

# RELIGION AS CRITIQUE, CRITIQUE AS RELIGION

Some Reflections on the Monotheistic Weakness of Contemporary Criticism<sup>1</sup>

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If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha  
Buddhist saying

Kritiker beharren darauf, einen Menschen, der sich zum Gefühl der menschlichen Kleinheit und Ohnmacht vor dem Ganzen der Welt bekannt, für „tief religiös“ zu erklären, obwohl nicht dieses Gefühl das Wesen der Religiosität ausmacht, sondern erst der nächste Schritt, die Reaktion darauf, die gegen dieses Gefühl eine Abhilfe sucht. Wer nicht weiter geht, wer sich demütig mit der geringfügigen Rolle des Menschen in der großen Welt bescheidet, der ist vielmehr irreligiös im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes.  
Sigmund Freud<sup>2</sup>

Car ma position vis-à-vis de la Religion est d'une importance considérable dans ce moment dont j'ai commencé à parler. Il y a des religieux parmi mes élèves, et j'aurai à entrer sans aucun doute en relation avec l'Église, dans les années qui vont suivre, sur des problèmes à propos de quoi les plus hautes autorités voudront voir clair pour prendre parti. Qu'il me suffise de te dire que c'est à Rome qu'en septembre je ferai le rapport de notre Congrès de cette année et que ce n'est pas par hasard s'il a pour sujet :  
le rôle du langage (j'entends : Logos) dans la psychanalyse.  
Jacques Lacan à son frère, 7 avril 1953<sup>3</sup>

## 1. The Comtian paradox

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Auguste Comte, we find the idea that once religion will be definitively behind us, for it is only a fable fitting into little kids or into mankind's infantile phase. At their age, it surely is educational, but soon, it is to be replaced by a less 'fabulous', more rational approach of reality. And finally, we reach the level of maturity allowing us to face reality in a concrete and 'positive' way, i.e. without religious fables or metaphysical rationalizations. This is what Comte thought in his days, and this is more or less still the opinion many claim today. Even those who do not consider religion definitively outdated, have at least moved it away from science and public life, and reduced it to a mere private matter.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Future of an Illusion*, chapter VI: S. Freud (1974), *Studienausgabe, Bd. IX. Fragen der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fisher Verlag, p. 166-167; English translation by James Strachey: S. Freud (1961), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, p. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> This letter is only available on the internet. See:  
[http://www.lutecium.org/Jacques\\_Lacan/transcriptions/scans\\_lacan/lettre\\_07\\_04\\_53/lettre\\_jacques\\_marc\\_07\\_04\\_53.htm](http://www.lutecium.org/Jacques_Lacan/transcriptions/scans_lacan/lettre_07_04_53/lettre_jacques_marc_07_04_53.htm).

However, did Auguste Comte not teach as well that a positivist approach of reality was at the same time the one and only true religion? Did he not consider himself as the founder – the “Saint Paul” – of a new universal “Religion of Humanity” (“Religion de l’Humanité”)? Indeed, changing the name of his “positive philosophy” (“philosophie positive”) into a “positivist” one (“philosophie positiviste”)<sup>4</sup>, he soon made it into a doctrine and a religion<sup>5</sup>, baptizing himself as its “high priest” and writing, without any trace of irony, his well-known “positivist catechism” (1852). According to him, a radical positivist approach of the world can only be effective when it is at the same time a truly “proved religion” (“une religion démontrée”).<sup>6</sup> Positivist science cannot create a new positivist civilization without performing a new dogmatism. “The special aim of his research is to replace definitively the supernatural bases of civilization «whose decline can no longer be denied»”, a commentator writes.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Comte’s positivist reply to the collapse of those “supernatural bases”, once the cornerstone of Western religion, consists, not in destroying or overcoming religion, but in founding a new scientific religion: religion freed from all obscure fables and characterized by the clarity of positive science. But, anyway, still a religion, even an absolute one. Comte’s critique of religion finally *ended up with religion again*.

Comte’s “positivist religion” might seem naïve and even paranoid to us (as it did already to his closest disciples). And, indeed, the old Comte suffered really from paranoia. But he nonetheless seems to acknowledge *in advance* what other critiques of religion are often forced to face *afterwards*. This is at least what Lucien Scubla argues in a recent article.<sup>8</sup> Scubla refers, for instance, to Marxism, which, unmasking vehemently religion as a political weapon in the hands of the ruling power, in fact ends up functioning as a religion – and even becoming a religion.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Comte, apparently, Marx was not able to foresee or to ‘think’ the religious character of his own doctrine. Nor were many revolutionary thinkers and

<sup>4</sup> The shift from “positive philosophy” to “positivism” occurred in the revolutionary year 1848, when he published his “Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme” and created his “Société positiviste”. See: Auguste Comte (1998), *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme*, présentation par Annie Petit, Paris: GF Flammarion, p. 14, 18.

<sup>5</sup> It was in 1847 that Comte explicitly redefined his philosophy as the “Religion of Humanity” and himself as its “high priest” (in this quality, he even “married two proletarians” [H. Gouhier (1997 [1931]), *La vie d’Auguste Comte*, Paris: Vrin, p. 245]). In his writings, he first mentioned it in the “Conclusion” of the “Discours préliminaire du Système de politique positive” (1851).

<sup>6</sup> Auguste Comte (1966), *Catéchisme positiviste*, Chronologie, introduction et notes par Pierre Arnaud, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Tacussel (1993), ‘Auguste Comte, l’oeuvre vécue’ in: Auguste Comte, *Calendrier positiviste, ou système général de commémoration publique*, présenté par P. Tacussel, Paris: Éditions Fata Morgana, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Scubla (2003), ‘Les hommes peuvent-ils se passer de toute religion? Coup d’œil sur les tribulations du religieux en Occident depuis trois siècles’, in: *Revue du MAUSS*, n° 22, second semestre 2003: ‘Qu’est-ce que le religieux: Religion et politique’, p. 90-117.

<sup>9</sup> Scubla 2003: 100-101.

political leaders during the twentieth century. As naïve as his doctrine on religion might seem, Comte was thinking his theory – as well as modern science or modernity as such – as religion, and, in the light of recent history, it is worth questioning if this is so stupid as it might seem. What does it mean that, while criticizing religion, Comte at the same time acknowledges the religious status of his criticism?

As old-fashioned Comte's religion and his religion critique might be, this aspect is exactly the question modern criticism is nowadays struggling with. Although, for centuries, we vehemently criticized religion, religion has not only survived, it recently took even over this very critique. Once, religion was thought to be "people's opium": a manufactory of illusions, leading people away from politics and real life. It never became the kind of "proved religion" ("religion démontrée") Auguste Comte was hoping for. On the contrary, it remained an opium-like illusion, but, today, it seems nonetheless to be able to bring people back to politics. The great fights in our globalized world are fought in the name of religion, how false and superficial this reference to religion might be. In a way, it is religion that gives today's non-western people the critical voice indispensable for taking part in the global democracy to come. Those fabulous opium-gods gave them their critical position, and made them really belong to the Western (which is the real name for globalized) world. Once, religion was first of all the object of ideology critique; now it has become, if not its inspiration and guarantee, its very status.

Don't we meet here one of the backgrounds of current criticism's *positive* interest in religion? For contemporary political criticism too has made a turn towards religion, especially towards Christianity. So has Saint-Paul become a positive point of reference for left-wing political thinkers as Badiou and Agamben. And so, as Žižek claims, is "Christian legacy [again] worth fighting for".<sup>10</sup> Current criticism, not only fights Christianity, it at the same time looks at it as if it looks into its own mirror image – as if, in Christianity's vicissitudes, it recognizes its own. Christianity failed in performing an answer to the crucial questions of modernity. But did modern criticism not fail as well? Is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 not a sign of its final incapacity to build up a real alternative to the traditional (capitalist bourgeois) system, which it had so long and so rightly criticized? If, nowadays, this long critical tradition is under attack, is it not for the very same reasons Christianity was once attacked for? Christianity, however, did resist those attacks and, more or less, could stand its

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou (1997) *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France; Giorgio Agamben (2000), *Le temps qui reste*, Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages; Slavoj Žižek (2000), *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why Christian Legacy is worth fighting for*, London & New York: Verso.

ground within a world of criticism. So, modern criticism, incapable of performing an alternative for the existing political system, maybe hopes to learn from Christianity how to deal with this incapacity. How to criticize the existing situation without any alternative to propose? This is the modern – or, which in fact amounts to the same thing, post-modern – question we are facing today. Does it not come very near to the question (post)modern Christianity has to deal with: how to criticize existing (post-)modernity, having only an illusion to offer as alternative. How to criticize illusions while having only other illusions to propose?

In fact, here, we are very close to the crucial point in psychoanalytical criticism as well. For psychoanalysis, criticizing religion as an illusion, in fact cannot present an alternative that is entirely beyond illusion. Of course, religion is a fable repressing the unconscious trauma upon which civilization is built. But, as it is still necessary to emphasize, the unconscious is not so much the object of psychoanalysis as its very condition. Psychoanalysis is not a science discovering the unconscious; it is a science aware of the fact that all consciousness and knowledge – including psychoanalytic knowledge – is built upon the unconscious, i.e. upon that which by definition escapes any consciousness. So, psychoanalysis is not a science among other sciences; it is a critique of the modern – i.e. *Cartesian* – premises of science. It deprives science of its basic (Cartesian) *certitude*, and redefines radically the condition of knowledge. It redefines radically critique as well. In a psychoanalytical perspective, criticism can no longer be based upon an insight in the real state of things. Here, critique can no longer be ‘platonic’, telling real from unreal, essential from fictional. The world as such is now to be considered as ‘fiction’, and truth is to be claimed, not outside this fictional horizon (as Plato taught?), but entirely within it. Since Nietzsche and Freud, truth can no longer be the alternative of fiction and fable. In other words, psychoanalytical criticism can designate repressed wishes and traumas, but it cannot restore totally from repression and trauma. It can designate the repressed traumatic structure lying underneath a religious ‘fable’, but it cannot overcome this repression. It cannot make people live without any fable.

Met opmaak: Niet Markeren

Here we meet again the Comtian paradox, affecting now not only science but criticism as well. A psychoanalytic critique of the religious fable ends up with reinstalling a new fable. For it cannot remove repression; it can only replace it by another ‘better’ one. And what is the difference between psychoanalysis and religion if both of them are installing and maintaining repression? For, is the aim of an analytical cure not the reinstallation of repression or the installation of a better one? So, is psychoanalysis too not ending up with religion again? It might not be the scientific “religion” Auguste Comte’s positivism is about, but is it not a kind

of *critical religion* – a kind of *critique as religion*: a criticism which, having no real remedy for the illusion it fights against, can only celebrate its own critical gesture? For having no real anchorage for its critique, it seems to have its own critical move to by its sole foundation. Its last support seems to be solely its faith in its own critical gesture as such.

In this respect, critique comes very close to religion, to a fable telling that criticizing fables remains within an inherently ‘fabulous’ horizon, and that therefore, nevertheless, critique has to believe in itself: criticism ending up to be faith in the fact that critique has a sense of its own. It is a criticism, ending up with what is very near to the Kantian notion of ‘*Vernunftglaube*’. Thus: criticism ending up with religion. Again.

But why should we go so fast? Why should we run immediately to the end? Perhaps, it is not bad to turn first to the religion it all began with. Not to avoid the problems and questions we are in nowadays, but precisely to get more into them. As questions, as problems.

## 2. Religion as critique

The religion it all began with – as well as the religion it maybe ends up with – is not just simply a religion. It is monotheism. This is what modern criticism for centuries has criticized, this is what modern criticism is possibly ending up with. And if monotheism is a religion, it is certainly a special one. At least, it is a religion claiming that religion is never simple, that we should never trust any religion that claims to be simply a religion. ‘Simple’, ‘natural’ religions trust themselves, trust the trust they have in their gods, i.e. in the ideas and the images they have of them. Monotheism is by definition critical about this kind of trust. It is not so much the faith in one God, as it is a claim or an insight in the fact that only God is God, i.e. that what we *suppose* to be gods or God, in fact is not God. God is never something or someone we spontaneously – simply – believe and trust in. This kind of God is a false one, an idol. Spontaneous, ‘natural’, ‘sentimental’ religion is no religion at all, so monotheism claims. True religion is not based upon a ‘basic trust’, but upon a permanent critical inquiry about what and who we have basic trust in. In God’s name, we should not trust our trust in Him; we should distrust it.

Only a critical attitude like this makes us sensitive to *revelation*, which is the hallmark of the monotheistic God. Only by subverting the securities we are settled in, we can open ourselves for what comes from a radical outside. An unapproachable, inconceivable ‘outside’: this is the place from where the monotheistic God breaks into our world. He intervenes in a by definition unnatural, disturbing, even subverting way. The god who gave Jacob, third and

definitive patriarch of the monotheistic tradition, his new name – Israel – is a strange God, preferring the false and tricky youngest son (Jacob) over the rightful older Esau, and fighting to death with Jacob in order to finally change his name and to call him the one who has “struggled with God and with men and has overcome”. For this is what Jacobs new name ‘Israel’ literally means, so the well-known passage in Genesis tells:

“That night Jacob [...] was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (Genesis 32, 22-31)

This passage tells in fact the very core of the entire monotheistic tradition: religion as a strained relation to the divine, as a struggle and even a straight fight with it. If God is discovered to be graceful, it is never without first having fought with Him. And this only occurs after having fought – and unmasked – other, false gods.

Indeed, monotheistic religion is first of all a fight against false gods: the Jewish and the Christian Bible as well as the Koran (i.e. the three monotheistic ‘books’) tell us again and again the never ending battle against the false gods. The Jewish tradition starts with it – remember Moses destroying the golden calf – and the apocalyptic scenario’s of the three monotheistic books all end with it, each of them telling their version of an ultimate war against an ultimate false god. This is what monotheism is about: not what people suppose to be god is God, only God is God. Natural, spontaneous idea’s and feelings about God are by definition illusionary and empty. True religion is there to fight these illusions. However, what is more, monotheistic religion is also a fight against itself, against its own persisting inclination to slide back into a normal, natural religion, having faith in what or whom we think God is. In a way, monotheism is a religion that makes ‘religious distrust’ to the very kernel of religion. It is, in other words, par excellence a critical religion. The critical attitude towards religion is the very kernel of its religiosity.

Certainly, monotheism too must once have started as a ‘simple’ religion, i.e. the religion of people having trust in their own god guaranteeing power and prosperity. This must

have been the case in the early times of Israel, in the time of the Davidian kingdom. However, the real origin of the kind of monotheism that lead to today's tradition of that name (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), is to be located in another period, more precisely in the time when this Hebrew people with its 'simple' religion was on the verge to disappear. It was during the Babylonian Exile that this simple religion was interpreted to be a false one. For in Babylon, they found out that true religion did not consist in the political power and the prosperity of a nation: these 'false gods' were to be renounced. True religion was a religion of the heart, supposing a personal conversion and leading to a spiritual and – especially – moral life, a live style respecting the "orphan and the widow", the "poor and the needy".<sup>11</sup> This is what the 'prophets' had told in the centuries before the Exile. Then, they were considered to be dissident prophets, not playing up to those who had the power. Now, however, sitting in tears "by the rivers of Babylon"<sup>12</sup>, people remembered those dissident prophets, just as they remember that other traditional story, the one about the exodus out of Egypt where they were given what the prophets told to be their religion's kernel: the law. Being 'God's people' did not equal with being owners of a powerful land. 'God's people' was first of all an 'inner' category. It defined those who obey God's law, wherever they were, whatever situation they were in. Even here, by Babylon's rivers and having lost everything, they could be what their God has given them to be: faithful to the One and Only God, which means (as they discovered only now): obedient to the law which is not so much a religious law (installing an economy between the mortal and the immortal) as it is a human law, installing a just and social society. To serve God is at the same time to serve the 'orphan and the widow', 'the outlaw and rightless'. Those who *only* serve God, serve an idol. Their religion is a false one; it is in fact no religion at all. For true religion is never *purely* religion, *purely* an affair between man and God. True religion is never religion *alone*.

Yet, in a monotheistic perspective, it is not that easy to define what, then, 'religion' exactly means. For, at the one hand, it is what monotheism is fighting against: a false believe, a celebration of idols, an obscure traffic between men and gods, between mortals and immortals. About this kind of religion, monotheism can only be extremely suspicious – a suspicion which forms its very kernel. Hence, monotheism is itself genuine 'religion critique'. Its God is by definition the result of a never lasting critical attitude. None of those we think is

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<sup>11</sup> "Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace; may the poor and needy praise your name." Psalm 74:21; see also: Exodus 22, 22; Deuteronomium 10, 18; Psalm 10, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 137.

god, is God. Only God is God. And being just towards God means nothing else then doing justice to our neighbors, first of all to “the poor and the weak” among them.

On the other hand, this religion critique ends up to be itself a religion. It performs a cult, including rituals, prayers, saints, sacred objects and gestures. In short, monotheism, too, establishes a ‘holy economy’. It is true, monotheism is critical about sacrifices, certainly about human sacrifices, which it forbids explicitly.<sup>13</sup> In general, it criticizes the idea that life, which is giving by the divine, at times should be given back to it. The monotheistic God is supposed to be too sovereign for that kind of ‘life/death traffic’.<sup>14</sup> To live, he does not need the gift of those he created. This is precisely why pagan gods are false: to keep alive, they need food, which is given by sacrifices, human sacrifices and other ones.<sup>15</sup> If the monotheistic God is hungry, it is never because of need for food. He is it in an entirely ‘sovereign’ way. He does not need anything. That is way also his gifts are free, for nothing. And yet, nonetheless, the monotheistic God keeps asking for gifts, offerings and sacrifices (except human ones – besides the one of his own son). Even Christianity, whose explicit profile it is to be the ultimate sacrifice (i.e. the sacrifice of sacrifice), remains a religion, i.e. a culture where man is asked to send God gifts, offerings, and sacrifices, to celebrate and to pray him. Monotheists should be critical about what or whom people (including themselves) call God. They should not trust the god they spontaneously trust, for only God is God. But this God must nonetheless be trusted, and this trust must be expressed in a religious way: by praying and celebrating this God, by offering him gifts and (non-human) sacrifices. This is the paradox of monotheistic religion: it is a critique of religion manifesting itself as a religion.

### 3. Critique of religion ...

At least, this is a paradox for those who do not accept the typically *modern* historical, evolutionary approach to this problem. For the others, there is no paradox at all. Is the monotheistic ‘religious critique of religion’ – so they argue – not just a necessary step or

<sup>13</sup> Here, usually, the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham is mentioned (Genesis 22). For a critique of the idea that monotheism – and especially Christianity – is beyond the logic of human sacrifice, see: M. de Diéguez [1981], *L'idole monothéiste*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>14</sup> The Christian idea of incarnation in a way retakes that kind of life/death traffic. Manuel de Diéguez characterizes Catholicism and its Sacrifice of the Mass as a “système d'échange quasiment tangible avec le pouvoir divin” (Diéguez 1981: 46; see also the entire chapter 3).

<sup>15</sup> This is, for instance, the reason why Zeus and the other gods could not simply kill the original androgyne humans, when they seemed to be all too powerful and began to attack the gods – as Aristophanes tells in Plato's Symposium (190c): “Doubt reigned in the celestial councils. Should they kill them and annihilate the [androgyne] race with thunderbolts, as they had done the giants, then there would be an end of the sacrifices and worship which men offered to them; but, on the other hand, the gods could not suffer their insolence to be unrestrained.”

phase within the evolution of western civilization? And is this evolution not undoubtedly going in the direction of a more and more purified atheism? Anyway, western culture – and a fortiori modern culture – is the result of a critique of – and a break with – religion. Only, this break took time to get realized. In the beginning, religion critique could only work from within, operating within the then existing theoretical framework, which was entirely religious. Unmasking the religious fable with religious concepts: this is what monotheism did. However, once monotheism had become the ruling religion, its criticism kept going on. That is why the apotheosis of Christianity during the High Middle Ages sewed the seed of its own critique, i.e. the Reformation, which laid the foundation for the Enlightenment critique of religion, preparing the post-French Revolution a-religious bourgeois society and introducing today's wide spread atheism. So, atheism is not the opposite of Christian monotheism, as Enlightenment presumed: it is its prolongation, and even its realization. To realize what monotheism is about – i.e. the Jewish and Muslim law or the Christian love doing justice to 'the orphan and the widow' – one should not only get rid of the gods, but of the monotheistic God as well. Nothing of what you suppose to be god is God, not even God. Finally, true monotheism ends up being atheism, just as atheism ends up being the only true monotheism.

This is the claim of many modern thinkers. Remember for instance Hegel's statement that the very kernel of Christianity is nothing else but God's dead – a statement already present in a 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran hymn.<sup>16</sup> According to Hegel, in Christianity, religion's truth is both unmasked and saved, i.e. '*aufgehoben*'; and in Enlightenment's atheism, the same thing is done to Christianity as well. Finally, it all ends up with the '*Aufhebung*' of the very difference between religion and its opposite, or, which amounts to the same thing, between atheism and its opposite. It ends up in what Hegel calls 'the absolute knowledge' ('*das absolute Wissen*'). However criticisable this idea might be, it expresses our common opinion about religion in a more accurate way than we are willing to admit. For, indeed, the difference between religion and its opposite – or between atheism and its opposite – seems to have lost its importance. Both religion and atheism have become a matter of personal belief, and this in fact neutralizes their former opposition. Those who are willing to really fight for one of both (for religion or for atheism), and, therefore, want to rearrange the existing world according to its respective principles, are nowadays supposed to be 'fundamentalists', which commonly means that they are 'wrong'. For, so we suppose, they should know that, beyond the

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<sup>16</sup> "O großer Nott ! Gott selbst ist tot": Hegel quotes from a hymn written by Johannes Rist (1607-1667). See: G.W.F. Hegel (1966), *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion: Die Absolute Religion*, in: *Philosophische Bibliothek Band 63*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, p. 157-158. See also: Jean Wahl (1951<sup>2</sup>), *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, p. 73.

opposition between religion and atheism, there is the knowledge that both are nothing more than a personal belief. And this knowledge operates, consciously or not, as an ‘absolute’ one.

Yet, also other, explicitly non-absolute philosophies transcend the difference between religion and atheism. Gilles Deleuze, one of the most vehement anti-Hegelian philosophers of recent time, claims for instance that the most abstract and sophisticated issues about God made by traditional thinkers as Dun Scotus, Spinoza, Leibniz, and others were in fact most exquisite moments of free thought. Just as the traditional Christian painting found in the dogmatic idea of God, rather than a restriction, a real stimulus for free art.<sup>17</sup> God’s infinity liberated finite man from his false and oppressing limits. So, reflecting about God and even taking Him as reflection’s starting point did not obstruct free atheist thinking. On the contrary, it stimulated such thought wonderfully well, so Deleuze stresses.<sup>18</sup>

Here, another modern approach of religion and atheism should be mentioned: the Freudian criticism and its unexpected ‘christocentrism’. Undoubtedly, Freud acknowledges modernity’s atheist tradition, and he explicitly expresses the hope that future times will leave religion behind.<sup>19</sup> Yet, this is precisely why he appreciates Christianity. For the Christian fable repressing the original trauma that underlies religion is so superficial and so ‘thin’, that it can easily be read as an *unmasking* story. It is not a coincidence, Freud argues, that in Christian religion, the ‘son’ has taken over the place of the ‘father’, who was central in the Jewish religion (where Christianity comes of) and in most of the other religions. For the origin of religion – which is at the same time the origin of society in general – is not to be found with the father, but with his sons, and more precisely with what they did to the father. It is here that, referring to Darwin, Freud dishes up his modern, ‘scientific’ fable.<sup>20</sup> In the time of the ‘primitive horde’, a monstrous father forbids his sons libidinal satisfaction in order to keep all the women of the horde for himself. Being the very principle of life, *libido* let the sons no other way than to remove this obstacle, i.e. to kill their father. A persistent feeling of guilt forced them to create a new father – a totem, and later a god – towards whom they could

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<sup>17</sup> “Deleuze [...] suggests [...] [that], [i]n the hands of great painters like El Greco, Tintoretto and Giotto, this (theological) constraint became the condition of a radical emancipation: in painting the divine, one could take literally the idea that God must not be represented, an idea that resulted in an extraordinary liberation of line, colour, form, and movement. With God, painting found a freedom it would not have had otherwise – a properly pictorial atheism.” (Daniel W. Smith, “The doctrine of univocity: Deleuze’s ontology of immanence.”, in: Mary Bryden (Ed.) (2001), *Deleuze and Religion*, London & New York: Routledge, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> On could mention here also Jean-Luc Nancy’s project of a “deconstruction of Christianity”: J.-L. Nancy (1998), “La déconstruction du christianisme”, in: *Les Études Philosophiques* (4), 503-519.

<sup>19</sup> Remember Freud’s plea for non-religious education (“irreligiösen Erziehung”) in *Future of an Illusion*, one of Freud’s major essays on religion (Sigmund Freud [1974], *Studienausgabe, Bd. IX: Frage der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: Fisher Verlag, p. 181).

<sup>20</sup> Freud 1974: 410 ff.

express that guilt. So, religion is an attempt to pay debt to those imaginary gods – i.e. killed fathers – in order to get rid (in a not less imaginary way) of that unbearable feeling of guilt. That is why the origin of society coincides with the origin of religion.

Yet, Christianity modified the repression of the traumatic guilt holding society together. By sacrificing himself, the Christian ‘Son of God’ – hardly secretly – confesses the murder of the father: the only act able to redeem man’s original sin is suicide, self-sacrifice – which means that the sin to be redeemed could only be on that level, i.e. murder. This is how, in Christianity, the repressed unconscious guilt becomes almost conscious. Christianity’s celebration of God’s Son is too obviously the ‘religion of the sons’, and, in that way, almost acknowledging the death – the murder – of the father. In other words: God’s death. Christ’s sacrifice is the sacrifice of the son, and in this quality it is an adequate repetition of the sacrifice/murder of the father – a repetition that in fact is a confession. Anyway, Christianity is a decisive step to turn the unconscious into consciousness, which is the very reason for Freud’s ‘christocentrism’.

#### 4. ... within the limits of illusion alone

Yet, the sting is in the tail, or, more exactly, in the detail. If in Christianity, ‘the repressed *almost* becomes conscious’, as said a few lines above, the word to notice here is ‘almost’. It is a word indicating that Freud is hesitating here. On the one hand, he hopes that the hidden consciousness of Christianity becomes manifest, and takes away Christianity’s ‘raison d’être’, as well as the ‘raison d’être’ of all other religions and of religion in general. This is the Enlightenment side of Freud’s position, explicitly expressed in *The Future of an Illusion*. There, we can read his sincere hope that one day, we no longer will need illusions like this. On the other hand, however, he realizes that Christianity – just like any other religion – is indeed an illusion – ‘illusion’, in this essay being defined as an entirely libidinal product. Yet, this implies that it is anything but sure that we could ever live without illusions at all. For repression and illusion, although they can be analyzed and unmasked by psychoanalysis, nevertheless remain basic structures indispensable for the libidinal subject. So, let us have a closer look to Freud’s theory of the illusion.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud mentions three main reasons why our ancestors created religious illusions: to banish the terror of nature (for our libidinal constitution has made us totally maladjusted to nature), to get reconciled with our fate, and, finally, to compensate for the frustrations caused by civilization. So, religion is a “vessel of representations”, protecting

us “on two sides”, on the one side against “nature and fate” (i.e. the tragic conditions of life and death), on the other side against “civilization’s frustrations”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, to deal with the problems of nature and fate, we do no longer need “gods” or other religious illusions: now, we can make use of science, so Freud claims. However, science itself is not without causing frustrations, Freud continues. Even civilization in general appeals for frustrating illusions. Although science and civilization shape the wishes and desires that we, on the most basic – i.e. libidinal – level, live by, they at the same times limit desire, which make frustration and discontent unavoidable. Indeed, as Freud elaborates in another well-known essay, civilization is never without its “discontent”, and, for the very same reason, never without illusions.<sup>22</sup> Precisely because civilization will never completely harmonize libidinal wishes with reality’s requirement, discontent and illusion will always be two sides of the same unavoidable coin.

Yet, in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud is not exactly saying this in so many words. But it is supposed by the strictly “psychological” analysis he says to be making there. For, as he mentions clearly, unmasking illusions is not the same as analyzing their content. “To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines [Wahrheitswert der religiösen Lehren] does not lie within the scope or the present enquiry. It is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions”, so Freud writes at the end of the sixth chapter.<sup>23</sup>

We have neither time nor space to analyze more in detail the four chapters that follow after this passage in *The Future of an Illusion*, but even a quick reading makes clear that the long review of objections and refutations given there not only concern the religion Freud criticizes, but also – and particularly – the status of his own critique, i.e. the status of his “psychological” analysis. Does such an analysis *really* unmask people’s false belief? This is to say, more precisely: do they stop believing in God once they understand “rationally” that it is an illusion? Freud is very clear in this: atheist psychoanalysis never will convert the faithful to atheism.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, faith is too much a “psychological” thing, i.e. a matter of unconscious wishes and presuppositions. And although psychoanalysis can awaken some of these wishes to consciousness, it cannot make the unconscious as such conscious again. The unconscious is too much a basic structure of the conscious itself.

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<sup>21</sup> Freud 1961: \*\*\* ; 1974: 152.

<sup>22</sup> See Freud’s essay *Civilization and Its Discontent* (Freud 1974: 191-270).

<sup>23</sup> Freud 1961: 33; 1974: 167.

<sup>24</sup> “I still maintain that what I have written is quite harmless in one respect. No believer will let himself be led astray from his faith by these or any similar arguments.” Freud, 1961: 47; 1974: 180.

Then, does this mean that psychoanalysis supplies a new foundation to faith and religion? Psychoanalysis will surely be used for this, Freud admits<sup>25</sup>, although he repeats again and again that it should pursue the opposite. For, religion contains a “ban on thinking” and it remains our “psychological ideal” to consolidate the “primacy of intelligence”.<sup>26</sup> A few lines further, however, Freud is willing to ‘moderate his zeal and admit the possibility that he, too, is chasing an illusion’.<sup>27</sup> Which does not stop Freud expressing his belief in the necessity of rational critique – and thus in criticizing religion.

Then, is Freud’s own theory not finally based upon belief – in this case a belief in the value of rational thinking, of intelligence and critical attitude? Is his psychoanalytical theory not basically a kind of ‘Vernunftglaube’, in the Kantian sense of the word: a faithful belief in the supremacy of intelligence and rational thought, supposed to be the only way to free us from the chains of unconscious drives? Is this not just a belief, and thus, in the last resort, an illusion? And does this not discredit the entire religion critique? Does a critique unmasking religion as an illusion make any sense when this unmasking itself is based upon an illusion? Is Freud’s religion critique not basically a ‘religion’?

## 5. Enjoyment

When, here, Lacan is not able to resolve the paradoxical problem either, he can at least help to push the analysis a little further. For his conceptual tools enable to detect a weakness – or even a certain naivety – in Freud’s ‘Vernunftglaube’. Which, however, does not imply that it will be particularly easier to avoid ending up in the same aporia as Freud.

What is, according to Lacan, the weak point in Freud’s theory? Freud claims, as we already know, that civilization, although indispensable, necessarily creates frustration and discontent. From a libidinal perspective, civilization is a ‘law’ restricting unconscious drives and wishes. That is why this law, to assert its authority, turns to religion for support. Although based upon human rationality, it needs the support of some imaginary illusion to be respected.

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<sup>25</sup> “If the application of the psycho-analytic method makes it possible to find a new argument against the truths of religion, *tant pis* for religion; but defenders of religion will by the same right make use of psycho-analysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines.” Freud 1961: 37; 1974: 171.

<sup>26</sup> “How can we expect people who are under the dominance of prohibitions of thought [unter der Herrschaft von Denkverboten] to attain the psychological ideal, the primacy of intelligence?” Freud 1961: 48; 1974: 181.

<sup>27</sup> “But I will moderate my zeal and admit the possibility that I, too, am chasing an illusion. Perhaps the effect of the religious prohibition of thought may not be so bad as I suppose; perhaps it will turn out that human nature remains the same even if education is not abused in order to subject people to religion. I do not know and you do not know it either. It is not only the great problems of this life that seem insoluble at the present time; many lesser questions too are difficult to answer.” Freud 1961: 48; 1974: 181.

Traditionally, religion has proved to be strong in this. However, this makes civilization and its law depending on believing in God, which is, from a rational viewpoint, an unpredictable factor. So, what was supposed to be the law's guarantee turns out to be a danger for the law and for civilization in general. It can only be a step in the right direction, Freud argues, when we are attached to society's laws only because of their *own* authority, and not because of the illusory authority of some God.<sup>28</sup> Modern freedom compels us finally to speak in our own *human* name. Thus, in Freud's analysis, God's single role is to guarantee the human law, giving its prohibitive character an extra imaginary strength. To this, Lacan – with Freud – replies that the law is not only negative, i.e. prohibitive; it is also positive: it gives desire its structure. More precisely: marking clearly its final object, the law gives desire its basic orientation. Despite – or even thanks to – its forbidden character, this object keeps desire unfulfilled. And since we *are* (unfulfilled) desire, this prohibition is constitutive for our very being.

Here, Lacan goes a step further than Freud adding that the forbidden object is at the same time the object of *enjoyment*. For, it is precisely prohibition that makes enjoyment possible. In his seminar on ethics, he explains that the object of enjoyment is by definition located *outside* the domain of the law, or – as Lacan puts it – outside the symbolic order: outside the realm of signifiers where someone, in order to be what he is, continuously has to refer to other signifiers, ceaselessly deferring the 'object' he is longing for.<sup>29</sup> Although this object is inaccessible, there is nonetheless a way for the subject to 'enjoy' it. Only, this enjoyment is not without taking its toll: it couples with a fading of the subject. Enjoyment is only possible when the subject loses its capacity to be present with it. You can long for it, you can remember it, but the moment it occurs, you cannot be with it. This is the crucial point in Lacan's definition of enjoyment (*jouissance*): it is a libidinal satisfaction on the level of the subject, during which the subject fades away and the entire libidinal economy then is supported by a fundamental 'fantasy'.

So, whereas Freud stresses that the final object of our desire is by definition illegal, Lacan adds that the law at the same time directs our desire towards it, giving this object a

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<sup>28</sup> "But we do not publish this rational explanation of the prohibition against murder. We assert that the prohibition has been issued by God. Thus we take it upon ourselves to guess His intentions, and we find that He, too, is unwilling for men to exterminate one another. In behaving in this way we are investing the cultural prohibition with a quite special solemnity, but at the same time we risk making its observance dependent on belief in God. If we retrace this step – then, it is true, we have renounced the transfiguration of the cultural prohibition, but we have also avoided the risk of it." Freud 1961: 40-41; 1974: 174-175.

<sup>29</sup> See the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Jacques Lacan (1986), *Le séminaire, Livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil; (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, translation by D. Potter, London / New York: Routledge.

constitutive status. Although impossible and phantasmatic, the forbidden object is the ultimate support of our entire libidinal economy. It is the support, even when the subject fades away (as it is the case in *enjoyment*).

## 6. Religion as sublimation

This puts religion in a quite different light. It is not only a support to the authority of the law; at the same time, it supports human tendency to transgress this law and to enjoy the forbidden object. Yet, it does not allow *real* transgression (for *jouissance* is phantasmatic), but it supports the *desire* for transgression, for *enjoyment*, or for whatever. By celebrating what is beyond the limits of the law, it keeps desire desiring. This is what Lacan has in mind when he defines religion as *sublimation*. In his seminar on ethics, sublimation is defined as the way to raise the object of desire to the level of “*das Ding*”, which is, at that time, Lacan’s conceptual term for desire’s final object.<sup>30</sup> In sublimation, an arbitrary signifier is singled out from the symbolic order and put at the inaccessible place of desire’s final object; then, all other signifiers are fashioned in such a way that they continuously circle *around* this object without ever obtaining access to it. So, by celebrating this object, it is in fact *desire* which is celebrated.

In this sense, religion should not be exclusively considered as what *represses* desire. It can function as desire’s *sublimation* as well, and, in this quality, can give desire a certain freedom. It is true, it does not give desire what it finally wants – for this is enjoyment, which, being not a signifier, cannot be given consciously. But religion is able to affirm that we *long* for it. In this, it appreciates what we really are – for, once again, we *are* desire. Although sublimation is not the ultimate way to deal with desire, it is at least a way that does not repress it – a way that affirms the most basic reality of our life: desire.

Yet, this Lacanian perspective modifies radically the notion of both religion and religion critique, just as it changes the notion of truth and reality as well. For Lacan, the truth of psychic and social reality is not to be found in the real separated from the false and the fictitious. Reality itself – the reality constituting the world in which we live – is basically a fiction, i.e. an infinite set of signifiers (*signifiants*). Their signification (*signifié*), having no ground in the real, is entirely an effect of the signifiers. That is what Lacan, referring to a basic notion in Lévi-Strauss, calls a symbolic universe: a world (materially) made of signifiers

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<sup>30</sup> Lacan 1986: 133; 1992: 112.

radically separated from the real. Signification is no longer supposed to refer to the real; it is caused but by the autonomously operating signifiers.

So, where is the truth in the Lacanian universe? For, unlike flat post-modernism claims, Lacan keeps truth as an entirely valid concept. Only, he does not define it as what makes words or thoughts corresponding to real things. Lacan redefines truth within the horizon of the *primacy of desire* (for truth or whatever). So, a discourse or an attitude is true only in so far it acknowledges the primacy of desire. More precisely, true/untrue is about how the *subject* acknowledges its position within the world of fiction (i.e. the symbolic order): about how human being recognizes himself being not his own subject, but the subject of the desire of the Other. For, this is in fact his position: he is not the Cartesian subject, being the support (the platform, the *'hypokeimenon'*, the *'subjectum'*) of his own being, but of his *desire* for being – a desire, which he copied from the other's desire. More precisely: since the libidinal being can only repress his archi-trauma – i.e. his lack of being – by alienating itself in the order of signifiers, it realizes itself as the subject of signifiers. We can only exist as the ones we think we are, so Lacan claims, in so far as we are represented by signifiers: this makes us, at the most basic level of our identity, coincide with that what 'a signifier represents to other signifiers' – to refer to Lacan's definition of the subject.<sup>31</sup> It is the signifier's support, it makes the signifier occur, happen; it gives it its 'ground'. So, the subject (I am) is not the signifier as such, but what, being the effect of the signifier, exists as hidden underneath that signifier, supposed to be literally its 'supposition' (which is the literal meaning of 'subjectum'). A supposition without any real or 'ontological' ground: this is, according to Lacan, how we have to define the modern subject. It is literally a fictive 'supposition' made by an autonomous *'Einbildungskraft'* – 'autonomous', because it is not even reducible to our own imagination, but only to the imagination at work in the anonymous symbolic order we are alienated in. Seeking for the point where I can meet my true self (my truth), I will find this point escaping even the materiality of the question for myself. 'True' characterizes that specific attitude (that 'act', Lacan ends up to say) affirming this escaping point, and, thus, affirming the desire I am: affirming that I am *but* desire for being. This moment (or act) of truth – which is a radically singular moment that can be dealt with no one – can be located at the end of a psychoanalytic cure. Its more social form – its cultural celebration – is sublimation.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan (1966), *Écrits*, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, p. 819, 835, 840. Lacan uses this formula for the first time in his seminar on identification: J. Lacan (1999), *L'identification. Séminaire 1961-1962*, Paris: Publication hors commerce par l'Association freudienne internationale, p. 60.

Where, in this Lacanian approach of truth and subject, should we locate religion and religion critique?

Unlike the Enlightenment critique, Lacanian theory does not criticize religion as a fiction, for all reality is supposed to be fiction/signifier. Religion's truth-value is to be found in the way it puts the subject in relation to reality, or, which amounts to the same thing, in the way it gives freedom to desire. Does religion help us to recognize and 'cultivate' the desire we are? Does it help to recognize our identity, not as a substantial subject supposed to be our own ground, but as a subject being, paradoxically, the support of something, which it is at the same time an effect of? This is the kind of questions guiding a critical approach to religion.

Now we understand why Lacanian theory is not without a certain appreciation for religion. In this respect, it is not incomprehensible that people, alienated in the symbolic order (in what Lacan calls the 'Other'), in times of trouble, address themselves to that order *as such*, i.e. as to an instance to whom they can personally relate. Certainly, they are always lost in the Other, but in an unconscious way. Being in trouble, they *feel* lost in the Other, and, by praying the Other not to abandon them, they express more or less the structural shape they are in. Praying the Other to save the single individual I am shows that my entire individuality depends on Him, i.e. on the symbolic order I am alienated in. So, there is a truth in praying – at least a hidden one. For, indeed, the act of praying denies that the Other I'm addressing to does not exist *as such*<sup>32</sup>, that He is nothing but the endless fiction I am living in (and by), and that the only true salvation left for me is to acknowledge that I am totally lost in the Other and, which amounts to the same thing, that my only escape from it (an escape I cannot handle nor manipulate myself) is a vain *jouissance*. Moreover, it is neither incomprehensible that I suppose *jouissance* to be the haven religion believes in. Only, psychoanalysis is there to deconstruct this idea and, gradually, unmask it in order to face my truth, i.e. that, on my most fundamental level, I am unfulfilled desire, and that only this makes my enjoyment possible. That only enjoyment gives me the sovereignty I am longing for, and that "sovereignty is NOTHING", as already Georges Bataille said.<sup>33</sup>

Here, again, 'atheism' is supposed to be the destination of man's struggle with his 'gods', i.e. with the wishes he takes too easily for real. This is at least one of the reasons why Lacan, not unlike Freud and his 'christocentrism', defines the "roman religion" (Christianity)

<sup>32</sup> Or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it in his analysis of the biblical figure of Job, that the Other (in this case God) is 'impotent'; S. Žižek (2003), *The Puppet and the Dwarf – The Perverse Core of Christianity*, London (UK) & Cambridge (Mass): The MIT Press, p. 125-127.

<sup>33</sup> See the last sentence of *La souveraineté*, in: Georges Bataille (1976), *Oeuvres complètes VIII*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 456. For the influence of Bataille on Lacan, see the first chapter of Jean-François de Saugerac (2001), *Le désir sans foi ni loi: Lecture de Lacan*, Paris : Aubien, p. 21-60.

to be the “true religion”.<sup>34</sup> And yet, this is not contradictory to his claim that ‘atheism’ is the most difficult thing there is, and that it is precisely where psychoanalysis leads to. The truth of any desire for God is not God, but godless desire.

This is, however, not to say that monotheism is without danger, and that it leads spontaneously to an affirmation of desire’s primacy. After all, monotheism remains a religion, i.e. a discourse allowing someone to talk in the name of a God. In this case, he does not so much acknowledge desire (for God) as God Himself. Speaking in His name, he appropriates God’s inaccessible position, and takes over His absolute power. So, he pretends to fill in the desire of the others, and instead of giving room to their desire, he forces them to accept him and/or his God as the ultimate answer to their desire – a procedure which in fact deny their desire. While he himself transgresses the limit separating desire from its final object and occupying the locus of ‘*jouissance*’, he steals from the others both their desire and their ‘*jouissance*’, and he constrains everyone to do *as if* his or her desire is fulfilled.

It is here that we meet the ‘perverse core of Christianity’. Criticizing every appropriation of God (i.e. desire’s object), Christianity is a way to acknowledging the primacy of desire. But precisely by making this claim, one can secretly bring about exactly the opposite. This is how Christianity as well as the two other monotheisms in fact mostly operate. Referring to God as to a point from which everything can be criticized, Christianity appropriates this point and supposes to be itself immune to any criticism. This is why Christianity – in its open and in its hidden forms – is still – and will always be – to be criticized. Here, we meet the inner danger of monotheistic criticism: its critical claim itself can turn out to be an instrument consolidating the repression of desire it wants to attack.

Yet, is this a danger characteristic only for monotheistic criticism alone? Although Lacanian theory explicitly intends to avoid it, it nevertheless seems to be still affected by it. This is why we have to reflect a last time upon Lacan’s definition of sublimation and its relation to religion and religion critique.

## 7. The monotheistic status of modern criticism

According to Lacanian theory, sublimation names the modified way modernity relates to the real. As object of desire, the real is considered to be by definition inaccessible, although

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<sup>34</sup> See the press conference Lacan held in Rome, October 29 1974 (*Lettres de l’École freudienne*, 1975, n° 16, pp. 6-26; on internet: [http://www.lutecium.org/Jacques\\_Lacan/transcriptions/conference\\_presse\\_1974.htm](http://www.lutecium.org/Jacques_Lacan/transcriptions/conference_presse_1974.htm)). “La vraie religion, c’est la romaine. [...] c’est la religion chrétienne.” (Lacan 1975 : 15).

human 'desiring machine' is entirely oriented towards it. This is why the real is to be linked to the unconscious, so Lacan argues. Contrary to what the entire tradition claims, the real does not guarantee any solid, ontological ground to human knowledge. Or, which amounts to the same thing: the real, being the ultimate *object* of knowledge, can never be its *subject*, its ground, its '*hypokeymenon*'. This insight defines the heart of modernity, so Lacan repeats again and again during his entire oeuvre. The real is not knowledge's ground, but its unconscious kernel. Knowledge, being orientated towards it, is at the same time kept at distance from it.

That is why Lacan interprets modern science, too, as sublimation, i.e. as a way to give freedom to human desire (for knowledge) and to let it endlessly circle around its final object without being ever able to have access to it. It is a way to 'acknowledge' the unconscious (the unknowable real) as the very base of consciousness and knowledge. Only, science is doing this in a rather paradoxical way: by *denying* it. The unknowable (the unconscious) is supposed to be, instead of being its base or kernel, something still *to be* discovered. The moment of knowledge is now deferred to the future: *once*, we *will* know what we *still* do not know. This way, science denies the inner limit upon which it is built: it denies its break with the real; or, which amounts to the same thing, it denies the unconscious or unknown to be its ground. Hence the limitlessness of modern science. Science is chasing after the real, while that 'real', of course, constantly withdraws, turning this chase into a limitless but vain quest, only satisfied in an equally vain *jouissance*. Yet, limitless science is not without danger, as is shown in the catastrophes it can lead to. Twentieth century's nuclear and other disasters are the result of an immeasurable scientific power, not able to face its own limits. It is the result of a science which, in its '*jouissance*', has lost itself: capable of destroying everything, it remains blind for the fact that it is blowing away its own subject. In order to achieve its goal, it seems ready to destroy mankind itself.

In this respect, religion, the second kind of sublimation Lacan (with Freud) distinguishes, has a more accurate truth-value. At least, it does not simply deny the unknowable kernel (i.e. the unconscious) human desire is pointing at. Putting an unknowable God at the locus of this kernel, it keeps desire consciously unfulfilled and, thus, ongoing. This way, it operates as a first, still immature recognition of desire's primacy. It has, however, not yet the clarity of an artistic sublimation, the third one Lacan distinguishes. In his eyes, art is supposed to have the highest truth-value. Referring to Greek tragedy, he argues that art shows

most explicitly desire's impossibility to gain access to its final object, and, therefore, is to be considered as the least luring kind of sublimation.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, what the status of Lacan's own theory? Is it also to be considered as a sublimation giving room to desire? This is not what Lacan himself claims. According to him, psychoanalysis is a science: not the kind of science denying desire (by pretending to know its 'nature' 'essence' or whatever), but a science *mapping* desire, constructing a *topology* of the nodal points where one can locate the subject hiding itself in the tricky games of libidinal economy. Whereas classic science still had something in common with religion (both being sublimations), psychoanalytic science is too much a merely 'structural' way of analyzing desire. So, it seems Lacanian theory is definitively not ending up with religion.

Things, however, seem not to be that clear; and, in a way, Lacan admits it himself. Let us, for instance, have a closer look at a press conference he gave in Rome, October 29, 1974, a few days before his lecture entitled "La troisième".<sup>36</sup> In the press conference, he announces that, in the lecture of the next day, he will speak about how psychoanalysis relates to religion, and he asserts unambiguously that it is '*or* psychoanalysis *or* religion'. "If religion triumphs, psychoanalysis has failed", he literally claims.<sup>37</sup> So, it is clear that, in his eyes, psychoanalysis should offer an alternative to religion – which brings Lacan very close to Freud's religion critique. A few lines further, however, when someone in the audience asks explicitly how then he explains "the triumph of psychoanalysis over religion", he backs down and replies that "psychoanalysis never will triumph over religion. Religion is indestructible, psychoanalysis will never triumph; it will survive or die".<sup>38</sup> So, contrary to Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*, Lacan seems to admit that religion has a future or, that it will at least remain our general horizon, also for psychoanalysis.

Lacan adds that religion will triumph over more than only psychoanalysis. Since modernity has lost its foundation in the real, since the real does no longer impose limits to science, *sense* has lost any ontological ground. So, it is no wonder that, in our 'scientific times', religion continues to play its role of 'giving sense'. For this is what religion

<sup>35</sup> For science, religion and art as three kinds of sublimations, see Lacan, 1986, 155; 1992, 130.

<sup>36</sup> *Lettres de l'Ecole freudienne*, n°16, 1975, pp.177-203 (on the internet: <http://pro.wanadoo.fr/espace.freud/topos/psycho/psysem/troisiem.htm>).

<sup>37</sup> « [...] rapports de la psychanalyse avec la religion. Ils ne sont pas très amicaux. C'est en somme ou l'un ou l'autre. Si la religion triomphe, comme c'est le plus probable – je parle de la vraie religion, il n'y en a qu'une seule de vraie – si la religion triomphe, ce sera le signe que la psychanalyse a échoué. » (Lacan 1975: 7)

<sup>38</sup> "M<sup>me</sup> Y. – Vous avez dit « si la religion triomphe, c'est que la psychanalyse aura échoué ». Comment expliquez-vous le triomphe de la psychanalyse sur la religion ? J. LACAN – La psychanalyse ne triomphera pas de la religion ; la religion est increvable. La psychanalyse ne triomphera pas, elle survivra ou pas." (Lacan 1975: 13)

traditionally did: guaranteeing human being's foundation in the real; giving him and his life a real sense. However, the understanding of what 'real sense' really is, can only come from critical theories as (among others) psychoanalysis, allowing to face the real as what is beyond reality (i.e. beyond the symbolic order). Among all 'sciences', only psychoanalysis and some other critical theories are able to show the real as the sovereign senselessness our desire is aiming at (for this is what Lacanian '*jouissance*' is about). This is, maybe, the background of the next question in Lacan's press conference of 1974, asking: "will [then] psychoanalysis become religion?" "I hope not", Lacan replies, "but, perhaps, it will become a religion, who knows, why not?".<sup>39</sup>

Of course, Lacan knows that, if psychoanalysis becomes a religion, it stops being psychoanalysis. Then, it considers the impossible real – or, which amounts to the same thing, the unconscious – as a kind of hidden sense. And pretending having knowledge of the unconscious coincides with denying it. For, psychoanalysis is not knowledge *of* the unconscious; it is a knowledge knowing that it starts from – and is based upon – that which is impossible to know. In this respect, psychoanalysis is a symptom of history, more precisely of modernity's discovery of the real as inaccessible and impossible – so Lacan explains briefly (in fact, all too briefly) in his response of the question from the audience. But it is indeed only a symptom, for modernity at the same time denies this discovery and believes it will be able to have full knowledge of the real. That is why (and this is one of Lacan's major statements) the real as impossible only appears in the margin of modernity's ideologies and sciences. The real only appears in *symptoms*, just like symptoms are the only way the real comes into our world. In this perspective, psychoanalysis is one of the few 'sciences' or critical theories that take symptoms seriously and that redefines science as proceeding from the primacy of the symptom (or, which amount to the same thing, from the primacy of the abnormal over the normal).

'A symptom taking symptoms seriously': it could be an accurate description of the paradoxical shape psychoanalysis (and maybe current criticism in general) is in. Yet, this characterization shows at the same time the inherent weakness of its critical gesture. For, what is the truth-value of a critique taking symptoms – i.e. the real – seriously, if it is itself a symptom? How could this kind of critique have any ground, any support at all? Can it be something more than a symptomatic and transient moment lasting as long as lasts the

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<sup>39</sup> Lacan 1975: 14.

symptom it ‘affirmatively’ criticizes? Lacan frankly acknowledges this.<sup>40</sup> As ‘science of the real’, psychoanalytic criticism cannot give ‘sense’ to the symptom it analyzes, although this symptom is the only ‘access’ we have to the inaccessible real. Psychoanalytical criticism can only ‘de-center’ the ruling ‘normal’ knowledge about the real, without being able to come to a ‘real’ knowledge of the real.

Here, we face a weakness similar to the criticism at work in the heart of monotheistic religion. Monotheism criticizes human believe in gods or God, but is itself not able to get in touch with a real God – or with ‘real’ God is a name for. It criticizes all supposed knowledge, but its critique too lacks any real support, and neither has it a real alternative to promote. At least, this is the aporia monotheism leads to. In the final analysis, this kind of critique only ‘de-centers’ what it criticizes: it deprives knowledge of its supposed center, of the locus where it presumes meeting itself as being the full (Cartesian) subject of its knowledge. But this criticism does not offer any alternative. Except God, so monotheism claims; at least the real God, which is the one who asks to trust no existing idea of God at all, nor any idea of a non-existing God. This paradox is both the core and the weakness of monotheistic criticism. It is also weak in the sense that it can easily change into an absolute power. For, taking the position of this unknowable God, I can easily pretend to know and control everything and everyone. Monotheism’s radical weakness can turn to be a tricky way to claim an absolute and almighty position. This is the perverse core of monotheism, that has become manifest in almost its entire history. That is why, perhaps, real – i.e. really critical – monotheism can only be found in the margins or the symptoms of its history.

Lacanian criticism explicitly wants to be weaker than monotheism’s weakness. Unlike monotheistic criticism, which can still hope that the weak position will turn out to be the strong, messianic position supported by God and allowing to speak in His almighty name, Lacanian criticism refuses both hope and non-hope. Speaking in the name of this weakness could turn it into a hidden absolute power. If Lacanian criticism can only celebrate its own critical gesture, this is to emphasize its de-centering character. Inheriting the weakness of monotheist critique, it tries to be really weak, for it does not take over its ‘sublating’ moment. It nonetheless remains supposing – or ‘hoping’ – that this weakness is more ‘real’ (i.e. more respecting the impossibility of the real) than anything else. In this supposition, in this ‘hope’, that kind of criticism has not surpassed monotheism, although is at the same time an attempt not to fall in the typically monotheist traps.

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<sup>40</sup> “Pendant un petit moment, on a pu s’apercevoir de ce que c’était que l’intrusion du réel. L’analyste, lui, en reste là. Il est là comme un symptôme, et il ne peut durer qu’au titre de symptôme.” Lacan 1975 : 15.

Lacanian criticism – and in fact any modern or postmodern criticism – should not confess to be a “proven religion”, like Auguste Comte once did. And it is neither simply a critical religion like monotheism. But it should be aware that it is not simply beyond monotheism either. It shares its weakness. And to remain alert to this weakness, it should keep reflecting about its monotheist background.