Psychoanalysis and its father in the West, Sigmund Freud, have often been seen as the antitheses of religion and faith. This book seeks to dispel this misconception and place Freud and psychoanalysis as hopes to the faithful and the hedonist alike. Ethics and morality do not get compromised and unethical and immoral behaviour do not get free licence under Freud’s teachings. The result of two lectures and one interview of Jacques Lacan, this book is a timely addition to the English literature on and by Lacan as it gives hope to the many psychoanalysts long caught in the dilemma of choosing religion or psychoanalysis primarily because of the either/or dichotomy between these two choices as presented by scholars of either field.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part ‘Discourse to Catholics’ includes two lectures—given on 9 and 10 March, 1960, in Brussels, at the invitation of the Faculté Universitaire Saint-Louis’ (vii). The second part ‘The Triumph of Religion’ is ‘from a press conference held in Rome on October 29, 1974, at the French Cultural Center, when Lacan was ... interviewed by Italian journalists’ (ibid.). The first part of this book is divided into two sections, ‘Regarding Ethics, Freud Has What It Takes’ and ‘Can Psychoanalysis Constitute the Kind of Ethics Necessitated by our Times?’

As mentioned in the ‘Lecture Announcement’, Lacan shows us that even libertines have the freedom ‘to recognize the voice of the Father in the commandments his Death left intact’ (4). He clears the objective of his lecture in the very beginning by saying that he would not defend psychoanalysis or stress its ‘therapeutic nature’ (5). He considers this lecture more of a ‘teaching ... focused explicitly on ... the ethical impact of psychoanalysis’ (6). Lacan starts his discussion by stating that the real and the rational are essentially the inverse and converse of the same principle and that both have ‘a reassuring compatibility’ (8). He questions the ‘creed of stupidities’ (ibid.) that positions the ego, consciousness, evolution, and behaviour in order to explain the growth and tensions of human beings. He considers that these hypotheses mask the reality that ‘nothing in the concrete life of a single individual allows us to ground the idea that such a finality directs his life and could lead him—through the pathways of progressive self-consciousness undergirded by natural development—to harmony with himself as well as to approval from the world on which his happiness depends’ (9).

Evidently, Lacan does not want to adopt a reductionist approach or make an oversimplification of the progressive human pathways. According to him, the human being, driven by desire, when incapable of achieving it, becomes unhappy, and languishes in anguish. He asserts that the human being is ‘ever more impotent to meet up anew with his own desire, and this impotence can go so far that he loses its carnal triggering’ (10). In his expert manner, Lacan destroys the one-solution-for-all approach to the psychology of desires because desire ‘is no simple thing. It is neither elementary, nor animalistic, nor especially inferior. It is the result, composition, or complex of an entire articulation’ (ibid.). He also quashes the ‘genetic psychoanalysis’ that portrays desire as ‘the figurative reproduction of primal concrete experiences’ (11). He makes an urgent call that desire ‘insofar
as it appears in Freud’s work as a new object for ethical reflection—must be resituated within the context of Freud’s intentions’ (ibid.). A rereading of Freud can only be possible through Lacan and though Freudian psychoanalysis has been often condemned as wrong, one can arrive at a firm conclusion about Freud’s accuracy of thought only after understanding his thought in his own perspective. As Lacan puts it, ‘a meaning is born from a set of letters or words only insofar as it presents itself as a modification of their already received usage’ (13).

Quoting St Paul, Lacan attempts to prove that belief, no matter how sincere it might be, cannot and should not be excluded from ‘the examination of those who are attached to knowledge’ (18). Lacan declares that everyone ‘knows that Freud was a crude materialist’ (20). Everyone also knows that Freud considered religion to be an illusion. Lacan, however, believed that ‘true religion … would take in everyone in the end’ (Jacques-Alain Miller, back cover). Lacan believes that ‘Freud is far closer than he allows to the Christian commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself”’ (32). Lacan’s religious and Christian reading of Freud integrates reason and psychoanalysis into faith-traditions.

Lacan points out to us ‘the topological chains that situate at the heart of each of us the gaping place from which the nothing questions us about our sex and our existence. This is the place where we have to love the neighbor as ourselves, because in him this place is the same’ (47). To express the idea that ‘nothing is closer to us than this place’ (ibid.), Lacan quotes the surrealist and symbolist French poet Germain Nouveau, who wrote under the pseudonym Humilis. Even the English translation of this poet is captivating: ‘Brother, who makes blood-red wine from golden grapes / Love thyself, as the vine loves its garden clusters’ (49). Here we find a resonance of the famous statement of Yajnavalkya: ‘It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear, that he is loved, but for one’s own sake that he is loved’ (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.5.6.).

It is vital to study Lacan to understand Freud from a completely novel perspective that would free the average reader from the vicious colouring that comes with most Freudian scholarship. And this book is a good place to start the study of Lacan. Of course, his Seminars are seminal (See <http://www.lacan.com/seminars1a.htm> accessed 13 August 2018). The radical and too broad a thinker Slavoj Žižek maintains that to understand Lacan we need to read both his écrits or written theoretical texts, and seminars. Žižek says: ‘If you go directly to the écrits, you won’t get anything, so you should start—but not stop—with seminars since, if you read nothing but the seminars, you also won’t get it’ (Slavoj Žižek, How to Read Lacan (London: Granta, 2006), 129). The second part of the book under review, The Triumph of Religion is ample proof that it is vital to read Lacan’s interviews to have a clearer understanding of his thought.

For instance, Lacan locates the untenability of the psychoanalyst to Freud himself and argues that though ‘it isn’t necessary to educate man’ since he ‘gets his education all by himself’ (56), nonetheless ‘a certain amount of education is necessary in order for men to manage to stand each other’ (57). He gives a quite succinct definition of the real, a quite philosophical definition too: ‘The real is the difference between what works and what doesn’t work. What works is the world. The real is what doesn’t work’ (61).

Lacan equates the psychoanalyst with the clergy or the confessor. However, he is sure that religion ‘does not triumph by means of confession. If psychoanalysis won’t triumph over religion it is because religion is invincible’ (64). This is so because we ‘can’t even begin to imagine how powerful religion is’ (ibid.). Lacan is highly biased towards Christianity and says: ‘There is one true religion and that is the Christian religion’ (66). He is prophetic about his own influence: ‘In very short order, you will see, you will encounter Lacan on every corner. Just like Freud! Everyone imagines he has read Freud because Freud is everywhere … That will happen to me too’ (71).

For anyone interested in religion and psychoanalysis, particularly for the psychoanalysts of the religious, this book would serve as a guidepost.

Editor
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