

The Eclipse of Religion and Freud's "future of an illusion"

Franco Ferrarotti
Prof. Emeritus of La Sapienza University, Italy
Founder of La Critica Sociologica

Abstract

The main contention of this paper is that, no matter whether one is a true believer or a professed atheist, religion remains a relevant social phenomenon. Serious scholars have written about an eclipse of the sacred in industrial societies through a sad confusion between «sacred» and «religious». The «religious» as a commodity administered by an organized church might well be in a state of crisis. But the «sacred» is actually the *meta-human element* that makes mankind exist and develop beyond the so-called «laws» of the market.

Keywords: religion; sacred; Meta-human factor; market laws; church religion.

Introduction

Faced with the corrosive effects of the sacred-profane dialectic, is it still possible or meaningful to attempt an exhaustive definition of the religious phenomenon?¹ Definitions of religion are many and extraordinarily elusive. An annotated list of them would unfortunately not be very instructive. What one can freely assert is that a definition of religion claiming to be exhaustive, and thus rigid and closed, is not admissible. We may agree that religion presents itself everywhere as the privileged guardian, the administrator, and the guarantor of the sacred. However, for religion too the closeness of the sacred is "dangerous." As a privileged means of access to the divine, the power of the sacred is inversely proportional to that of officially constituted religion.

The sacred, the profane and the divine.

As a necessary and needful product of human groups, the sacred is the *toad of God* in the throat of each human being. In every culture just as in every individual's life there develops a tension between sacred and profane.

However, a phenomenon already pointed out by Durkheim must be noted: the "contagion" of the sacred. The power of the sacred is such that an enclosure which can guarantee its seclusion, if not its inaccessibility, is a simple security measure.

¹ At the time I wrote my article for the volume *Culturologia del sacro e del profano* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1966) this seemed not only possible but a duty.

This is also because the sacred is indeed potency, strength, power, and yet the sign of dramatic fragility: it is a short step from cosmos to chaos, and a fall is always possible. Thus, the sacred is an assurance, but also a threat. Naturally, accepting the postulate of the divine, or taking for granted the existence and transcendency of the divine, the existence of God, things would become remarkably easier.

As has been tellingly observed, the *sacred must then become an element of the profane*, in the sense that it would be placed as a mediator between profane and divine, more exactly as the echo of the divine in the human-profane. *The downgrading of the sacred from substantive to adjective* would certainly help and confirm the status of church religion as administrator and mediator in the dialectical profane-sacred-divine relation. However, this enterprise, from the conceptual point of view and in the light of the real historical documentation, appears far from easy. No doubt the distinction of three levels (profane, sacred, divine) would smooth out many difficulties from the theological and hermeneutic point of view. Others however, perhaps also more serious, would arise. Could such a threefold distinction be effectively applied to the formal structure of religion taken as a universal phenomenon, on a documentary foundation which is empirically confirmable?

Consider the five universal religions studied by Max Weber, and especially Hinduism, for example, in which the means of access to the divine is by devotion, and thus not a cognitive-speculative approach, nor a ritual one in the strict sense, but rather one of pure "interior movement," in the sense of an individual disposition. Can this in itself be called "sacred," still using the weak meaning of sacred (as adjective)?

In any case, to be able to apply the threefold distinction of profane-sacred-divine to different, specific religions, or to religions as historically distinguished from the point of view of sociological, ethnological, and anthropologico-cultural research, one must expect that often sacred and divine may become confused. That is, one at least of the two terms may be missing, insufficiently developed, or only vaguely suggested: in other words, it is present only as a possibility, a potential not yet translated into a presence which is reflected on, conceptually consistent, and consciously acknowledged by the believers. It has been rightly observed that, especially in primitive religions, sacred and divine tend to become confused. In these religions a clear distinction between divinity and the mediating elements we call sacred - stones, animals, people, rites, etc. - is not always maintained. That is, there is an excessive personalization of the divine which ultimately confuses it with its symbol. According to some scholars, especially those who are believers, it is argued on the contrary that the distinction between sacred and divine, though not made explicit, is present. To Eliade, for instance, it seems clear that the sacred stone or sacred tree is not worshiped as such but only because it bears witness, or takes the place of something which is not, or is no longer only, stone or tree.

In my view, the believing scholar expresses himself here by an interpretation in which he adds to empirically investigated reality an element not derived from the empirical findings of the research but rather one which originates directly in his personal value judgment or choice, legitimate in itself but external to the research. One can now also more easily understand why Durkheim, Mauss, Hubert and all their school generally tended to consider the sacred and the divine as united, mingled, and generally interchangeable. *They were in reality concerned to preserve the transcendence of the divine* and, through that, to endorse the mediating and administrative function of church religion.

However, this is directed not only against Durkheim's positivistic school, which for all its hermeneutic and reductionist crudeness has, in this regard, an element of strength still valid today, but also against the best-known phenomenological theories. Rudolf Otto, in *Das Heilige* (1917), sees in the sacred the "totally other," the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, capable of (simultaneously) arousing terror and attraction. However, still earlier, in 1913, Nathan Soderblom, in substantial agreement with Durkheim, did not regard the idea of God as essential but underlined the importance of the sacred as a power which strikes terror. In addition, Gerardus van der Leeuw also held that the notion of the sacred is older and more important than the idea of God.²

The maternity of the sacred

The relation between the sacred and the natural is restated by Mircea Eliade in his *Traité d'histoire des religions*, especially in regard to the attitude of the primitive religious man. Here, the sacred is seen and interpreted in relation to the great cosmic polarities. The sky symbolizes the Highest and transcendence, vertical ascent, levitation, the spirituality of the heights - the mountain, but also meteorological phenomena such as thunder, lightning, storms, sun, and moon. These symbols emphasize the power of the sacred and its inaccessibility, but at the same time the poverty, weakness, and powerlessness of logico-speculative argument, and the inadequacy of theological explanations administered ecclesiastically, which an immediate relationship with the sacred, or the presence of charismatics and their "gifts," can surpass. The sacred universe is thus a powerful one, but also uncertain, dramatically exposed to the possibility of destruction because it is unpredictable, nonlogical, and mysterious. The (*ambiguous*) *maternity of the sacred* becomes manifest as one which is directly linked to the major natural phenomena and at the same time controls them, holds them tightly and if needs be "cancels" them. Thus, every existing thing has no value in itself, but instead is only a symbol, a weak duplicate or resemblance of a *real hidden, powerful reality* (*Alles Vergangliche: Ist nur ein Gleichnis*).

² Gerardus van der Leeuw, *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations*, Paris, Pavot, 1955, esp. pp. 35 – 36.

Thus, by way of the game of analogies of symbolic correspondences, the maternity of the sacred is established. However, it is, as we have seen earlier, a capricious, inscrutable maternity. The sacred in reality is also danger. (Perhaps the unpredictable nature of the gods in Homer should be recalled here, their death-dealing jealousy, their unpredictable temper; Jahve's exclusivism is not a game, while the Old Testament is shot through with a constant fear of displeasing a shadowy God, one who is not averse to demanding ruthless trials - like Abraham's sacrifice.)

The sacred incinerates and destroys, just as it nourishes and gives meaning and direction. Religion, we have seen, is the guardian of the sacred as intermediate term to the divine, but a *nonreligious conception of the sacred* is possible, and in addition, in the Christian religion, there is a basic ambiguity which erodes it. This *calls it continually in question as a religion organized in the name of "evangelical origins,"* and as power structure condemns it and indicates self-extinction, suicide, for it. According to Bonhoeffer, it is hard to believe Christ was the founder of a religion. The Gospel - literally the foretelling of the Kingdom of Heaven - goes beyond simple organized religion, which from principle it does not acknowledge. Following this, setting up a church is an error, a relapse of the Pharisaic kind.

With extraordinary intelligence, in late Nietzsche this point is grasped, though fragmentarily, and he anticipated, at times literally, most modern theologians on the "death of God." He suggests returning to this theme by way of the case of the ex-professional soldier, Paul of Tarsus (the parallel with another soldier, Ignatius Loyola, is striking): Chapter on *Paul*, the Jewish family in the diaspora, "love," the "free" adaptation by Jesus of everything Jewish-priestly; a) *death* for our sins; b) the "redeemer" is immortal; deep hatred for *culture* and knowledge - already Jewish (Genesis 52); the "immortal" soul; psychology of "those about to die"; the priest as "fallen angel"; all the church has *ruined*;

1. mystical exaltation
2. fasting
3. the "monastery"
4. festivals
5. charity³

Nietzsche's criticisms are no stronger than those of some apocalyptic and dissenters' groups which have often seen a "diabolic" quality in the Church. These extra- and anti-ecclesiastical groups, to be found in the Middle Ages as well as in the present era, especially in the period after the Ecumenical Council Vatican II, tend to propose, against the obedience which tradition for centuries supposed was owed by the faithful to the hierarchy, the freedom of the "sons of God," and more precisely still, the

³ Nietzsche, *Frammenti postumi*, p. 350; emphasis in original.

self-determination of the “people of God.” There is no doubt that Vatican II tried, especially after the death of John XXIII and making use of Paul VI’s extraordinary diplomatic gifts, to stem this basic challenge which ran, and runs, counter to the prerogatives of the hierarchy and of the Church organized as a political body, economic center, and power structure. However, it seems destined to come into collision with the internal contradiction of the bureaucratic organization *which cannot transcend itself without destroying itself*.

In conclusion, the eclipse of church religion seems unavoidably determined by:

- a) the monopoly of the Church itself and its monopolistic power which cannot see, and hence confront, the problems presented all over, on a global scale, to local churches;
- b) the “sacred” as a personal experience, which thus escapes control by ecclesiastical teaching and which *affirms the charismatic gift beyond, and ultimately against the bureaucratic control of church religion* (from this point of view, the work of Cardinal Suenens on the “charismatics” and “neo-Pentecostals” is an intelligent counter, but cannot conceal its defensive nature as a rearguard action);
- c) the exhaustion of shared, basic values for establishing the Christian community as a really universal community.

The only way out would seem to be through a rediscovery of the sacred as of service to man and through a collective impulse toward a neo-communitarian undertaking, where the needs now illusorily satisfied by the experiences of the “charismatics,” and generally by the new heterodox, psychologizing forms of the sacred at the level of individual experience could thus find a positive, non-mystifying outlet beyond, and if necessary opposed to, every religion established with exclusive jurisdiction and a discretionary power structure.

Freud and the religious phenomenon

In this respect, Freud’s position is strikingly radical. After *Totem and Tabu*, Freud’s interest in the religious phenomena continued to reveal itself through frequent references and digressions in his subsequent works. Reference has already been made to the preface that Freud wrote in 1919 for Reik’s book on the religious rite. In 1921 in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud examined two examples of permanent, artificial groups with a high degree of organization, one of which was the Church (the Catholic Church in particular). In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), speaking of the ideal ego, Freud observed that it is a substitutive formation of the ancient love for the father, and as such contains the germ from which all religions derive.⁴

⁴ «The Ego and the Id», in *Essais de Psychoanalyse*, Paris, Payot, 1965, p. 206.

The year 1927 saw the appearance of a fundamental work which contained a reconstruction of the Freudians interpretation of the religious phenomenon. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud dealt with the nature and future of religion, in addition to its origins. In relation to his previous writings, this work has a particular tone that derives from the encounter between the analysis of the scientist analysis and the considerations of the thinker Freud, his hopes, and his desires. Above all because of the faith it expresses in the power of human reason and in the scientific outlook that animates it, this work of Freud has been defined as one that, among all his other works, stands as «the closest to the great tradition of "Enlightenment" »⁵.

After noting that religious ideas possibly constitute the most important part of the psychic elements that characterize a civilization⁶, Freud inquires into their specific value. He begins by observing that civilization tends to attempt to achieve two aims: the first is that of defending itself against nature; the second consists in regulating human relationship and in distributing wealth.⁷

As regards the first purpose, despite the great progress that has been made, nature has not been conquered and in the future nature will be conquered only with difficulty or incompletely (it is difficult to imagine, for example, how to avoid death).⁸ As regards to the second purpose, the results have been very meager: life in common requires great renunciation of instincts and impulses, and the human regulations relative to them cannot be imposed without coercion.⁹ Hence for man life is very harsh.

The individual reacts to the instinctual renunciations imposed by society by developing hostility against it. But how does the individual react to the supremacy of nature? Freud asserts that the first step in this relationship is man's humanization of nature¹⁰: if natural elements have passions like man, if death itself is not something spontaneous, but an act of a malevolent will, if nature is populated by human-like beings, he can feel at home, as it were, in the presence of the supernatural. He is no longer paralyzed and helpless, and perhaps he is not even indifferent: in order to defend himself from these beings, he can use the same methods he uses toward men (he can try to influence them, to placate them...) Freud observes that this phenomenon is not new; it is a continuation of an infantile prototype. Another time in life man found himself in a similar state of impotence: as a child *vis-a-vis* his parents. He had reason to fear

⁵ H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1955.

⁶ By civilization, Freud (he does not distinguish between culture and civilization) understands the totality of those aspects through which human life has progressed from the animal state (*The future of an Illusion*, vol. XXI, p. 6).

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 6. Freud extends this discourse to every type of civilization. In fact, it seems that every civilization must be built on the base of the suppression of instincts by coercion (*Ibidem*, p. 7) is necessary above all else so that men may be directed to dedicate part of their energies to work, and secondarily because there are amoral and anti-cultural aspects in men which must be repressed.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

them (above all his father), but at the same time he was sure of their protection against dangers.¹¹

Freud asserts that in the course of time, when man began to make his first observations on the regularity and conformity to law of natural phenomena, the forces of nature lost their human features. But the feeling of human impotence in the face of nature remained and with it the desire for paternal protection. The gods preserve their triple task: to exorcise the terror of nature, to reconcile man with the cruelty of fate (in particular with death), and to compensate man for the sufferings and privations that civilized life imposes upon him. But a gradual change of emphasis occurred within these God-given functions.¹² Because natural phenomena are regulated automatically, it was thought that the gods, after having ordained that everything be thus as it appeared, were able to leave nature to herself, reserving for themselves the right to intervene occasionally by way of miracles. In their second task, that of reconciling man to the cruelty of fate, the gods failed more frequently. It was thought then that they had created fate, but in that case their ways had to be considered inscrutable.¹³ Human expectations increasingly concentrated on the third function of the gods: to compensate man for the suffering inflicted by culture, and to watch over man's obedience to the precepts of civilization, which were considered to be of divine origin.¹⁴

Thus, little by little, a vast patrimony of religious ideas was formed, made up of material taken from the remembrance of the feeling of impotence felt in one's own infancy and in the infancy of mankind. Thus, for example (Freud alludes in particular to a phase of development of religion corresponding roughly to the final form of Christianity in Western culture), man begins to think that his own life serves a higher purpose, perhaps traceable in the appearance of attempts to perfect human nature; the most spiritual part of man, the soul, which in the course of time has slowly been separated from the body, became the object of this elevation and exaltation. The idea arose of a Providence which ordains everything for the best. Death itself is only the beginning of a new existence.¹⁵ Human moral laws are extended to the entire universe, and this idea expands into the concept of a divine justice that rewards good and punishes evil, if not in this life, then certainly after death. Wisdom, truth, and justice are the qualities of that unique divine being in whom the ancient deities are condensed in our culture.

¹¹ The forces of nature are not conceived as equal to man, but as superior to him; otherwise, the impression of tyranny that they arouse in man would not be justified (*ibidem*, p. 17). To the possible objection that the humanization of nature can be the expression of the one and only mode of thinking of the primitive, and that therefore it should not be seen as a consequence of the fear universally felt by man in the presence of natural forces, Freud replies that the processes of thinking are not only the expression of disinterested curiosity (*ibidem*, pp. 22-23). He does not deny that the humanization of nature is the expression of a primitive thought, but he sees this fact as the reason and genesis of this particular type of human thought (*ibidem*, pp. 22-23).

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹³ Freud recalls that the Greeks held fate higher than the gods themselves.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

Freud's origin of religion

The concentration of the divine attributes in a single being was fundamentally a return to the historical beginnings of the idea of deity¹⁶; now that God was a single person, man's relations with him could again find the intimacy and the intensity of the relations of the child with the father.

Freud recognizes that the origin of religion, as expounded here, is seen in a different light from the explanation given in *Totem and Tabu*: in the essay of 1913 he said that religion is born of the desire for the father, whereas here it is asserted that it is born of man's feeling of impotence in the face of the threats of nature and fate. However, Freud observes that the two points of view are compatible. Above all, he points out that in *Totem and Tabu* his intent was not to explain the origin of religion, but only to explain the origin of totemism.¹⁷ The transition from the animal-totem to a human god was hardly referred to in *Totem and Tabu*: the fact that this aspect has now been clarified is merely an interpolation, not a contradiction, of what has already been said. Freud sees, however, a connection between the father complex and man's feelings of impotence (and consequently the need for protection)¹⁸; it consists in the continuing relation between the child's feeling of impotence and that of the adult. Basing himself on infantile life, Freud recalls how the child's libido turns first to the mother as a being who gratifies all his needs and protects him from external dangers; subsequently, the libido is transferred to the father, a figure of both love and hate, giving rise to an ambivalent relation.¹⁹ As the child grows and becomes aware that he is destined to remain a child for always and that he still requires protection against the unknown and powerful forces that dominate his life, he paints them with the features of his father. Thus, he creates the gods of whom is afraid, whom he tries to propitiate, but to whom he nevertheless assigns the task of protecting him. The child's defensive reaction to his weakness (deifying the mother and then the father, whom he both loves and fears) therefore exhibits the characteristic features of the reaction of the adult to his own weakness and fears, the creation of the omnipotent and also beneficent deity, which results in the formation of religion.²⁰

After noting that religious ideas do not draw their strength from rational arguments, Freud asks himself: what is their psychological significance?²¹ The answer can be found

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁰ Whereas in *Totem and Tabu*, Freud attributed a phylogenetic origin to religious idea (the remembrance of the original parricide), he introduces an ontogenetic factor.

²¹ *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 25.

by reflecting on their origins: «They are illusions²², fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes»²³.

This discourse is followed by considerations that are interesting more for the views they offer of Freud's personal attitude toward religion and of his personal *Weltanschauung* than for the reconstruction of the Freudian interpretation of religious phenomena. To the question of whether religion is necessary for civilization as a means whereby men may accept the renunciations imposed upon them by society²⁴, Freud replies negatively. Certainly, religion has rendered great services to society by repressing asocial impulses and by regulating society for many centuries.²⁵ And if it has been succeeded in making the majority of men happy, its abolition is hardly something to be desired. But men are dissatisfied with civilization and feel it as a yoke, to be shaken off at the first opportunity. Nor can it be said that men have become more moral through the work of religion.²⁶ Indeed, today religion has become a danger because, by subordinating obedience to the precepts of civilization, to the truth of religion, there is the risk that when the falsity of religious ideas is disclosed (and this process is already in operation, above all through the work of science), the masses give free rein to their hostile feelings against civilization and it will collapse.²⁷ Consequently, Freud hopes for a reinterpretation of religious doctrines in which men will finally attribute to themselves that which (the precepts of civilization) they previously attributed to divine will.

Basing himself on *Totem and Tabu*, however, Freud notes that by attributing the precepts of civilization to God, religious doctrines express a historical truth in symbolic form: the first precepts of civilization in fact expressed the will of the primitive father, the original image of God.²⁸ Consequently, religious ideas contain not only desires but also important historical remembrances, and this union of the past and the present gives them great strength. Given the analogy that Freud contends exists between the development of the individual and the development of mankind, it could perhaps be said that just as at a certain point of individual development the phenomenon of infantile neurosis comes into being (because the child is incapable of suppressing many instinctual impulses with a rational effort, but suppresses them with acts of repression

²² A belief is an illusion when it is motivated primarily by a wish which negatives every relation with reality (*ibidem*, p. 30). Freud notes that certain religious beliefs are so improbable that they could more properly be called delusions.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 38-39.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

behind which as a rule there is anxiety)²⁹, so does mankind, viewed as a whole, also falls into similar neurotic states of neurosis for the same reasons, since in the age of its intellectual infancy the indispensable instinctual renunciations for the sake of life in common were accomplished solely by means of the coercion of affective forces.³⁰ The residues of these processes, which are comparable to repression, occurred in antiquity and have weighed upon humanity for a long time. In short, religion would be the universal obsessive neurosis³¹ of mankind, originally born of the relation with the father, as the individual neurosis from the Oedipus complex. In this case, it can be supposed that the detachment from religion will occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth (in most cases infantile neuroses are cured spontaneously). *The Future of an Illusion* terminates with an expression of the hope that, as happens during analytic treatment, the effects of repression (visible both in religious teachings and in neurotic symptoms) will be replaced by the results of a rational effort.³²

Bibliography

1. Sabino Acquaviva, *L'eclisse del sacro nella società industriale*, Milano, Comunità, 1970.
2. Franco Ferrarotti, (con P. Brezzi, M. Callari Galli, G. Harrison), *Culturologia del sacro e del profano*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1966; *Une théologie pour athées*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1984; *Faith without Dogma*, New Brunswick, Transactions, 1983, *The Social Production of the Sacred*, San Diego, Essay Press, 1977; *Le paradoxe du sacré*, Bruxelles, Les Éperonniers, 1987.
3. Ferrarotti, F. (2018). Sacred and Profane. Essential ambiguity and vital necessity of the Sacred.. *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, 17, 09-35. <https://doi.org/10.7336/academicus.2018.17.01>
4. Sigmund Freud, *Il futuro di una illusione*, it. tr., Torino, Bollati-Boringhieri, 1990.
5. Rudolf Otto, *Il sacro*, it.tr., Bologna, Zanichelli, 1926.
6. Mircea Eliade, *Il sacro e il profano*, it.tr., Torino, Boringhieri, 1973.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 42-43.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

³¹ Actually, the analogy with obsessive neurosis does not exhaust the essence of religion: if religion in fact includes certain obsessive limitations comparable to those of neurotics, it also includes a system of illusions incompatible with reality, such as are found in certain hallucinatory states (*ibidem*, p. 43). It must always be born in mind, however, that religion is only a matter for analogies with psychological states.

³² Freud realizes that this substitution will deprive men of the instinctual satisfaction that they first drew from religion, and wonders if this loss may not prejudice civilization, in the sense that men will never be able to obey simply rational precepts (*ibidem*, p. 44). He answers that, if the primacy of intelligence over instincts has not yet asserted itself in man, it cannot be ruled out that it may assert itself in the future (*ibidem*, p. 47): it is actually gravely compromised precisely by religious education. But once religious education is abolished, men will finally be able to realize the primacy of the intelligence.

7. Raffaele Pettazzoni, *L'essere supremo nelle religioni primitive*, Torino, Einaudi, 1994.
8. Segio Quinzio, «Cosa c'è dietro il ritorno del sacro» in *Lettera Internazionale* gennaio-giugno 1995.

© Academicus™

DP13193-DP13194 28-2010 Academicus International Scientific Journal
International Trademark Classification under the Nice Agreement

 Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC

The Eclipse of Religion and Freud's "future of an illusion"

by Franco Ferrarotti

is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Presented: November 2023

Included for Publishing: December 2023

Published: January 2024 , Volume 14, Issue 29 Academicus International Scientific Journal