political' in the original sense of this word: it is based in the social environment, in the Other, in the symbolic, which is to be located in the social/political field. It is that Other whom I address to when saying 'Oh my God'. In this perspective, one must conclude that god is inherently political. The identity of the 'polis', too, only exists in reference to – and supported by – the Other. And in times of distress, this 'polis' prays to him or damns him, which is to say that it turns for support to what in fact gives its support: the symbolic universe of

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alone, and that he longs for others and other things than the child. At that (traumatic) moment, the child has to find out a new libidinal ruse in order to constitute a 'self'. It will, then, again constitute itself in reference to the lack of the Other, but now, it will (unconsciously) 'acknowledge' this very lack. It will identify itself with an other marked by lack, i.e. a *desiring* other. Only now, the libidinal being achieves a more or less stable state. In Lacanian terms: it constitutes itself as being the subject (bearer) of the desire of the Other. It is the bearer of a chain of signifiers referring endlessly to other signifiers and, thus, endlessly deferring the moment it gets really satisfied in its desire, including its desire to be *really* itself.

signifiers. Again, it is an affirmation of the fact that those slippery and universal signifiers support us: in times of distress, we seek for ‘our god’ as to our final support. Remember, for instance, Shatov’s penetrating exposé in Dostoyewsky’s *The possessed*:

The object of every national movement, in every people and at every period of its existence is only the seeking for its god, who must be its own god, and the faith in Him as the only true one. God is the synthetic personality of the whole people, taken from its beginning to its end. It has never happened that all, or even many, peoples have had one common god, but each has always had its own. It's a sign of the decay of nations when they begin to have gods in common. When gods begin to be common to several nations the gods are dying and the faith in them, together with the nations themselves. The stronger a people the more individual their God. (II, I, vii)<sup>10</sup>

For Lacan, religion is not only one of the traditional elements in our symbolic universe; it has roots in our very relation to the symbolic order as such. It is, more exactly, embedded in the roots of our identity. Prayer and curse – phenomena to be considered as one of religion’s ‘transcendental’ bases – are ways of falling back on our identity’s hidden (repressed) constitution, i.e. its being subjected to – as well as being the subject of – the symbolic order. Thus, Lacanian theory has to admit that religion has very strong roots in man’s libidinal constitution. No wonder then that, in the 1974 press conference I mentioned, Lacan has to conclude that religion is not expected to disappear that fast.

### 3. Religion, Religion Criticism and/as Desire

There is more in Lacanian theory that supports this conclusion. Another of its core concepts is ‘desire’, defining the basic human condition: rather than to have desires, man *is* desire, unfulfilled desire. If, after more than three centuries of merciless religion critique, religion still persists or even revives, it is because it meets that condition. It is, as Lacan says, one of the ‘cultural’ ways to deal with desire.

In fact, the intention to keep desire alive – and, thus, unsatisfied – is assignable in each religion, and even in each culture. This is why, on the one hand, man puts his destiny in the hand of what is beyond, in the hands of the gods, of the One God, in an Idea or an Ideal, and, on the other hand, hopes that, with those gods, God, Idea or Ideal, he finally could get home. Two seemingly contradictory things are in the play here: desire is opened to what is ‘outside’,

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<sup>10</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*, Translated by Constance Garnett (<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/d/dostoyevsky/d72p/>)

i.e. beyond human reach, *and* this ‘outside’ is experienced (fantasized) as the real ‘inside’, the real home of desire. The intimate of man is what makes him not coinciding with himself, i.e. what makes him desiring – even for himself. The gods broke Ulysses’ life and deprived him from his home, his family live, his wife, his town for ten years; but it was solely from the same gods that he could expect a safe homecoming. Jehovah-God “dislocated the socket of [man’s] hip” (which happens to Jacob in Genesis 32), let “the water reach [man’s] neck (Psalm 69), beats him with “the rod of his wrath” and “broke [his] bones” (Lamentations 3); at the same time however, according to the same chapter in *Lamentations*, does his “loyal kindness never cease, his compassions never end”; or, as Palm 18 tells: “God is my rocky summit, my shield, my refuge”.

In a Lacanian perspective, religious culture cannot be reduced to a choice between the negative and positive side of God or gods. It is a way of bringing precisely the tension between both ‘into cultivation’, into ‘culture’. It is an expression of the basic uncertainty which man, in his quality of subject of desire (for certainty), is characterized with. Psychoanalytically, this kind of basic uncertainty refers to the ‘polymorphous- perverse’ condition of the drive, i.e. to the fact that the pleasure principle makes the drive ‘playing’ with the life-functions rather than to yield to their logic. “Culture”, as Lacan defines it in the last lesson of the 6<sup>th</sup> seminar (*Le désir et son interprétation, 1958-59*), is the cultivation of that polymorphous perverse condition, i.e. of the basic dissoluteness and uncertainty of human drive.<sup>11</sup> A year later, in the 7<sup>th</sup> seminar, he model his notion of sublimation on that definition of “culture”, now reshaped as “sublimation”, i.e. a “*façonnement du signifiant*” turning around the ‘extime’ centre of ‘dad Ding’.<sup>12</sup> As sublimation, religion is defined as a “shaping of the signifier” around a nodal point in which the uncertain god(s) are located enables a culture of desire.

Both a polytheist and a monotheist god are to be considered as solidified uncertainty, but precisely in this quality, man’s hope is set on him as his ultimate point of certainty. Within this constellation, desire finds a way to deal with his basic lack, to make it bearable as well as to keep it open. This is possible only thanks to repression (*Verdrängung*). What counts for a rock of certainty on a conscious level, operates on the unconscious level as a persistent uncertainty. Nothing is more uncertain to lean upon than a god – all sacred myths, biblical stories and psalms tell us about this – but man clings to his god as if he was his life’s very

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guarantee, and he reads in these myths, stories or songs the certainty telling him that he is supported by a cosmic goodness.

In a sense, monotheist religious culture only ‘capitalizes the uncertainty which paganism expresses with a variety of gods, and ascribes it to one monolithic God. He is now the *solely* uncertainty imaginarily turned into certainty by human prayers (read: by human desire). In that single certain/uncertain point, man is promised to find himself at home, as once was Abraham. Which is a way of saying that he never will get home, for ever alienated as he is from his (desired) home and even from his (desired) self – as the vicissitudes of Abraham’s descendants show. From that God, so the monotheist fantasy goes, man receives an unnatural and absolute Law, *promising* him a home – a Beloved Land – once the commandments of that Law shall be fulfilled. Which, of course, will never happen and, thus, renders the commandments absolute. So the only kind of ‘home’ the One God in fact gives to human libidinal being, is the *Logos*, the world of words he lives in, words that never reveal their precise origine nor their exact meaning. Man’s ‘home’ is one in which he remains alienated, because – to put it in Lacanese – no signifier is able to reveal his ultimate significance or identity; but at the same time, it is a ‘home’ that recognizes man in what he in fact *is*: desire (unsatisfiable desire, desire for identity, for what goes beyond that identity or for whatever).

All this implies that also in criticism, including religion critique, this basic human condition named desire is involved. This is why religion and religion critique are not simply each other’s opposite. Christendom and monotheism in general are, so to speak, *religion-critical religions*. They have raised religion criticism to the core business of their religiosity. The monotheistic axiom tells that nothing we think to be god is God, for ‘only God is God’. From the perspective of human libidinal economy, this axiom prevents human being from settling down in a position which at the end is all too satisfying – and, thus, deadly – for his desire. It prevents from total satisfaction, if only because it does not allow us to feel completely at home in our world. Of course, it tells about a God who loves us as a father and gives us the world to be our home, but in fact this telling makes us only longing for what it tells about. Desire as such, and not desire’s satisfaction, is the base of monotheism.<sup>13</sup> That base is shaped in the figure of an extremely unnatural God, monolithic and impenetrable, who

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<sup>13</sup> Not even the belief in an after-life is essential to it. This kind of fantasy, which is strongly tributary to the Greek philosophical idea of immortality, is introduced only late: in the midst of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. The larger part of the (Jewish) bible has been written without supposing an immortal heavenly life after the human mortal one. Monotheism is not based in a belief in a post-mortem life, but in the obsessive fascination for an unnatural,

relates to humans by means of an absolute Law that cannot be reduced to the normal, natural laws of life – a Law that can never fully be satisfied and, in this capacity, keeps human desire ongoing.

In Lacanian terms: monotheism takes religiosity away from the atmosphere of the imaginary where every demand is supposed to be answerable, and puts it on the level of the symbolic, thus acknowledging the radical incompatibility between demand and answer. According to monotheistic fantasy, our demand for God can never be answered by God's presence. His answer can only be a remainder of his presence and, thus, affirm his absence. The moment man arrived at the rendez-vous, God is gone and had left signs, i.e. letters, words, commandments. Instead of answers to our demand, we got commandments that change our demand into tasks and duties. Such is the core structure of monotheist fantasy, as crystallised for the first time in the Jewish biblical tradition.

Performing the inadequacy between demand and answer, monotheist culture affirms the true (symbolic) dimension hidden behind every (imaginary) demand, which is desire. This is why monotheism is not so much a religion of sacrifice (in which sacrifices are supposed to give the gods what they demand so that *they* will give us what *we* demand from them), as a religion of absolute commandments. Living under these commandments, the humans realise they will never be able to fully satisfy the demand expressed in those godly words, but that nevertheless they should do so, for only then, they will enjoy the satisfaction they long for. Their obedience to the letter of the Law, their celebration of God's words, and their hope for enjoyment are what shapes their desire. To save the openness of desire, it fights all kinds of false gods, who are nothing but lures of the imaginary. The monotheistic God is an affirmation of the *Logos* – the symbolic universe of signifiers – we live in and by.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the imaginary that hides the dimension of desire behind the format 'demand/answer' (or lack/completion), such affirmation of the symbolic gives more way to desire as such (desire in its unsatisfied and unsatisfiable dimension).

#### 4. Faith

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monolithic and impenetrable God who relates to humans by means of an absolute Law that cannot be reduced to the normal, natural laws of life.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, what Lacan says about the typically monotheistic "commandement primordiaux en tant qu'ils sont les lois de la parole" (J. Lacan [1986], *Le séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris : Seuil : 206).

Yet, from a psychoanalytical perspective (i.e. from the perspective of the primacy of desire), here, we touch not only the core, but at the same time the most precarious point of monotheism. Precisely by unmasking the ‘pagan’ figures of uncertainty as false certainties (by unmasking them as idols) and by localizing all uncertainty/certainty in One God, it is possible that the dimension of uncertainty *as such* – this is to say desire – gets completely suppressed or, more exactly, denied. Precisely religion’s most religion-critical and truth-loving side shows at the same time its most risky side – risky for losing the core point in religion (as considered from the perspective from the primacy of desire). It turns religion into a belief, a true faith, a faith in truth or, more exactly, a faith believing that the thing you believe should not be believed, because it is simply truth itself. In short, the kind of faith that monotheism promotes risks to be lived as knowledge, as knowing.<sup>15</sup> This is also where it ends up with when one, in the name of science, keeps on criticizing religion, and, even with Freud for instance, analyzes Christianity as the ‘religion of the son’ in which the repressed oedipal truth underlying religion is laid bare.<sup>16</sup> There, too, the radical non-knowledge underlying every knowledge or science is denied. There, criticism’s own unsublatable uncertainty – i.e. the fact that is base, too, is unattainable desire – remains completely out of sight.

It is its critical potentiality that has made Christianity pass almost imperceptibly into Enlightenment, so Lacan argues<sup>17</sup>. It is no coincidence either that, in this context, psychoanalysis has appeared: not so much as a theory *of* the unconscious, i.e. as a theory treating the unconscious as its object, but as a theory affirming the very impossibility of reducing the unconscious to an object of knowledge. With the emergence of psychoanalysis, Enlightenment discovered in its kernel a not-knowing that was not so much the ‘dark continent’ now ready to be discovered and explored, as the condition of the unconscious that constitutes the ground of every discovery or enlightened knowledge.

So, what is to be (psycho)analyzed in Christianity as well as in religion in general? It is that which, in times of science, promises knowledge a safe harbour: faith. Since modern non-essentialist science is unable, on merely scientific grounds, to declare itself guaranteed by

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<sup>15</sup> “Il ne suffit pas que certains thèmes ne soient usités que par des gens qui croient croire – après tout, qu’en savons nous? – pour que ce domaine leur reste réservé. Pour eux, si nous supposons qu’ils y croient vraiment, ce ne sont pas ces croyances, ce sont des vérités. Ce à quoi il croient, qu’il croient qu’ils y croient ou qu’ils n’y croient pas – rien n’est plus ambigu que la croyance –, une chose est certaine, c’est qu’ils croient le savoir. C’est là un savoir comme un autre, et à ce titre cela tombe dans le champ de l’examen que nous devons accorder à tout savoir, dans la mesure où, en tant qu’analystes, nous pensons qu’il n’est aucun savoir qui ne s’enlève sur le fonds d’ignorance. C’est cela qui nous permet d’admettre comme tels bien d’autres savoirs que le savoir scientifiquement fondé.” (Lacan 1986 : 202).

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reality's very base or essence, it can only *believe* things are like this. The only thing left, here, is faith. That faith, however, is in fact a faith in faith, a belief in what it believes is true, and, thus, knows. It is a faith giving back ontological ground to knowledge, making knowledge again unmarked by lack and rendering it absolute and self-assured.

In that context, psychoanalysis is there to recognize that knowledge rests on unconsciousness, on 'not-knowing'; not a "cloud of unknowing" naming the mystical end to which human knowledge is on the way<sup>18</sup>, but the unknowing supporting all knowledge, the unknowing as knowledge's very condition. The negative-theological nature of Christian faith might tell that God withdraws from all human knowledge, this very God remains subject of a knowledge unmarked by any unknowing. This way, believing in God as unknowable is still a way of supposing oneself supported by God's absolute knowledge. It remains the *godly* truth behind *man's* "cloud of unknowing". Psychoanalysis is an attempt to redefine knowledge as being based in *radical* unknowing, i.e. in the unconscious.

Is this to say that Christian religiosity *necessarily* takes the position of the absolute knowledge? It possesses at least some strong tools to avoid this. One of them is the fact that it is the religion of God's death, of the Word incarnated in the realm of our mortal flesh. In Lacanian terms: it is the religion celebrating the primacy of the Logos, of word and language considered, not in their spiritual dimension, but in their everyday materiality. It is the religion of the signifier – a term which, here, stands for a world not based in a 'deeper' sense, a world considered as plane surface, as mere superficiality. In this sense is modern science in keeping with Christianity: it continues the "*Entzauberung*" of the world; or, more radical, it continues to purge the world of all 'idols', which in this case means: supposed 'essences' or other kind of 'ontologically based evidences'. By cutting the gods dead, Christianity had already given that purge a first try. During and after the Renaissance, it repeats this move by both leaving mediaeval Aristotelianism behind and cutting off the revival of the antique pagan gods.<sup>19</sup> With the religion of the Word incarnated, *everything* became *Logos* – i.e. signifier – and the dimension of the real (i.e. of reality's ontological base, its essence) was evacuated radically from the range of science.

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<sup>18</sup> As is supposed by the anonymous mystical treatise from the 14th century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

<sup>19</sup> "Il fallait aller sûrement un peu plus loin que Platon dans la dénaturation ['naturation' is what characterises Aristotle] du désir pour que les choses débouchent autrement [than in the natural 'physical' theory of Aristotle]. La science moderne est née dans un hyperplatonisme, et non pas dans un retour aristotélicien sur, en somme, la fonction du savoir selon le statut du concept. Il a fallu, en fait, quelque chose que nous pouvons appeler *la seconde mort des dieux*, à savoir leur ressortie fantomatique au moment de la Renaissance, pour que le Verbe nous montrât sa vraie vérité : celle qui dissipe, non pas les illusions, mais les ténèbres du sens d'où surgit la science moderne." Jacques Lacan, Le séminaire, Livre IX, 1961-62, L'identification (inédit), leçon de 15 novembre 1961.

The Christian who, in this ‘superficial’ modern world, believes in God, in fact believes in the death of God, i.e. in the God who died on the cross and incarnated in the human Logos, in the world of signifiers. When, aware of this, he nonetheless keeps on claiming to believe in the proper existence of a living God, his concern is not so much God as himself. That belief expresses his wish to be supported by a world of signifiers – by the *Logos* – in which he is able to constitute himself as (subject of) desire. Believing in God’s existence tells him that he does not sink away in the groundless universe of words he indeed lives in, but that this weightless universe rests in an absolute base called God. What is repressed by means of this faith is God’s very death, i.e. the fact that He is incarnated in a world for which He is no longer able to offer any guarantee.

Believing in Gods proper existing and denying his incarnation and death is a way to repress the very core of modernity, i.e. the fact that man has become himself the subject (bearer, ground) of a world lacking any ontological ground. For modernity means that the world is now resting in us, even if, in our capacity of bearer/subject of that world, we haven’t any ground in ourselves either. *Even if we have to find that ‘ground’ precisely in the world (read: the signifiers) we speak about, we have to do as if it is us who are the world’s ground.* Man is subject/bearer of a *Logos* which is at the same time his sole support. *As if he has to be the ground for the ground bearing him.* This is the *Munchausen*-disposition of the modern subject. This is the reason modern man is inclined to stick to a God whom he wishes to take over this impossible task. This is also the reason why the problem of the subject remains still the core problem of modernity (including so-called post-modernity). Within that modern condition, religion is a symptom of the fact that we cannot deal with the problem of the subject in a proper way. Which is to say that religion – also in its cruel manifestations of today – forces us to retake the question of the subject.

## 5. Two Paradigms in Modern Religion

The *experience* underlying modernity as defined above can be characterized as radical scepticism. It is the experience that nothing is what it seems to be, that the world is an incoherent patchwork in an advanced state of decomposition and that even God is no longer the one to appeal to since he seems to have abandoned us. It is the experience of what René Descartes, in a formal way, has conceived as ‘doubt’, and which Blaise Pascal, in a more existential way, named ‘anxiety’.

To this modern experience, Christian religion provides two paradigmatic answers. The first is the one exemplified for instance in the larger part of Protestantism. It tells that modernity's sinking grounds only show all the more clear that the sole solid ground to be found is with God, a God presenting himself in the shape of an invisible and inaccessible grace. This is the Pascalian God. The world is shaking on its foundations, nothing is what it seems, corruption and lie make the rule instead of being exceptions: all this proves to Pascal how earthly earthly things, and how godly godly things are. In order to be who he is, God does not need anything of what is earthly. Even if nothing of what in our eyes exists really exists, God would not miss anything. This is why 'nothing' is the most truthful characterization of all there is, including human being. And if, nonetheless, this 'nothing' seems to be something, this is only because of Gods sovereign and graceful will. All is a result of his godly free gift.

Pascal's description of the world seems to be one big complaint about how vain man and world are. For him, however, it is nothing but an apologia in favour of Christian faith and the central doctrine of grace. Our world, including ourselves, is nothing; but the mere fact that this 'nothing' exists, shows that it *may* exist, that God *allows* and *gives* it. 'Nothing may exist': if you read this in a positive way as saying that even 'nothing' is allowed by God to be there, then, you are in the heart of Pascal's (and Kierkegaard's and of so many others) religious affirmation of modernity – or, maybe better, his modern affirmation of religion. The experience that our own almighty grip on reality, in the end, has no grip at all (which is exemplified in our incapability of dealing with the nuclear threat) can be read as the experience of an overwhelming and crushing God whom we owe our very existence and whom we have to thank even for the fact that we are 'nothing'.<sup>20</sup>

The Hamletian paradigm: this could be the name for religion's other kind of answer to the modern experience. It is a paradigm at work in a great part of modern religiosity and it fits best with the larger parts of 'catholic' Christianity. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, too, the point of departure is the experience of the world as a den of corruption and lies. This is at least what Hamlet's God, i.e. the ghost of his dead father, again and again tells to his son during those 'mystical' nights of his. Unlike the first paradigm, however, this is not a sign that only God escapes the earthly realm of sin, corruption and lies. Hamlet's God tells he is *himself* the very victim of such vices. It is up to Hamlet, the son, now to take revenge for his father's death and to restore his harmed and corroded greatness. Translated to religion, this tells that God, too, is

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<sup>20</sup> For an excellent comment on the consequences this strange logic has on the Western reflection on love, see: Le Brun (2002), *Le pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, Paris: Seuil.

affected by the world's corruption; that he, too, is marked by the lack marring us as human beings. For this very reason, however, it is up to us now to assist him and help him to get rid of that lack. It is up to us to compensate the shortcomings God suffers from. Here, affirming human nothingness and wagering on God's grace is no option. On the contrary, the only option is 'to work', in the strictly catholic sense of the word: to offer one's works to God and assisting him where his incarnation fails; helping him overcoming the lack that haunts him. In this kind of religion, all comes down to 'works': working on God and his Creation, working with the courage of despair as well as with the joy of utopia.

These two paradigmatic forms of religion are assignable in concrete modern history. Yet, what is at stake in both forms is nothing less than the question of the modern subject. That question asks if man is up to his typically modern task of being *subjectum*/bearer of a world, since this world has lost the godly *subjectum* it had in medieval times, and is incapable of being its own 'subjectum' as was the case in antiquity. Has man – first option – to assume this task realising that he is himself 'nothing' and that he must be grateful that, nonetheless, he is allowed to exist? Shall he assume to be the world's subject although he knows this sovereign task belongs to God – a God to whom the totality of being adds nothing? Or, other option, has modern man to assume this task by assisting God, by doing in his place what He is no longer able to do Himself? Has he to compensate for God so the latter does not disappear definitely?

Note that the subject in play here is indeed the subject of modernity, the modern subject as for the first time formulated in the works of Descartes. In the world of chaos and doubt, man finds certainty in doubt itself: there, the 'bearer' of 'subjectum' of doubt is revealed as what escapes definitely all doubting. But none of the two religious answers evoked above agrees with the Cartesian way of defining the modern subject. They both contest the idea of a doubtless point of certainty from where modern man supposes to approach reality (including his own reality) and propose an alternative concept of the subject. The point from where man approaches reality is not a 'thing' (a 'res'), but a kind of 'nothing': this is what both religious answers to Descartes have in common. One answer says that we, for this very reason, are handed over to an *undamaged* grace – overwhelming but also 'crashing', since we have nothing adequate to give in reply to it. The other answer tells that we are handed over to a *damaged* grace, i.e. to a god asking us to help him doing his job – not in order to occupy his place or to take over his function, but to help him to be worth occupying this very place.

All this tells the problematical position of the modern or post-modern religious *believer*. He is subject/bearer of a world become *Logos* – a *Logos* resting in its own lack.

Located on the very locus of that lack, the believer nonetheless confesses that this *Logos* rests in itself, which according to him means: in God. Here, the believer runs the risk of not enough, or not correctly, acknowledging the place in which the *Logos* rests to be *his* place, i.e. the place of a mortal, self-deceiving Munchausen – this is to say that, standing in that place, he speaks in the name of a dead God. This is why Christianity (and monotheism in general, or even every religion present in our modern world) has to learn from psychoanalysis what psychoanalysis has learned from Christianity, i.e. that this place is the place of God's death, the place the dead God occupies in our symbolic system, the place which is precisely the one of death, lack or void. It is the place that gives our desire, rather than a satisfying home, the unrest of a stranger, an unrest that keeps our desire unsatisfied, ongoing. This kind of unrest is the only human 'home' for the desire we 'are'.

If religion will "triumph", if it will never succumb under the pressure of religion critique (contrary to what a common 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century idea used to believe), then, it should do so as religion of desire. It is religion as a way to give a cultural shape to our desire. In that sense, it has to acknowledge and reinforce its own critical – including religion critical – potential instead of performing itself as a religion of faith and belief. For religion *has* a critical potential vis-à-vis the central myth of modernity, i.e. the myth of – and thus the faith and belief in – the full subject, of the subject supposed to be the bearer of itself and to rest self-assuredly in itself. Contrary to what that myth tells, the modern subject is not first of all subject *of itself*, as a Descartes thought, but *of the Other*. This is to say that it is the subject of the world in which it is definitely alienated, from which it is dependent (as the Pascalian religion emphasizes) and for which it is responsible (as the Hamletian religion points out). Monotheist religion – and certainly modern Christianity – has certain tools that are appropriate to analyse critically the denial of desire in modern culture. This is why not only critical theory (including Lacanian theory) has to detect the critical potential in religion, but also religion itself should embrace theories which – in other terms, with other tools and from a different perspective – deal with the same criticism. From a psychoanalytical perspective, religion's *raison d'être* is to cultivate human desire, i.e. to perform human being as the subject of a desire that has its base outside himself (i.e. in the Other). Religion is one of the sublimatory ways to keep desire open and unsatisfied, by celebrating the subject as well as the object of desire as being unreachable. This procedure is impossible without a critical dimension, which, by the way, belongs to the core of monotheistic religion.

6. Phantasm ...

However, is religion not mere fantasy, as centuries of modern criticism have claimed? Indeed, it is. Even in its capacity of being a culture of desire, religion is the full product of fantasy.

But what is fantasy? Is it what proves religion to have no base and, therefore, to be doomed to disappear? Is fantasy unreal and without any ground? Is it the opposite of what is based in the substantiality of the real?

The point not to be missed here is that psychoanalysis has radically redefined fantasy. What the hysteric tells on the couch might for a larger part be fantasised, it nonetheless is the cause of his symptom. *'Le malade imaginaire'* might not be *really* ill, but he *is* ill just because he fantasises he is. Fantasy is not the opposite of reality, it is part of it. Or, even more exactly, it redefines reality since it is what enables our very relation to reality, and, thus, affects profoundly that relation. This is to say that the reality we deal with as libidinal beings is invested with pleasure, wishes and, thus, fantasies. Lacan was the first to fully understand that this Freudian insight changes the very nature of reality. This, too, is the reason why he was so susceptible to structuralism, since structuralism is a similar redefinition of reality as a 'symbolic' system. The 'reality' we deal with are signifiers: this is what Freud has discovered in his works on dreams, jokes and everyday life pathology, so Lacan stresses again and again. And structuralism, introduced by the work of Saussure, was an attempt to redefine the 'nature' of the reality we live in: it is the incorporeal reality of language constituting the materiality of the 'fantasy' we live by.<sup>21</sup>

All this, however, is already explained in the preceding pages. Yet, there is more. Religion is not only fantasy; it is set of phantasms as well. And this means something different, for *phantasm* is a concept occupying a proper and crucial place in Lacan's theory of the subject. As phenomenon, it is to be defined as a more or less fixed series of signifiers – a "scenario", Lacan says<sup>22</sup> – that involuntarily comes into one's mind, but that, contrary to neurotic symptoms, does not cause specific emotional troubles. The classic example is: "A child is being beaten", a sentence Freud noticed with a few of his patients (in fact one of them is his own daughter Anna) and analysed in a famous essay with that title.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Freud, who analysed these sentences solely on the level of the phenomenon, in Lacan's theory they refer to a crucial point in the constitution of the subject defined as the subject of the Other, of the

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<sup>21</sup> For the interpretation of Saussure and structuralism as a profound and far from being closed reflection on the "ontological" nature of language, see Patrice Maniglier (2006), *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme*, Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer.

<sup>22</sup> \*\*\*

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symbolic. The subject is not merely the subject/bearer of the imaginary 'full' image the libidinal being identifies with, but the subject/bearer of an 'unfull' Other, the Other as marked by lack, i.e. constituted by signifiers endlessly referring to other signifiers. Although the libidinal being constitutes its 'self' first as the imaginary image of other persons, its final 'self' is constituted as the subject/bearer of signifiers within which he will never but long for that 'self'.<sup>24</sup> Which is to say that it is the subject of the *Other's* desire.

And what, then, is a *phantasm*? It is what the symbolic subject imagines to be the satisfying answer to that desire. Every word is of weight here. It is 'imagined' and, thus, imaginary. It is more precisely the *imaginary* support to the *symbolic* subject. Before the emergence of that symbolic subject and its phantasm, the 'self' of the libidinal being was an imaginary 'ego' constituted as the 'signifié' of all the signifiants it was living in. When this trick failed, the libidinal being had to constitute its 'self' only referring to 'signifiants'. It was only possible as 'what a signifier represents for another signifiant', to quote Lacan's description of the subject as 'subject of the desire of the Other'.<sup>25</sup> Within this construction, the phantasm is the very 'image' of that traumatic condition. It is a more or less fixed scenario of signifiers imaging the fact that the subject exist *only* as represented and thus as slashed away by the signifiers. As Freud has pointed out, the phantasm "a child has being beaten" hides in fact the sentence "the father beats me", a sentence which expresses his traumatic condition of the libidinal situation it is in as well as the child's most hidden wish, i.e. to be beaten by the father. Since 'father' is the metaphor for the symbolic order this can be translated as the wish to *really* disappear underneath the signifiers by which it is represented. The phantasm represses this ultimate 'deadly' wish, and thus makes 'normal' wishing possible.

So, the image of the phantasm shows what, at the end, the subject in its quality of being the subject of desire *really* wishes: to get *beyond* desire, to get rid of desire as such, to stop being the subject of desire and being a subject at all, and to finally really disappear in the ultimate object of desire, an object beyond desire and its subject. To become as 'nothing' as the 'nothing' my desire ultimately longs to desire for.

"A child is being beaten", to be translated as "the father beats me", is first of all to be considered as a scenario of signifiers which, in their very capacity of signifier, disable the *real* realisation of what they say. Yet, they do not simply function as signifier, but also as image:

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<sup>24</sup> Which is to say that he constitutes his 'self' as the bearer of a signifying order in which he will only exist as what "a signifier represents for another signifier". Thus Lacan's definition of the 'signifier' in seminar IX ("le signifiant est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant", see the end of lesson of \*\*\*, *Séminaire IX, L'identification, unpublished*).

<sup>25</sup> See note 23.

as an imaginary figure at least *showing* what these signifiers mean to the subject. They form a picture of the subject's condition as being castrated from the real by the signifier, and this picture functions in a *double* way. First, it 'shows' where the libidinal being is ultimately after: no longer to desire for what he imagines he is, but, finally, to really be what he is, without longing for it. In short: to disappear as subject of desire. Secondly, once the subject has indeed disappeared, to behold at least a *picture* of that disappearance and, thus, to let that picture take over the function of subject.

The subject's function consists in being the support of the libidinal economy once it is alienated in the realm of the signifiers. When this subject fails, when it fades away, then, a supplementary construction takes over its function. That construction is the phantasm. When the subject fails in its function, when it fades away, the totality of the libidinal economy does not crash thanks to the phantasm.

Does this every happen? Is there a situation where the subject fails in its function? Indeed. It is the case in enjoyment, '*jouissance*', when the libidinal being finally gets in the possession of the ultimate object of his desire. Not on the real level, for in that case, it would really stop desiring, i.e. living (since he *is* desire). When this does not occur, it is thanks to the phantasm, to the construction enabling that the subject/bearer of desire (and, which amounts to the same thing, the subject of the signifier) can fade away and that, even then, the libidinal economy beholds its support. This is why enjoyment is only possible phantasmatically. In enjoyment, I disappear as the subject of my experience (I am not present with my enjoyment the very moment I enjoy – an experience French eroticism refers to as '*la petite mort*'), but this does not mean that enjoyment is impossible. It is possible because 'my' disappearance – the fading of my subject – is fixed in a picture, in the imaginary construction of the phantasm. In the moment of *jouissance*, the libidinal economy I am fully rests in that picture, in that crystallized, imaginary scenario of signifiers.

The phantasm is what is left from the imaginary once the 'self' changes from an imaginary constitution as 'ego' into a symbolic subject. It is the *image* of the subject's disappearance underneath the signifier, the image of his 'death'. Yet, *as image*, it holds the entire libidinal system and gives it a stable support. It is the image of both the subject's traumatic condition *and* the *jouissance* it ultimately longs for. As image, it is able to show the subject's impossibility (i.e. its being 'nothing', its being not even a signifier) as its condition of possibility.

7. ... and monotheist religion

When religion is so indestructible and capable of resisting the most firm and intelligent kinds of religion critique, it is not only because it appeals to the human condition of being the subject of desire and (thus) signifiers. It is also because it anchors in man's phantasms, in his imaginary transcendental schemes<sup>26</sup> imaging his traumatic condition as being the very figure of his unlimited satisfaction, his *jouissance*. And even when the phantasm as conceptualized in Lacan's 6<sup>th</sup> seminar is something singular, different with respect to each individual in particular, one could easily extrapolate this Lacanian concept and discern phantasmatic schemes of larger symbolic identities, schemes proper to the singularity of a culture, of a time, of modernity and modern religions, for instance.

The two paradigms of modern religions I mentioned above, the Pascalian and Hamletian paradigm, can be considered as such transcendental phantasmatic schemes.

The first paradigm, the Pascalian phantasm, expresses both man's traumatic condition as being weighed down by an iron grace *and* the condition of his enjoyment as what makes him disappear in that overwhelming 'grace'. Man is able to live that contradiction thanks to the power of the signifier, enabling repression and other 'formations of the unconscious'. First of all, there is the signifier's symbolic power to postpone the moment of *jouissance* and to make desire taking precedence. Secondly, there is the signifier's imaginary capacity of composing a scenario imagining the human subject's being absorbed by *jouissance's* grace. For this is what, according to Lacan, Pascal's wager is after: *jouissance*.<sup>27</sup> Lost in a universe as in a sphere where the centre is everywhere and the limits nowhere, modern man only has his 'human, all too human' rationality in order to discern some fixed coordinates. Nonetheless, so Pascal suggests, he cannot but wage on what is beyond, on ever coming home in an infinite amount of happiness that has nothing to do with any kind of happiness within reach.

Here, one of the first shapes of modern man's controlled rationality is experienced as being oriented towards its own transgression. Modernity's rational certainty (crystallized as the Cartesian subject) wagers on something by definition uncertain, if only because it supposes the surpassing of even destruction of the wagering subject. In the Pascalian religion both sides are held together and compose the imaginary scheme of law and transgression at the same time. One should abandon the sole happiness within reach in order to gain in infinity of happiness which for the moment is definitely out of reach. Both sides of this 'phantasm'

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<sup>26</sup> It is Bernard Baas who reads the Lacanian phantasm through the concept of 'transcendental schemes' as worked out in Kant's *Kritik der Reiner Vernunft*. See Bernard Baas (\*\*\*), *Le désir pur*, Leuven: Peeters.

consolidate human libidinal being in its quality of subject of desire – of desire for the unreachable ‘happiness’ whose right name is not the fullness of heaven but the incompleteness of phantasmatic *enjoyment*.

In its proper way, the Hamletian modern religious paradigm does the same. It provides modern man with the image of a blessed god whose wounds he should take upon him in order to become what he is. The symbolic power of the story’s signifier, however, will for ever differ and delay that moment. At the same time, the phantasmatic support of the story cherishes this moment in an image showing death and *jouissance* at the same time. This phantasm images the moment where the subject’s ‘death’ is at the same time the condition of possibility for both his desire and enjoyment. Only by taking upon him what this image tells, only by taken up his real position as being the dead the signifier represents to another signifier, Hamlet re-finds ‘himself’ as subject of desire (i.e. as subjected to desire, a disposition which becomes the clearest when the very satisfaction of that desire slashed him away).

Identity is supported by floating signifiers, giving way to desire: alienated within these signifiers, the libidinal being supposes itself to be the bearer of the entire procedure. The phantasm is a supplementary imaginary structure, giving the system an ultimate support when its subject loses itself in *jouissance*. Contrary to the subject which enables the floating life of a libidinal identity living by the grace of slippery signifiers, the phantasm guarantees an imaginary fixation giving that floating entity a nodal point. That point is a fixed one, if only because it is located *outside* the slippery symbolic order. What is more, it is anchored in the subject’s transgression of the signifier’s law. What gives the subject its ultimate support is the fixed image of its ‘deadly’ transgression.

This goes for all kinds of libidinal identities, including religious identities as monotheism. As a “shaping of signifiers” (“*façonnement du signifiant*”), monotheism gives way to desire and its subject. *And* its anchors that subject in an image performing its transgression. The latter names the specifically phantasmatic side of religion. Where the former aspect represents basically monotheism’s critical side, the latter represent the more ‘religious’ one, the side responsible for a reflex of conservatism, of attachment to even the most obscure element of its orthodoxy. So, it is the phantasmatic side which is responsible for the conservative reflex so typical of religious fantasy.

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<sup>27</sup> Lacan goes extensively into Pascal’s wager in his seminar *D’un Autre à l’autre*. Jacques Lacan (2006), *Le séminaire, Livre XVI, D’un Autre à l’autre, 1967-1968*, Paris: Seuil.

All this shuts a new light on the cry we have analysed ‘Oh my God!’. As is already clear, it is the cry of an imaginary identity in trouble, crying in fact for its ‘symbolic’ support, i.e. the signifiers constituting its materiality. So, God is nothing than the materiality of the unconscious, i.e. signifier. In Christian terms: he is a dead God, i.e. the God incarnated in the Logos, in the signifier. ‘O my God’ puts the identity back on the rails, i.e. makes the imaginary ego capable again of floating on the slippery paths of the signifier, navigated by the repressed symbolic subject.

But what happens when this cry does not help enough, when the libidinal identity is not helped by being put back on the rails of desire. This is to say: what happens when it is the *subject of desire* that in trouble. Then, it cries for its imaginary support, which is not the imaginary ego, but the phantasm. And this gives the cry ‘Oh my God!’ a quite different scope. Discontent of being the subject of desire, i.e. no longer standing desire’s slippery condition as alienated in a universe of signifiers, the subject cries for what is beyond those signifiers. It cries for what, finally, is no longer desire, but *answer* to desire. It cries for the object ultimately satisfying desire, the object of *jouissance*, and it clings to the picture imaging this *jouissance*. Thus, to the phantasm.

Here, we meet the other thing to which, in the monotheist myth, the signifier God refers: the object of *jouissance*, the object which, once possessed, extinguishes the desire we *are*. God, not as the ‘logical’ stuff of which the desire I am is made, but God as the phantasmatic answer to that desire, as the object supporting my identity when my subject fades away and I am only borne by a phantasm. This is the god the mystics talk about, a god analysed by Lacan in his famous seminar *Encore*.<sup>28</sup> God as name for the real, i.e. for the ultimate object of desire located outside the symbolic. Notice that this god, too, is a dead god, a god that is ‘nothing’ to the desiring subject, be it the ‘nothing’ he finally wants to fade away in. It is the seven times “nada” that Juan de la Cruz met once arrived at the top the mystical Mount Carmel. His qualification of ‘real’ emphasizes all the more his radical incompatibility with the living subject of desire. ‘God’ and ‘real’ are but names for the fact that a libidinal identity is finally based in the image of its transgression: what holds the identity does not coincide with what holds its subject.

So, when an identity is in trouble and has to defend itself, it might not stop by defending its subject, i.e. by defending his alienated position in a floating surface of signifiers. It might not stand precisely this, and call for its support beyond the subject, for its phantasm,

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan (1975), *Le séminaire, Livre XX, Encore, 1972-1973*, Paris: Seuil.

which is based not in the subject but in the object of desire. It might think that it has to defend precisely that object because it is there that his identity's solid ground is to be found. The crucial point is that, then, although one thinks he defends his 'self', he defends only an image, an image picturing the way that 'self' of his fades away in the final object of his desire. Which is to say that this self-defence only saves an image and that, in the final analysis, it comes down to the subject's self-sacrifice in favour of that phantasmatic image.

Today's fundamentalist defence of religion illustrates this remarkably clear. What is at stake here is 'identity', realised in a symbolic universe in which religious signifiers prevail. That identity, however, is not lived as floating in this universe, using its signifiers to give shape to one's desire. Here, the identity is in trouble with itself precisely because it cannot stand its floating character, its condition of unfulfilled desire. The fundamentalist cannot stand that the world – including his religion – is marked by a fundamental lack, by unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. He cannot bear his religion to be but a "shaping of the signifier" in order to celebrate its impossibility to give an ultimate answer to the question man coincide with. He claims a full identity, based in what is beyond desire. Which in fact means that he denies the 'real' nature of his identity, which ultimately is borne by a *phantasm*, an image based not even in the subject, but in the object of his desire, i.e. in something which will for ever remain object and will never be 'subjectivised'. Fighting for himself, the fundamentalist fights for an *image* which leads him beyond his only possible support, the symbolic. So, what he thinks to be self-defence in fact goes beyond the logic of self-preservation and comes down to real self-sacrifice. Defending his phantasm and the object it rests on, he sacrifices his subject. He defends a phantasmatic image in which, in his capacity of subject, he is definitely lost.

Today's religiously inspired suicide bomber believes he is protecting or re-installing the purity of his religious identity, while in fact he only performs an act of destruction and killing. He does not support the traditional religion he is pretending to fight for; he only supports an image which he takes for more real than any reality. What he supports is a phantasm. So, here, the phantasm is not lived as a repressed, unseen scenario supporting an identity while floating over the surface of signifiers. It is lived as if it were the only real thing, and all other reality not conform to the standard of that image, is judged to be unreal and, thus, condemned to disappear. This is why, for instance, the greatest enemy of the Muslim fundamentalist, are the 'normal' muslims, the ones who live their Muslim identity as the subject of desire (to be a Moslim). The slightest difference with the phantasmatic image of the 'real' Muslim proves them to prevent that image from becoming real reality. Judged from a 'phantasmatic' norm, they are condemned in advance.

## 8. Phantasm and Criticism

Obviously, the phantasmatic aspect is religion's most dangerous side. Defending its identity, religion ends up with defending its phantasm and this can easily lead to the totalitarian horror as described above. Though, it is not solely fundamentalism that strikingly illustrates this kind of procedure. All kinds of modern ideology, including the non- or anti-religious ones, have been guilty of this. People being sacrificed for the sake of a phantasmatic image: it is certainly the most striking feature of the past 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to be not that different.

Does this mean that we should go to war against those kinds of phantasms and eliminate them? This would be the worst we could do, for to go to war against phantasms cannot but be supported by phantasms. Since it is a basic and indispensable element within the constitution of the subject, since there is no identity possible without being supported by a phantasm, the latter cannot be eliminated or neutralized. It can only be denied; and, as we have seen, this denial is not without the worse consequences. It is not the phantasm as such that makes the problem here, but the position the subject takes in relation to it.

The phantasm is a 'formation of the unconscious', and in this respect, it is *repressed*. It functions in a libidinal economy floating on the surface of signifiers supposing themselves to be borne by the subject. Only when this is no longer bearable for the supposed subject, the denial of the phantasm comes into play and causes the trouble we evoked above. What, then, is to be repaired here? Not the phantasm, but the attitude towards the phantasm – as well as towards all other unconscious formations referring to the basic lack in which the entire system rests. In other words, *repression* is to be repaired. The phantasm must again be included in the ever floating reality of the libidinal identity. It must again enable the libidinal subject's sliding over the slippery surface of the signifier. And this means that the phantasm must be acknowledged *as such, as phantasm*.

And this is, almost by definition, impossible. How the subject can acknowledge the phantasm, if that very phantasm is the hidden supplementary support of the subject, i.e. if the latter cannot do what it does without its support. There is simply no place possible outside the phantasm from where one can take position with respect to it. The phantasm belongs to that place, it is its ultimate constitutive element. The very position from where the subject operates is supported by the phantasm. It is only by denying this that one can imagine he could

manipulate – restore for instance – that phantasm, enchaining the dangerous consequences mentioned.

Nonetheless, phantasm *must* be recognized, acknowledged, and in a way even cherished. The modern condition we are in does not leave any other choice up to us. In order to not become the victim of our own denied phantasms, we have to recognize them. We must know that the ideals where we aim at and the full identity we like to claim are in the end unreachable and unknowable phantasms. Surely, we cannot know these phantasms in the sense that knowledge appropriates them. But we can know *of* them. We cannot know the unknowable, but we can know of it. We cannot lay hands on the phantasm, we cannot manipulate, restore or destroy it, but we can – and have to – know *of* it and affirm it as the very core of even our knowledge. We have to know of the phantasm as *repressed*. It is in this sense a reinstallation of *repression* must be conceived. We cannot but repress the ‘formation of the unconscious’ (including the phantasm), but we can know of that repression and find ways to affirmatively acknowledge it.

On the level of science, psychoanalysis is one of these ways. It tries to generate a knowledge centred on the unknown and unknowable; a knowledge proceeding from the insight that the ultimate object of knowledge is a phantasm. In this sense, psychoanalysis is not the kind of science that removes all repression (as the common perception and, by times, even Freud himself tell). On the contrary, its scientific purpose is to reinstall repression in such a way that we do know *of* that repression and its unconscious without having appropriating it into the enclosure of our knowledge.

Here, psychoanalysis and religion – more precisely monotheism – meets one another. Monotheism, being a religion based on all kind of ‘holy’ phantasms, considers religion critique to be one of its core tasks. It is religion critique raised to the level of religion. It criticises the idols and other kinds of false ‘phantasms’, but it is not without affirming its own phantasm, its own holy scenario imaging man’s alienated position with respect to the unreachable God. This might not be without ambiguity and is far from being immune to all kind of abuse, as monotheism’s history shows. But even this makes it to a picture of the shape our late-modern criticism is in. This kind of critique is to examine the phantasms modern man risks disappearing in, but must be aware of the constitutive character of phantasms as such. And what is more, that criticism has to be aware of its own phantasms as being simply constitutive for its own identity. Psychoanalysis – certainly in its Lacanian form – offers important tools to reconsider the status of modern criticism in that sense. Being marginalised in today’s scientific landscape, it is important for psychoanalytical theory not to lose its core

insight telling that science and criticism are not without phantasm. One of the very reasons why it has been marginalized, is the fact that current science denies this and acts as if it is not based in (unfulfillable) desire and its phantasms.

Why psychoanalysis should concern itself with monotheism? Because, there, it is offered a history of religion critical religion, i.e. of a criticism which cannot pretend to escape that which it criticizes, even the later is based on dangerous phantasms. Monotheism's history shows how difficult it is to cling on that insight and how easy it is to reinstall an absolute knowledge, for instance by defining monotheism as belief. And precisely for that reason, monotheism should concern itself with psychoanalytical theory. It is one of the few theoretical tools that can help it to rediscover religion critique to be its core business.