

PSYCHOLOGICAL TEMPLATES OF RELIGION AND THEIR REFLECTION IN ART, ARCHITECTURE OR THE DECORATIVE ARTS

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Abstract. *Religious art acts as the conduit for human need. The projection of psychological needs as posited by Freud has led to a cynical view of religious art as only related to religious expression, but we propose to view art as a projection of ultimate concern. The means by which human need for nurture and family, amongst other aspects, is expressed and objectified and becomes an external mean, through which love and its mirroring are expressed and processed.*

Key Words: *Religion, Tillich, psychology, beliefs, Freud, Italian painters, Giovanni Battista Salvi, Raphael, Madonna — and — Child, nurture, family, worship, Islam, Muhammad.*

Paul Tillich¹ when discussing the need for theology in a world where Religion was thought of as a mere projection, said that, “projection always is projection on something — a wall, a screen, another being, another realm.... The realm against which the divine images are projected is not itself a projection. It is the experienced ultimacy of being and meaning. It is the realm of ultimate concern.” In his book *The Theology of Culture* he reiterates this point, “One calls God the projection of the father image. But every projection is not only a projection of something, but it is also a projection upon something.”²

It was Sigmund Freud³ in his book *The Future of an Illusion* who posited that all human ideas about God stem from their basic human needs which are projected onto the different religious canvases. He describes religion as an illusion and as wish fulfillment.

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¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (3 volumes), University of Chicago Press, Volume 1, 1951, p. 212.

² Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 140.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, W. W. Norton — Vintage Books. Freud, Sigmund, 1989, New York, 1929.

Wishes are the “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind.”

Wishes, according to Freud, are what made religious beliefs illusory and he mocked the very base of religious belief by calling its core belief in God “patently infantile”, foreign to reality. “The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able rise above this view of life. It is still more humiliating to discover how large a number of people living in today, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions.”⁴

He explained: “In my *Future of an Illusion*⁵ I was concerned much less with the deepest sources of the religious feeling than with what the common man understands by his religion — with the system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the other, assures him that a careful Providence, will watch over his life and will compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he may suffer here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father. Only such a being can understand the needs of the children of men and be softened by their prayers and placated by the signs of their remorse. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able rise above this view of life. It is still more humiliating to discover how large a number of people living in to-day, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions. One would like to mix among the ranks of the believers in order to meet these philosophers, who think they can rescue the God of religion by replacing him by an impersonal, shadowy and abstract principle, and to address them with the warning words: ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!’ And if some of the great men of the past acted in the same way, no appeal can be made to their example: we know why they were obliged to. Let us return to the common man and to his religion— the only religion which ought to bear that name. The first thing that we think of is the well-known saying of one of our great poets and thinkers concerning the relation of religion to art and science: *Wer Wissenschaft und Kunst besitzt, hat auch Religion; Wer jene beide nicht besitzt, der habe Religion. Goethe Zahme Xenien IX*”⁶.

Freud’s unfortunate bitterness towards religion seems to have distracted him from his basic premise which is that religion is a projection of human need. He quotes Goethe about the correlation of science and art, and bypasses Goethe’s understanding of religion as art. “Wer Wissenschaft und Kunst besitzt, hat auch Religion;” [He who possesses science and art also has religion; but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion! — Goethe, *Zahme Xenien IX*]⁷

⁴ *Ibid.* 3.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, James Strachey (editor), *The Future of an Illusion (Die Zukunft einer Illusion)*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1927.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Goethe *Zahme Xenien IX*, Chapter II.

⁷ *Ibid.* 6.

Goethe also understands that religion is the conduit through which many find something undefined. Freud overlooked his own core beliefs in the parent childhood psychosexual development theory which discusses the reality of early childhood and sexual stages upon the entire life cycle.

If what Freud acknowledges in this theory demarcates a truth about humanity and their psychological development then it seems that this core projection of their need upon the idea of God is not merely an illusion nor something infantile but a need core to all humans. The projection, thus, is a sign, as in psychoanalysis, of a depth of unconscious need and desire.

Nowhere is this seen the more clearly than in the history of religious art which assumes a conduit through which the religious or emotional needs of the human are projected into specific images and archetypes and it is our opinion that these images convey a great deal about the human psyche and become a template for the unconscious. For it is within these images of Madonna and child, and of the crucified Christ that the wishes or needs of the unconscious are explored and remain constant projections. Art is a projection and always an expression of human ultimacy on some level. If we are looking for ultimate concerns as need is it not possible that that ultimate concern be apparent in the creative structures and products of the human being.

We will explore two basic needs and ultimate concerns that arise from the exegesis of needs through projection in art.

The need for nurture

In the archetypal picture of *mother and child*, Freud's basic structural analysis of religion as the basic need for nurture is projected onto religious images. The projection presents us with an externalized expression of the need of individuals as well as the collective. We see for example in the many presentations of mother and child the ideal image of mother enfolding child, the child looking adoringly at the mother.

Melanie Klein, a neo Freudian, speaks of the child looking for an "ideal object of unlimited pleasure and satisfaction"⁸. The focus of the child being the good object of love or as it happens to occur when the child's needs are not met a bad object. The good breast is the object of love because it is the first focus of the child's attention and then the mother. This need is placed upon an external aspect which acts as a conduit for the child's building of self and the basic meeting of the needs of the child. Art acts as an indirect object of love and a mirror to the internal world of homo sapiens.

The framework of these images describes the need for attachment and contact and elaborates on this need by connecting this with deity. God is seen as the core, primordial and primigenial mother and we see different elements of mother nurture expressed. Nurture as care, nurture as adoration, nurture as a contained, holding environment, nurture as the constituency of human contact, nurture as sustenance, nurture as comfort.

⁸ Meira Likiernan, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context*, Continuum International, London, 2002, pp. 101-112.

The disparaging of religion is commonplace and especially in Freud but it is widely acknowledged that need per se is pure and cannot be undermined. It is ironic that in the multifarious examples of religious art where nurture is a core part that the need will not be disguised and is seemingly integrated into the very religious fabric. The religious fabric then can be seen as a poetic mirror upon which humanity describes its core needs

For example in the Salvi's⁹ Madonnas usually we see mother and child enveloped in each other, their expressions of internal peace mirrored in mother and child.

The Narcissistic need to be idealized and to idealize emphasized by Kohut¹⁰ in his study in narcissism is permanently emboldened. The mother and child both sustained by the other. Even within this projection we see their own projection of nurture, child to mother, mother to child.

Bowlby describes the necessity for attachment, "If growth is to proceed smoothly, the tissues must be exposed to the influence of the appropriate organizer at certain critical periods. In the same way, if mental development is to proceed smoothly, it would appear to be necessary for the undifferentiated psyche to be exposed during certain critical periods to the influence of the psychic organizer — the mother"¹¹. This definitive need is extrapolated and exegete in an artistic sense in the various pictures of nurture here displayed. It is apparent that in the art work the same projection that Freud spoke of upon God is now displayed in icons depicting the very nature of the need and meeting it simultaneously. The need for mother is now externalized and worshipped to be able to fulfill the basic need itself. Adoration in the narcissistic sense now creating an opportunity to connect with Bowlby's "Psychic organizer — the mother", the archetypal mother.

The images act as a womb, making contact with the community and the individuals. Holding the psychological space.

The need for family

The need for family is "glorified" and set into the canvas of images such as "The Holy Family by van Everdingen"¹². Here the need for attachment is reflected in a god-human family. The merging of god and family in this idealized image links the family psychically. We see the primacy of mother and child as the father looks on in adoration himself and the mother and child looking directly into the face of the viewer acting as direct mirrors of the archetype. In Raphael's "The Holy Family with a Lamb"¹³ we see the child as focus and the complete identification of child and lamb as they merge into one as objects of worship. Kohut's¹⁴ focus on the

⁹ Giovanni Battista Salvi (1609-1685) well known Italian Baroque, his paintings can be described as following the specifications of School of Raphael.

¹⁰ J. W. Newirth, *Idealization and Interpretation*, in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 23, 1987, pp. 239-243. On Kohut.

¹¹ J. Bowlby, *Maternal care and mental health*, World Health Organization Monograph (Serial No. 2), 1951.

¹² Caesar van Everdingen (1616/17 – 1678) was a Dutch portrait and history thematic painter known as part of Dutch Golden Art period. The Holy Family.

¹³ Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520), famous Italian painter and architect from High Renaissance. (Image from Lichtenstein private collection, source <http://caccioppoli.com/Madonna>).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

narcissistic need of the child to be adored is played out here in the parent's adoration and the child's receptivity to being adored. The unifying element in this case is the love and adoration of parents to child and the receptivity of the god-child.

If art is a projection of the basic needs of humanity then it behaves us to take what we see in its archetypal expression seriously. We can learn a great deal from the images that reflect these needs. In very much the same way that psychoanalysis takes the words of the client as primary material of the unconscious we can make use of the level of self-expression in art and architecture as primary material, and of its communication, expressing a great deal about a moment in time, but also about the collective unconscious. It is clear that the need for nurture and for family continue to resonate within each of us and within the art of the ages.

May we take note of the imprint of our unconscious upon the screen or canvas of the cosmos. The good object itself can never be seen merely as a vehicle and transport towards reflection and self reflection. The object itself becomes significant and continues to have a relationship and dialogue with those who make contact with it.

This aspect of "family need" can be extended if we analyze the concept of Community, especially a certain "Community of believers", regarding this problem the Islamic architectural spaces offer us a very clear meaning of what a Community should be, how the concept was settle in Hadith. The Friday communal prayer certainly is a form of expressing the need for gathering in one "group of believers" — a family in faith. The Islamic architecture reflects the need of a certain society to reflect a family — community, the inner space of the mosque is structured according this psychological pattern.

The need for worship

It is in the need mirroring of religious art that we find worship in a central place. This need is more than simply the processing of idealizing needs. It seems to be at the forefront of religious iconography. It reveals itself in the sense of Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, the sense of awe and holiness that is apparent in the glorification of the images. The awe that is directed towards the characters in the myriad examples of Madonna and child as well as the crucifixion scenes and the portraits of the saints in icons and religious art through the centuries points to another need, the need to worship.

The Greek text of the New Testament uses the word *proskuneo*, which means to kiss, to bow down and to worship. It details the posture towards God. We see this posture in the obeisance of the shepherds to the baby Jesus, we see this expressed in the halos or the glory of the presence of the spirit, we see this indicated in the fire upon the heads of the acolytes at Pentecost. We propose that following the projection of need onto the images it also indicated the deep psychological need for worship.

The need to see something, or someone as ideal and having an element of purity and perfection that humans do not possess and allowing room for a spiritual

form of idealization in a power, a being, superior and more refined in all aspects than a simple human expression of life. Elements of worship that are present in the images are adoration, idealization, obeisance to aspects that are supra-human. The need for an ultimate concern.

If art is a projection of the basic needs of humanity then it behoves us to take what we see in its archetypal expression seriously. We can learn a great deal from the images that reflect these needs. In very much the same way that psychoanalysis takes the words of the client as primary material of the unconscious we can make use of the level of self-expression in art and architecture as primary material and its communication of a great deal about a moment in time but also about the collective unconscious. It is clear that the need for nurture and for family continue to resonate within each of us and within the art of the ages as well as the need for worship. It must be noted that all of these aspects of need are relational and are depicted within the various artworks as relational. May we take note of the imprint of our unconscious upon the screen or canvas of the cosmos. The good object itself can never be seen merely as a vehicle and transport towards reflection and self reflection. The object itself becomes significant and continues to have a relationship and dialogue with those who make contact with it. It continually points to "the realm of ultimate concern."

A very suggestive image "painting" the miracle of worship can be found in the Islamic representation of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Jerusalem and back on Buraq (even its sense in Arabic is related with the light symbolism — *al-Burāq* "lightning"), a very famous story from the 7th century presenting "the Night Journey" of the Prophet carried by this unusual winged creature coming from Heaven. The 17th chapter of the Qur'an Sura Al-Isra "The Night Journey" is named according to this extraordinary episode. "*Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless, — in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things).*" (Sura 17: 1 Al-Isra)

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