Towards a Lacanian Theology of Religion

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Religion has not fared very well under psychoanalysis. Freud is construed as reducing religion to a form of obsessional neurosis or wishfulfilment; Jung had little respect for tradition offering up only universal archetypes, while today's trendy psycho-dynamic counselling dispels the question altogether. What about Lacan? I think Lacan offers the theologian some valuable tools not only for the analysis of theological debate, in particular the theology of religions, but also and not unrelated, sorting out just what it is we name when we name religion. I suggest that a Lacanian view of religion refuse the pluralist stance that religion is a universal genus, thereby allowing traditions differences to be taken seriously. However, he also refuses an exclusive position suggesting that there are only separate traditions and no common meeting points.

I shall begin by outlining the thought of Lacan. I shall then argue that the subject positions diagnosed by Lacan, psychosis, obsessional neurosis, and hysterical neurosis correspond to the three positions delineated in the theology of religions debate, the pluralist, the exclusivist, and the inclusivist. I suggest that Lacan's strategy in the psychoanalytic situation be used with regard to the debate between religions. In the final part I shall draw on the work of Slavoj Zizek. I shall use his Lacanian working of ideology to give a Lacanian definition of religion.

Lacan

In Lacan's work the structure of the psyche is worked out in terms of the imaginary, symbolic, and real. The imaginary refers to the subject's initial drive for unity. In Lacan's early work this is accounted for in terms of the mirror stage: when we first experience a mirror it promises us sameness, unity, and autonomy, confirming for us and conferring upon us our status as a subject via the image. What is at stake here is how the subject grasps themselves only in as much as they are virtual or reflected back upon themselves. The imaginary constitutes the subject, creating the ego, yet paradoxically leaves out the subject due to the fictional quality inferred by the need to constitute ourselves retro-actively from an other. If the

imaginary concerns the drive toward unity, the symbolic is marked by the heterogeneous. Symbolisation starts when words stand in for objects; hence the symbolic is identified with language. The symbolic orders our perception as we enter the chain of signifiers that constitute language. The moment we enter the symbolic a gap opens up between our empirical body and our voice. Our initiation into the symbolic requires the death of our empirical self and in this way antagonism is inherent to the symbolic order. The antagonistic part that resists entry into the symbolic is the real. The real forms the third part of Lacan's trinity. The real is paradoxical because it is the source of symbolisation in that it refers to what conditions our entry into the symbolic, yet it is that which resists symbolisation. From the standpoint of the symbolic order the real does not exist, it is manifest only in the effects it can produce and thus it is negatively related to the symbolic.

Crucial to this triad is desire. Desire is not included as a part of the trinity because it refers more fundamentally to the economy of motion within the trinity. For example, it is our desire to overcome the antagonism of the real within the symbolic that keeps us searching, building, and generating new metaphors, spinning the web of language and culture. The motive life force of desire can help us delineate it from need. Need must have an object in its sight like food. Desire has no object because it is related to the real and thus desire is perpetual in a way need is not. The motive role of desire in its relation to the real helps us to delineate Lacan's psychoanalysis from that of the Klein school. Melanie Klein had focused on the relations people formed with objects, for example, the child and the mother's breast. For Lacan desire has no object, it seeks the real and hence not an object as such but a cause: the objet petit a, the object cause of desire. The objet petit a is the object that is given up that enables the subject to become a subject (rather than a preexisting subject giving up an object). As such it is the impossible object because it is related to the real and so has no positive representation. The object petit a is known only as cause that sets desire in motion keeping desire desiring. For example, the particular look of a woman may set a man's desire in motion. However it is not the women he desires as object, rather the objet petit a, the look he cannot capture that set him desiring.²

Navigating our desire plays a crucial role in working through the Oedipal complex. For Freud the Oedipus complex was the key psychodynamic constellation. The complex describes the triangular economy of desire that exists between the child, the love of the mother, and the rivalry of the father. The conflict that emerges sets the basis for the child's understanding and development. For the male, desire for the mother is curtailed by fear of castration from the father. For the girl, the first love is

the mother. The girl's lack of a penis leads her to recognise herself as having been castrated already. As such she envies the male for having a penis and depreciates the mother for bringing her inadequately into the world. The female turns to the father and substitutes the wish for a penis with the wish for a baby.

For Lacan the Oedipus complex tells a more fundamental story concerning language and desire. Initially the child responds, trying to satiate the ambiguous desire of the mother. The father triangulates the relationship by uttering 'No' to the child. The imposition of the father and his utterance combine to form what Lacan calls the name-of-the-Father. The name-of-the-Father refers to the process by which the paternal metaphor or the phallus is substituted for the mother, the initial object of desire. Within the context of language the phallus operates as the master-signifier; the phallus does not refer to the biological penis but the prohibition of desire and hence 'Law'. By taking on board the master-signifier, new signification is given to the subject who is able to enter into the symbolic generating language for him or her self.

How successfully desire is navigated through the complex leads to imbalances within the field of the imaginary, symbolic, and real. These imbalances lead to the major subject positions given in analysis: the psychotic, and the neurotic in its obsessive, and hysteric form. Psychosis involves an inability to assimilate the paternal metaphor: the Name-of-the-Father. The psychotic is ruled by the imaginary because without the paternal metaphor they are unable to enter the symbolic. As a result desire does not exist because there is no language. Neurosis can be delineated from psychosis with regard to the paternal metaphor. In neurosis the paternal metaphor or name-of-the-Father has been assimilated. With the paternal metaphor comes prohibition and hence desire. However for the neurotic the prohibition is too much to endure. In coming to be in language the 'Law' indelibly exists. The neurotic tries to reverse or repress the procedure in one of two ways depending on gender. The male becomes an obsessive; the female becomes a hysteric. I shall return to these subject positions later.

Lacan and the Theology of Religions

So how can Lacan help the theologian? Do not the three Lacanian subject positions, psychosis, obsessional neurosis, and hysterical neurosis correspond to the three positions delineated in the theology of religions, the pluralist, the exclusivist, and the inclusivist?

A theology of religion contends with the issue of whether non-Christians are dammed by virtue of not being Christians. In *Theology and Religious Pluralism* Gavin D'Costa argues that these three positions are axiomatic upon two claims.³ The first claim is the universal salvific will of God. The second claim is the particularity of salvation through the confession of Christ. The exclusivist is axiomatic upon the particularity of God's saving event in Jesus: only Christianity conferred through Christ brings salvation. The pluralist's fundamental axis is God's universal salvific will: all religions offer a valid path to salvation. The inclusivist seeks a pragmatic balance between the two, open to the potential for *extra ecclesiam salus* without the *a priori* negative judgement.

The psychotic pluralist

I want to suggest that pluralism is a theological form of psychosis. Let us consider the work of the pluralist John Hick. Hick calls for a 'Copernican revolution' in which a Christian centred approach is eschewed for a God centred approach. The emphasis is on God's universal salvific will: all religions offer an equal path to salvation. This move is facilitated by arguing that Jesus is a mythical figure, at best an elevated leader. Jesus' status as such is not to specifically confer salvation but to bring us into relation with God. As such language about Jesus is stripped of its ontological claim and deemed simply expressive about his significance to the individual Christian.

Hick's pluralism represents a theological form of psychosis. First, Hick fails to take on board Christ as the generative metaphor of Christianity. Christocentricism gives way to theocentricism, which later on becomes an inexpressible 'Ultimate Divine Reality'. From Lacan's perspective the inexpressible may be seen as failure due to the absence of language itself. Inexpressibility becomes indicative of the failure to take on board the name-of-the-Father and the symbolic realm. Second, for Lacan language and the symbolic entail loss represented by the real, which sets us desiring. The loss fosters anxiety and doubt. With regards to the psychotic, because there is no imposition of language the psychotic is ruled by certainty. How does Hick's theology manifest certainty? Hick uses the allegory of the blind men and the elephant. Three blind men each feel a different part of an elephant (religion) and therefore each describes the same overall phenomena differently. However, Hick's claim that all religions offer an equal path to salvation, each religion being a different manifestation of the overall phenomenon, implicitly occupies the position of the observer of both the blind men and the elephant. In other words, at the centre of John Hick's 'Copernican' revolution is not God (the symbolic and ensuing uncertainty) but John Hick, (the self-assured psychotic locked into the imaginary). Third, the title of his edited collection The Myth of God Incarnate captures well the problematic of psychosis: the inability of the paternal metaphor to overwrite and hence 'incarnate' the body within the symbolic. Fourth, because there is no symbolic overwriting of the imaginary there is a difficulty for the psychotic in discerning where their voice is coming from. With regards to pluralism as a form of theological psychosis, pluralism does not stem from the belief that all religions offer different paths to the same God. Rather, it is the case that psychosis prevents theology from hearing where its own God is speaking from, the Church.

Neurosis. The Obsessive Exclusivist and Hysterical Inclusivist

In neurosis the subject has entered the symbolic but tries to repress the experience due to the anxiety caused by the heterogeneous nature of the symbolic. The male becomes obsessive; the female becomes hysterical. The former I shall argue relates to exclusivism and the latter inclusivism. The obsessive male sets up a relation to the *objet petit a* but refuses to recognise the *object a* is related to an other. For example, the infant may seek the breast to provide a sense of unity and well being, but not the mother. For the hysteric, the attempt to reverse entry into the symbolic takes the form of becoming the *objet petit a*. The hysteric refuses to risk their own status as subject by being someone else. For example, in bed the female fantasises about being another women for the man. In both cases desire is transformed into a demand: in the obsessive desire becomes a demand for an object; the hysteric interprets the others desire as a demand to be that object.

In our topography exclusivism is a form of theological obsessional neurosis. Representative of this paradigm is Hendrik Kraemer. Kraemer argues for exclusivism along methodological and theological lines. From a methodological standpoint Kraemer welcomed the developing science of phenomenology. This approach stresses the cultural totality of religions. Religions need to be understood within the milieu of their own cultural framework as an organic whole. In practice one must suspend judgement and allow a tradition's cultural totality to manifest its intentionality. Because religions are a cultural totality Kraemer could reject surface similarities between the traditions. From a theological standpoint Kraemer argued along the axis of God's special revelation in the particularity of Jesus Christ: God's saving event in Christ serves as the criteria for truth. Kraemer does not reject a general revelation outside biblical revelation but qualifies the possibility by arguing that such a revelation can only be recognised via the light of the special revelation in Christ. In short Christ's revelation is sui generis and any outright general revelation would compromise the incarnation.

Kraemer accepts the paternal metaphor of Christ but when the implications of the symbolic extend to other religious traditions he tries to

reverse the procedure to risk being eradicated as subject. For example, Kraemer was critical of Barth's thesis that 'revelation is the abolition of religion' because it had the effect of "blocking the entrance into the living religions as embodiments of the drama between God and Man'.5 Yet Kraemer ruled out similarities in a reversal of procedure on a phenomenological basis arguing that religions must be viewed as separate cultural totalities. In Lacanian terms this is because the symbolic comes to stand for the disturbing heterogeneity of language in contrast to the safe unity of the subject promised by the imaginary. In structural terms the obsessive sets up a relation to an object but refuses to recognise that object as being related to the other. Kraemer takes Christ as the partial object but refuses to see him as related to a God who acts as the universal benefactor of humankind. The obsessive does not want to share Christ and hence the obsessive can be defined in terms of a relation to enjoyment: the exclusive obsessive does not want the other to enjoy his religion. The obsessive standpoint ignores any discourse it cannot control and thus retains a sense of the subject as a whole subject, not a subject of lack.

For the hysteric, the loss entailed by the entrance to the symbolic is grasped in terms of the mother's loss. The hysteric constitute themselves as the *objet petit a* to make the other feel complete. If the obsessive cannot abide sharing a mouthpiece with the others, by contrast, the hysteric make themselves into the other's desire so as to master it. The hysteric manage the other's desires in such a way as to maintain their own role as desirable. In the obsessive, desire is impossible because the closer the obsessive gets to realising their desire, the more the other takes precedence over them eclipsing them as subject. In the hysteric's fantasy it is the partner who desires. The hysteric identifies with the partner as if she were he.

The inclusivist theology of Karl Rahner represents a hysterical theology. Rahner's thought is disclosed in four theses. First, his starting point is Christianity as opposed to Kraemer's Christ. Second: the Church is based on the 'universal salvific will of God revealed in Christ'. This means God offers salvation to those who have not historically and existentially encountered the Gospel. Grace is made available through other religions making them 'lawful' in the event regardless of their untruth, this is not to include all non-Christians but to motion toward the possibilities within those traditions. Third, in mission the Christian is not faced with others deprived of grace but 'anonymous Christians. For example: if a non-Christian responds positively to God's grace by 'selfless love' they are 'anonymous Christians'. This language reflects Rahner's tradition-specific starting point. Finally the church is not an elite community as opposed to the dammed but the 'historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted expression of what

the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church.¹¹ In short Rahner retains Christ as the normative criteria for truth like the exclusivist while accommodating the pluralist concern by refusing a priori judgement on other religions. In this way Rahner is open to history in a way the other two are not.

How is Rahner's inclusivism hysterical? For Rahner, non-Christians cannot be deemed sinful and deprived of salvation a priori. Rahner takes seriously the universal will of God: grace must be mediated through and despite non-Christian religions. Non Christians are 'Lawful' when mediating grace. For this reason we may speak of others as 'anonymous Christians'. 13 The crucial point to be taken here is not the traditional retort that this is chauvinism. Nor is Rahner to be simply defended, as D'Costa does, arguing that it is not language that seeks approval from another but is addressed to the church's self-understanding.14 The crucial point is that Rahner was equally honoured himself to be an 'anonymous Buddhist'. 15 Rahner's hysterical inclusivism as a form of neurosis accepts Christ as the paternal and generative metaphor. However, he tries to repress the occasion by appearing in the guise of the objet petit a for the other. That is to say, Rahner finds his identity threatened by the Other, the symbolic and heterogeneous world. The hysteric deals with this by refusing to risk themselves and instead appears in the guise of what the other desires. By accepting the guise of anonymous Buddhist he is instating his desire to appear as what is true within Buddhism: Buddhism's kernel of the real. At the same time, his anonymity ensures he can remain culturally removed thus refusing to risk himself as subject.

The End of Religion

Lacanian analysis aims at dialectising desire. That is to say, the purpose in analysis is to set desire in motion where desire has become stuck on demand and hence become a need. In the case of psychosis the procedure is plagued by sheer lack of desire. For neurosis the implication of dialectising desire is not to encourage us to get the things we want. Rather the attempt is to first, reconcile ourselves to fundamental antagonisms within the world; second, freeing desire decreases anxiety of the demands placed on us by others. The analyst dialectises desire by 'ending the session'. Lacanian practice ends the session when due to transference the analysand tries to fix or interpret the analyst's desire as demand. By stopping the session at this point the analysand must reconsider whether their interpretation of desire is the correct reading of desire and in this way resist reifying desire into demand.

Given our three subject positions, the pluralist, exclusivist, and inclusivist, isn't John Milbank's rally cry to 'end dialogue' not the

authentic Lacanian gesture?'¹⁶ Milbank's argument is that although we may think we are engaging with exponents of, say, Hinduism, we are really entertaining modern liberals. For this reason theology should end dialogue with other religions. At best we can engage their 'dead texts'.¹⁷ For D'Costa, Milbank's argument is important but Milbank pushes it too far when he says we have to be attentive to 'dead texts'. Milbank assumes that all religious traditions are built out of 'seamless narrative succession.¹⁸ However, D'Costa is sympathetic to Milbank's main point, the point expressed from the Lacan perspective: the end of dialogue severs traditions from fixing the desire of others into a demand. That is to say, the end of dialogue ceases to assume from a theological position we can know Buddhism, Hinduism, et al. In this way, paradoxically, desire, or in this context dialogue, is kept open. Milbank's 'No' is the Lacanian 'No' which constitutes in the final stages the 'Yes'.

Toward a Slovene-Lacan Account of Religion

One of the most prolific and innovative interpreters of Lacan is the Slovenian Slavoj Zizek. Zizek uses central Lacanian themes to develop a theory of ideology. In this final section I wish to develop Zizek's ideas with specific reference to religion.

For Zizek, ideology concerns the attempt to obfuscate the fundamental antagonism of the real through narrative. With regard to Lacan he comments:

Lacan is radically anti-narrativist: the ultimate aim of psychoanalytic treatment is not for the analysand to organise confused life-experience into (another) coherent narrative, with all the traumas properly integrated and so on. [...]. Narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism.¹⁹

How does religion equate with narrative, or, in speaking of religion, what is the underlying narrative fantasy? To answer this question we can again return to D'Costa's work, in particular 'The End of 'Theology' and 'Religious Studies".²⁰

In 'The End of Theology' D'Costa rejects current forms of theology and the study of religion as offered by the English higher education system. D'Costa's argument is that this practice has questionable presuppositions tied to the rise of the scientific method and secular State. Crudely put, the birth of religion is not to be found in some ahistorical human impulse toward the divine. Rather, one must look to the theoretical attempt to discern a genus religion from which one may go on to discern

species, a practice coterminous with the Enlightenment. The method appropriated was phenomenology. Phenomenology took as its starting point the bracketing or suspension of beliefs and presuppositions in an attempt to gain empathy with the object of study. The ideological imperative is to identify what is common to all religions and use this as a basis for reconciling the difference.

D'Costa tells the story in terms of Hans Frei's great reversal²¹ and a tale of matricide. Instead of incorporating the world in the Word, the Word is incorporated into the world. Religion is taken out of its historical context where it referred to the specific practice of the Church and monastic orders to imply in the Enlightenment an abstract universal category. D'Costa claims that this category specifically tries to destroy theology, its mother, by reducing Christianity to one historical object of study among others. Given the questionable nature of religion and phenomenology's spurious claim to objectivity, D'Costa argues that we should end religious studies, seeking instead tradition specific starting points.

By way of contrast, in *The Philosophy of Religion* Hick tells us: "Now that the world has become a communicational unity, we are moving into a new situation in which it becomes both possible and appropriate for religious thinking to transcend these cultural-historical boundaries." Hick expresses the enlightenment need to free us from tradition; a move made more possible in his eyes by the development of communication links.

What is of interest is that in D'Costa the narrative at work is patently one of the fall: religion, from its pre-lapsarian beginnings in the bosom of practice becomes intellectualised upon questionable presuppositions. By contrast Hick's narrative is one of redemption in which religion frees itself from the stain of particularity. Here we meet the crucial Slovene-Lacan point: two mutually exclusive ideological gestures, 'the coincidence of emergence and loss'.²³ For D'Costa religion emerges from tradition to become stained by the universal, while in Hick religion emerges universally, free from the stain of the particular. Is it not the case that we have here an effect akin to Jastrow's duck/rabbit in which one can see either/or but never both at the same time? Is not the real difference between D'Costa and Hick simply a gestalt effect? Is religion not staging the paradox of the real in which the condition of impossibility becomes the condition of possibility? In short, religion is an objet petit a.

Given that religion displays the properties of the *objet petit a* we can formulate a coherent definition: religion is that within the tradition of the church that is in-itself more than itself. In other words religion testifies to the Christian tradition's inability to fully represent itself to itself, because in coming into being as a historical social order, there is always a portion

of the real left behind. Therefore we can say of D'Costa that his description of religion remains ideological. Despite his claim that religion is in effect a tool of liberal modernity which tries to dissolve theology into the secular state. D'Costa still narrates religion as having a positive content (religion is a secular tool). In this way D'Costa clings to a base essentialism. From our Slovene-Lacan perspective religion is related to the real and therefore has no positive content. In other words, religion is the inherent excess within Christianity that rises out of the Christian traditions' structural gap. Therefore we can say that religion is ineffable. not because it is to be equated with a private experience discernible in the positive order of things, this would be the Kantian reading. For Kant the sublime comes into operation when we realise the insurmountable gap that exists between the object in its phenomenal aspect and its noumenal support known only as a postulate of practical reason. With regard to religion, from Lacan's perspective it does not signify some unrepresentable unifying noumenal depth genus. Religion attests to the fact that the essence of Christianity or Buddhism is their inability to fully appear to themselves. Hence when Rowan Williams describes the Holy Spirit in On Christian Theology he gives the Lacanian gesture "... the problem is no more and no less than the impossibility of seeing one's own face."24

In summary then, while religion signifies the gap in Christianity's ability to fully present itself, when it functions as the designator of Christianity it becomes ideological. In other words, religion becomes ideological when a specific tradition like Christianity falls prey to the *object a*, that in itself which is more than itself, interpreting it as a demand or identity and condensing religion in its signification so Christianity becomes a species of the genus religion.

The paradoxical sting in all of this is that far from suppressing the differences of traditions, religion secures their relative autonomy. Properly speaking, from a Christian perspective, religion is theological; religion is to do with the Christian tradition. But religion is also Islamic: that in Islam, which is more than itself. Religion should not be understood in terms of what unites separate identities that would be religion as ideology. Rather, we need religion in terms of the impossible object, the inherent antagonism at the heart of, from a Christian perspective, the theology of religion, which restores traditions to their relative autonomy. Or, traditions genuinely meet only when they experience the failure to meet up fully with themselves.

See Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 2001), The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, ed.

Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Vintage, 1998), The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954, ed.Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester, (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: Psychosis, 1955–1956, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (London: Routledge, 2000), The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, (London: Routledge 1999), and Bruce Fink, A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000).

- 2 For a good introduction to the object petit a see B. Fink, A Clinical Introduction, pp. 38-41, 52-53, 57-59.
- 3 Gavin D'Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
- 4 John Hick, God and The Universe of Faiths, (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 120.
- 5 H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), p. 193.
- 6 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1966), pp. and Ibid., pp. 80–115.
- 7 Ibid., p. 85.
- 8 Ibid., p. 86.
- 9 Ibid., p. 87.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
- 12 Ibid., p. 129.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 D'Costa, Religious Pluralism, p. 89.
- 15 Rahner quoted in Ibid., p. 91.
- 16 John Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue' in G. D'Costa (ed.), Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 174-191.
- 17 J. Milbank, 'End of Dialogue', p. 178.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 S. Zizek, Plague of Fantasies, (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 10-11.
- 20 G. D'Costa, "The End of 'Theology' and 'Religious Studies" in *Theology*, XCIX, No. 791, 1996, pp. 338–351.
- 21 Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1074), in Ibid., p. 341.
- 22 Hick, Philosophy of Religion, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1983), p. 113.
- 23 Zizek, Plague of Fantasies, p. 13.
- 24 Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), p. 126.