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# RELIGION AND ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION

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The chapter begins with a brief genealogy of psychoanalytic thinking in the broad area of religion. It first looks at Freud's early modernist dismissal of religion, comparing this with Lacan's valorisation of the ethical quests that both religion and psychoanalysis are said to share at the heart of their discourse. It then examines Lacan's later pessimism in opposing the 'triumph of religion' in our times to an increasingly uncertain future for psychoanalysis. Moving from a conceptual discussion of these themes to an applied analysis of contemporary challenges, the chapter highlights the contribution of psychoanalysis to an understanding of the aesthetics of violence informing the eschatology of Islamic terror within contemporary global jihadism.

Since Freud's early writings, and to this day, religion and psychoanalysis have constantly sought clarification of the status of their relationship. Over time, most inflexible interpretations have rejected the possibility of establishing a common ground between the two. When their incompatibility was not declared, in a suggestion that they lead completely independent lives, religion and psychoanalysis were taken to form an *odd couple*. Although tenderly intertwined, they remain utterly different from each other and would not normally get along under other conditions. What then are the circumstances enabling religion and psychoanalysis to get along and escape the grammar of an oppositional relationship that many have implicitly endorsed over time?

## Freud and the Limits of Religion

Despite his strong interest in religion, it is well-known that Freud did not help ease the ill-effects of this adverse relation and incited the strongest reactions with his pronouncements that 'the roots of the

need for religion are in the parental complex' (Freud 1957 [1910]: 123) and that 'at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father' (Freud 2001 [1913]: 171). Moreover, he noted that by arising, like the obsessional neurosis of children, 'out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father', religion stands in fact as 'the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity' (Freud 1961 [1927]: 43).

Although scrutinized from different angles over time, one original theme behind Freud's long-lasting fascination with religion is thus the structural relation that it establishes with neurosis. While initially standing as 'the expression of the instincts it has suppressed' (Palmer 1997: 13), Freud increasingly associated religious feelings of guilt and protection with the early biological condition of childhood, finally anchoring religion in the tutelary power of the father:

As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus, the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life [...] and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place (Freud 1961 [1927]: 30).

In the light of this original theme, Freud defines religion as an 'illusion'. Religious beliefs, Freud explains, are not 'errors' and are 'not necessarily false'. 'What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions' (Freud 1961 [1927]: 31). A religious belief becomes an illusion when 'a wish fulfillment' is thus assumed as a 'prominent factor' in its motivation, which bestows individuals with a cherished consolatory power. However, this entails disregarding its relations to reality, 'just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification' (Freud 1961 [1927]: 31).

Although acknowledging religion's enduring impact on human culture and its role in stabilizing basic moral norms, Freud remained convinced throughout his life of the irremediable inability of religion to achieve, increase, or even facilitate conditions of justice and happiness. The illusory character of religious dogma has long hindered any possible reconciliation with civilization. Religious phenomena have obstructed the development of rational explanations, which have only recently, thanks to the newly conquered territories of scientific progress, managed to gain final primacy over religion.

Defining the particular circumstances grounding Freud's psychoanalytic approach to religion would certainly account for what Freud saw as the 'modern' decline of religious dogmas. His modernist belief – or we can hazard the term *illusion* here – was that as the scientific approach grows, so religion declines. Aware of the negative effects that an enfeebling of religion may have on social stability, Freud envisaged the crucial task to be one of endorsing scientific work even further and assumed that it is 'the only road' to 'a knowledge of reality outside ourselves' (Freud 1961 [1927]: 31). This meant rethinking the relation that culture has long established with religion and so finally committing the former to maintaining rational grounds for the precepts of civilization:

Those historical residues have helped us to view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics, and we may now argue that the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect [...] In this way our appointed task of reconciling men to civilization will to a great extent be achieved (Freud 1961 [1927]: 44).

Despite his ongoing interest in religious beliefs, Freud continued to endorse a structural distance between religion and psychoanalysis, with the latter understood as an expression of scientific and rational knowledge. At the same time, religion functioned as the discursive horizon from which Freud's theorization derived a relevant part of its material. As Lacan often discussed over time, 'Freud's meditation about the function, the role, and the figure of the Name-of-the-Father, as well as his entire ethical reference, revolves around the Judeo-Christian tradition, and can entirely be articulated around this tradition' (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 22). This includes personal and biographic trajectories because, as Lacan saw, there is a certain parallelism in this direction between the figure of the old 'patriarch', Jacob Freud, and the magnificent figure of the father in *Totem and Taboo* (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 23).

Today, there is widespread debate precisely on the cultural premises sustaining Freud's overall vision. How should we think about Freudian psychoanalysis without its structural references to the Judeo-Christian legacy – with all the fundamental shifts that Freud instantiated within that framework – or the allegoric function of Greek mythology and symbolism? What happens to psychoanalysis when it is thought of and applied beyond its original setting? To what extent does Islam, for instance, escape the paternal logic dominating the Judeo-Christian tradition? And what is the experience of analytic treatment for a non-European or non-'Judeo-Christian' analysand?

Jean-Michel Hirt (1993), Salman Akhtar (2008), and Fethi Benslama (2002 /2009) – but also Tobie Nathan and Georges Devereux in a dynamic dialogue with anthropological research dating back to Bronislaw Malinowski – are only some of those who have contributed to such an inquiry, leading to an increasingly vivid discussion. In the same direction, Yana Korobko (2016) has looked more recently at the specificity of analysis in Arab settings, and Gohar Homayounpour has considered the authority of other mythological and cultural formations, which can potentially challenge the universality of the Oedipus complex. In *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran* (Homayounpour 2012), a suggestive emphasis is placed on the anxiety of disobedience allegedly underpinning ‘Iranian collective fantasy’, which should, more productively, be associated with the myth of Rostam and Sohrab in Ferdousi’s *Shanameh* (Book of Kings). Similarly, Omnia El Shakry (2017) has traced early conceptual twists in the Arab translation of psychoanalysis (including Freudian texts), which have allowed for the formation of an *Arab Freud* more resonant with the Islamic legacy.

All these approaches bear witness to the specter of a fundamental disjunction, Islam *or* psychoanalysis, that many have been trying to challenge recently (with Islam inconveniently assuming here the twofold position of both a religion and a non-Western culture).<sup>1</sup> Although this disjunction is aggravated by cultural presuppositions that touch on contemporary challenges and controversies, it reiterates an original tension, as discussed earlier, between psychoanalysis and religion. Freud himself was concerned that his critical approach to religion was conducive to ‘mistrust and ill-will’, not only toward his own person but toward psychoanalysis at large.

If I now come forward with such displeasing pronouncements, people will be only too ready to make a displacement from my person to psychoanalysis. ‘Now we see’, they will say, ‘where psycho-analysis leads to. The mask has fallen; it leads to a denial of God and of a moral ideal, as we always suspected’ [...] An outcry of this kind will really be disagreeable to me on account of my many fellow-workers, some of whom do not by any means share my attitude to the problems of religion (Freud 1961 [1927]: 36).

In replying to potential criticism, Freud rebutted the possibility that psychoanalysis be squeezed into the fixed framework of an atheist *Weltanschauung*, highlighting its function as a simple *method of research*:

In point of fact, psycho-analysis is a method of research [...] 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 right make use of psycho-analysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines (Freud 1961 [1927]: 37).

### **Lacan and the Triumph of Religion**

This critical shift from an understanding of psychoanalysis as a materialist-oriented ‘vision’ to a neutral method of research offers a good opportunity to introduce Lacan’s attitude to religion. Lacan’s overall engagement with religious feelings remained relatively inclusive over time and skeptical toward any modernist dismissal of religion. Far from discharging the latter as a mere illusion, the very consolatory power that Freud ascribed derogatively to religion was for Lacan something that had, in itself, to be valorized. While praising the capacity of religion to offer guidance and relief, he even lamented a certain tendency by clergy to send ‘their flocks to psychoanalysts’, as well as the tendency on the part of religion to let ‘science resolve problems when questions translate into suffering that is a bit too hard to handle’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 19). Unlike Freud, Lacan was thus critical of ‘a certain flippancy in the way science disposes of a field [religion] regarding which it is not clear how it can so easily lighten its load’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 19).

Lacan takes religion to fulfill, in its immediacy, a critical role in the psychic life of an individual, contributing to the formation of its symbolic universe. While accounting for certain ‘peculiar symptoms connected with the use of the hand’ of a Muslim analysand (Lacan 1991 [1953–54]: 196), Lacan dismisses the ‘classical’ reference to infantile masturbation in *Seminar I*, inquiring into the religious significance of these symptoms and the various meanings that Islamic law ascribes to the hand, including those related to theft and punishment. Central for Lacan is how this patient, who grew up in an Islamic environment, dealt with his Islamic ‘symbolic node’ to reveal his particular relationship with the law (Dunlap 2014: 3). While emphasizing the uniqueness of this relationship, Lacan observed that, ‘For every human being, everything personal which can happen to him is located in the relation with the law to which he is bound. His history is unified by the law, by his symbolic universe, which is not the same for everyone’ (Lacan 1991 [1953–54]: 197).

Besides the symbolic role of religion in the psychological genesis of individuals, Lacan was also convinced of a certain proximity between religion and psychoanalysis in their respective approach to fundamental ethical questions. A key theme examined in *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, and resumed the same year in his 1960 *Discourse to Catholics*, is precisely that of ‘the morals that psychoanalysis can suggest, presuppose, or contain, and of the step forward psychoanalysis would perhaps allow us to take – how audacious! – in the moral realm’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 6). In this respect, Lacan’s reading of Freud emphasizes the drama of desire that Freud places right at the forefront of the ethical experience, a drama played out at the level of an experience that is articulated ‘using the very terms with which characteristically Judeo-Christian religious experience has itself historically developed and articulated it’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 26).

This emphasis is particularly vivid in *Totem and Taboo*. The tension here between the preservation of desire and the ‘correlative principle of a prohibition that leads to the setting aside of this desire’ underpins, for Lacan, the very myth that Freud proposes to the modern man for whom God is dead; the idea that ‘the father prohibits desire effectively only because he is dead and, I will add, because he does not know it himself’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 24). Here we can conclude with Lacan that the mourning of the father will contribute only toward making humankind’s desire more threatening and its prohibition more severe and long-lasting: ‘God is dead, nothing is permitted anymore’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 25).

For Lacan, both psychoanalysis and religion contribute to the full disclosure of the nature of desire, which is structured as the chain of a discourse and remains unconscious. As Di Ciaccia puts it in a short note to the Italian edition of Lacan’s *Discourse to Catholics*, its focal point ‘is not the object that is sought, but an extreme within interiority that is, at the same time, an excluded inside; it is called sin for St. Paul, *das Ding* for Freud, the Thing for Lacan. It is the *jouissance* forever prohibited to the speaking being’ (Di Ciaccia 2006: 116).

Lacan recognizes that both believers and nonbelievers find themselves ‘called upon to respond’ to St. Paul’s unsettling words: ‘I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 18). Lacan is keen not just to show here the influence that the Judeo-Christian tradition has exerted on early psychoanalytic reflection but, more substantially, to show how the ethical framework functioning in this tradition reverberates in psychoanalysis. With its tension between law and sin, a mechanism is

enacted, which is ‘alive and well, perfectly perceptible and tangible to a psychoanalyst’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 18–19).

We have seen that, for Freud, behind psychoanalysis’s uneasy relationship with religion stands a broader modernist incompatibility between religion and science. In contrast, for Lacan, a higher complementarity between the two should be recognized because the relation that science entertains with religion is more complex than Freud originally anticipated. The discourse of science has been able to unveil the disappearance of any transcendental esthetic by which harmony could be established between our intuitions and the world: ‘We know what’s what on earth and in heaven – neither contains God – and the question is what we make appear there in the disjunctions constituted by our technology’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 36). Against widespread modernist assumptions, however, scientific progress has brought about neither the decline nor the disempowerment (lack of tools) of religion.

This theme became increasingly central to Lacan, leading to his subsequent reevaluation of the role of religion, science, and psychoanalysis in his teachings. During a talk given in Rome in 1974 under the heading *The Triumph of Religion*, Lacan targeted what appeared to him as the increasingly manifest *anxiety [anguish] of scientists*:

There is something Freud didn’t talk about because it was taboo to him – namely, the scientist’s position. It too is an impossible position, but science does not yet have the slightest inkling that it is, which is lucky for science. Scientists are only now beginning to have anxiety attacks [crises of anguish] (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 59).

Lacan emphasizes that, as technology develops, it discloses the risks that are produced by its own achievements and that now even threaten human life. At the same time, it reveals that ‘science hasn’t the foggiest idea what it is doing’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 61). It is here that religion displays its full potential. Far from reflecting a declining power, we witness its triumph, which Lacan links in this text to its ability to deal with the unfurling of the Real that modern science has triggered:

If science works at it, the real will expand and religion will thereby have still more reasons to soothe people’s hearts. Science is new and it will introduce all kinds of distressing things into each person’s life. Religion, above all the true religion [Christianity], is resourceful in ways we cannot even begin to suspect [...] Religion is going to give



meaning to the oddest experiments, the very ones that scientists themselves are just beginning to become anxious about. Religion will find colorful [truculent] meaning for those (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 64–65).

Although some critics have seen a positive stance in this passage, noting that ‘Lacan, especially in his later life, thought that some kind of meaning is crucial, even triumphant’ (Dunlap 2014: 162), we take this latter talk to display a more negative approach to religion than that in earlier remarks. Lacan’s emphasis on the capacity of religion to ‘find colorful [truculent] meaning’ while remaining coextensive with the growing invasiveness of the Real produced by science, reveals, as we shall soon see, the increasing inability of the symbolic order to ensure the overdetermination, flexibility, and reversibility of meanings in the signifying chain. In a more radical pronouncement, Lacan foresees a future in which religion ‘will be able to secrete meaning to such an extent that we will truly drown in it’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 66). Analogous to the designation of the psychotic, for whom ‘everything has become a sign’, the risk here is that this overproduction of truth and meanings will be the effect of a certain fixed relation to the symbolic order. At the same time, such a capacity by religion exposes the fragility of psychoanalysis that, in Freudian terms, may be a tool or method of research but that, for Lacan, is at the same time a symptom of the ‘discontents in civilization’ having emerged at a specific moment in the development of science.

It is here that psychoanalysis and religion show their difference in terms both of function and destiny. While religion’s specific function for Lacan is precisely to ‘find correspondences between everything and everything else’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 66) and ‘cure men . . . so that they do not perceive what is not going well’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 71–72), the function of psychoanalysis is to deal with ‘what doesn’t work’. As Lacan put it, ‘it concerns itself with what we must call by its name – I must say that I am still the only one who has called it by this name – the real’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 61). Notwithstanding the profound impact of religion in the texture of psychoanalysis and their respective concern for key ethical problems, the latter remains irreducible to religion. Indeed, psychoanalysis does not stand as a form of confession and will never become – at least as Lacan would hope – a religion, not even in a secularized form. A different fate embraces their respective trajectory, entailing that if religion triumphs, then psychoanalysis will not: ‘either it will survive or it won’t’ (Lacan 2013 [1974]: 64). While denoting ‘the pessimism that marks Lacan’s later work about the liberating potential of psychoanalysis’ (Crockett 2015: 250), this fundamental disjunction reflects Lacan’s growing insistence from the 1960s onward regarding the challenges faced by symbolic authority – partly an effect of the very intrusion of the Real that he discussed in this latter text.

According to Lacan, late industrialization would be responsible for an increasing erosion of paternal law, denoting the emergence of a complementary subjective model no longer organized around symbolic castration. The ‘decline of the Oedipus’ (Žižek 2000), the ‘end of the paternal dogma’ (Tort 2007), or Lacan’s pronouncement about the *évaporation du père* (‘melting into air of the father’) (Lacan 1969) are among the most quoted expressions depicting such a condition. Indeed, the debates of the last few decades have inquired into the social effects of this predicament when associated with, for instance, the type of libidinal economy instantiated by the *capitalist discourse*.

In this contemporary context, earlier reflections on the hedonistic and dissipative nature of the capitalist discourse in pre-financial-crisis times have been coupled with new investigations into the biopolitics of neoliberal debt economy (Vanheule 2016; Stimilli 2017). While exposing the constant process of the production, consumption, and consummation of life in the form of indebtedness, a complementary reinforcement of imaginary formations may also be ascribed to this predicament. These formations freeze the fundamental ‘ex-centric’ and ‘ambivalent’ character of the subject, favoring narcissistic and paranoid solutions that propel an ideal of pure integrity.

This overall debate can productively be linked to what Lacan saw as the potential rise of racism in the contemporary realm. For Lacan, the jubilation greeting the crisis of authoritarian (and patriarchal) forms of politics in the wake of the 1968 student protests risked obstructing a general reflection on the effects of the said displacement of the paternal metaphor. Two major, intertwined consequences would remain overlooked: on the one hand, the rise of a liberal and consumerist phantasm of freedom now conquering the hearts of the youth and. On the other, the rise of a general *idolatry* of the body, which might ultimately gain terrain behind the celebrated advent of a new community of brothers, thus favoring renewed forms of racism:

and when we return to the root of the body, if we revalorize the word brother . . . you should know that what is arising, what one has not seen to its final consequences, and which for its part is rooted in the body, in the fraternity of the body, is racism, about which you have to hear the last word (Lacan 1972: XII 12).

Eric Laurent has recently observed that Lacan’s overall insistence on racism since the late 1960s was partly a response to a historical context dominated by optimism for the growing economic interdependence of nations and the creation of larger political units as the European community

(Laurent 2014). Indeed, by 1967, while anticipating the problematic unfolding of globalization in the following decades, Lacan had already noticed that ‘Our future as common markets will be balanced by an increasingly hardline extension of the process of segregation’ (Lacan 1995 [1967]: 13). A few years later, in an interview with Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan openly pointed to the effects of a lack of orientation of *jouissance* resulting from increasing cultural hybridization: ‘With our *jouissance* going off track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only in so far as we are separated from this Other. Whence certain fantasies – unheard of before the melting pot’ (Lacan 1990 [1973]: 32).

In a context in which our *jouissance* has gone ‘off track’ and is no longer orienting us, and where world financialization and cultural and political integration contribute to the intensification of a generalized ‘melting pot’, a rejection of the *jouissance* of others offers preeminent solutions to this derailing. With this in mind, Laurent notes that

We have no knowledge of the *jouissance* from which we might take our orientation. We know only how to reject the *jouissance* of others [...] This is not culture shock, but the shock of different forms of *jouissance*. This manifold *jouissance* splits the social bond apart, hence the temptation of calling upon a unifying God (Laurent 2014: n.p.).

When reflecting on our contemporary context, one effect of this racialized logic is the increasing visibility of xenophobic populisms and religious fundamentalisms in Europe, which mobilize new forms of hypertrophic division. What these phenomena seem to have in common today is the attempt to solve what they frequently perceive to be a general sense of social and psychic disaggregation. While striving to restore an ideal of unity and integrity (e.g., the populist idealization of ‘the people’ as a moral and indivisible unit, or the fundamentalist celebration of the unity of God and truth), here a radical rejection of the *jouissance* of the other accompanies the endorsement of new practices for dividing peoples. A demand for seclusion and separation is thus instantiated along ethnic, political, or religious lines, while, more generally, the dislocating power of global structural forces is resisted (i.e., globalization, financialization). In the context of the European debt crisis, this has also entailed rejecting the economic theology that underpins neoliberal globalization and sustains the image of the market as, among other things, the only legitimate ‘faith’ within a secularized world. It is in the light of this scenario that the recent terrorist attacks in Europe can perhaps be rigorously interpreted. They reflect what Lacan describes in his concluding remarks to Miller as the return of God’s ‘baneful past’: ‘Even if God, thus newly strengthened, should end up existing, this bodes nothing better than a return of his baneful past’ (Lacan 1990 [1973]: 33).

## Radicalization and Terror

Our epoch has been described as the age of ‘planetary terror’ and ‘permanent civil war’ (Di Cesare 2017; Agamben 2015). Moving from a conceptual discussion of psychoanalysis and religion to an applied analysis of contemporary challenges, we would like now to consider briefly what can perhaps be described as a *frèrocité* of global jihadism – a neologism coined by Lacan that combines the term ‘ferocity’ with the French ‘brother’ (*frère*). Such a discussion allows us to assume a useful perspective from which to observe the segregating effects that Lacan ascribes to a renewed ‘fraternity of the body’ in a scenario marked by symbolic derail.

In *Jihad and Death* (2017), Oliver Roy investigates the fascination with death expressed by contemporary global jihadism in its fantasy of the caliphate and its pronounced commitment to violence. Controversial as it might be – we will soon posit a caveat in this regard – Roy takes global jihadism to supplant the type of political and cultural characterization that had qualified mainstream radical groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah. What an inquiry into Islamic terror reveals is that ‘there is no direct link between social, political, and religious mobilizations and the descent into terrorism’ (Roy 2017: 4).

For Roy, what is at stake is a worldwide process of the deculturation of religion. Increasingly detached from conventional territorial, cultural, and even political references, the radicalized youngsters found in various parts of the world, but particularly in Europe, couple this process with a general reconstruction of religion as fundamentally ‘separate’ from the social bond. By looking in particular at the sociology of European jihadists – mostly second- and third-generation Muslims, born-again Muslims, and converts in their early twenties – Roy notices a tendency to create insulated micro-communities under the banner of a fantasmatic Islamic vanguard (*al-tayfa al-mansura*).

In renouncing the culturally rooted Islam of their parents in favor of a virtual relationship with the global, transnational, and – we could say here – deterritorialized community of Muslims, this vanguard engages in a general process of ‘desocialization’ from the rest of society and of organic reconstruction of social ties along fraternal lines. One unusual figure in this respect is the overrepresentation of sets of siblings among the commandos involved in recent terrorist attacks in Europe. Roy describes this phenomenon as being far ‘too systematic to be merely incidental’ in

bearing little resemblance in other radical formations, whether in the far left or far right or in mainstream Islamist groups (Roy 2017: 25).

A biological and corporeal trait is thus added to the spiritual comradeship that already unites members of jihadist groups. At the same time, this ideal and material tie extends to siblings in laws, finally realizing a generational tension between the ‘peers’ culture of the vanguard and the religious, cultural, and social determinations of their parents:

They are not necessarily rebelling against their parents personally, but against what they represent: humiliation, concessions made to society, and what they perceive as religious ignorance. In fact, they turn the generational relationship around. They ‘know better’ than their parents, or at least say they do. They become the masters of the truth; they even try to (re)convert their parents (Roy 2017: 25).

The generational reversal underscored by Roy parallels a more analytical type of torsion because it appears to align to the general subversion that the capitalist discourse enacts on a social level. As we know, a central function of the master discourse in Lacanian psychoanalysis is to organize prohibition and desire. However, the capitalist discourse operates a ‘little inversion’ of it, allowing the barred subject to upturn its location by moving from the position of truth to the position of the agent. This turnaround within the original Lacanian formulation of the master discourse permits the split subject to gain control over truth, thus enfranchising itself from the organizing function of the Law.

In this respect, one key trait defining the psychology of contemporary terrorists may be located in the generational nihilism that the figure of the suicidal mass killer embodies in the West. This blind and ‘absolute’ violence – from Latin *absolutus*, ‘free from ties, unrestricted’ – best reflects the deadly and spectral *jouissance* of a total enfranchisement from the Law. According to Roy, contemporary Islamic terror should find its paradigmatic reference in Columbine syndrome, where the young attackers engage in an outburst of indiscriminate violence, administering death and announcing their grandiose narrative of solitary heroism, rage, and contempt with statements and pictures posted on social media.

As far as radicalized young Muslims are concerned, both their violence and overall narrative is certainly accompanied by substantial references to a suffering Muslim ummah that requires vengeance against political oppressors and purification of iniquity and unbelief. Despite the recognition of this reality, Roy nonetheless observes that their profile is actually characterized by a

‘paucity of religious knowledge’ and limited understanding of the struggles affecting Muslims in specific settings (e.g., Palestine). Disconnected, then, from the concrete local realities of the ummah, these radicals establish a relationship more imaginary than real with the victims they ought to defend and the enemies they combat. Indeed, one paradoxical upshot noted by Roy is that in committing to global jihad outside the frontiers of Europe, these radicals often remain trapped in inextricable civil and sectarian wars, mostly engaging in belligerent actions against other Muslims, sometimes against mainstream Islamist organizations like Hamas or Hezbollah, but rarely against the ‘crusaders’ they originally meant to oppose.

Two remarks follow from this scenario, which may better help us elucidate the terms of the discussion we have raised so far. First, given this general context, organizations such as *al-Qaeda* and *Daesh* (Islamic State) are not, for Roy, the cause of radicalization but instead play a crucial role in offering a theological rationalization to radicalization. It follows that what is at stake is not *radical Islam* as such but the *Islamization of radicalism*, which allows global jihadism to saturate the imaginary of a rebellious and often already radicalized youth becoming the measure of their general revolt.

The ability of *Daesh* in this context is to ‘provide a paradigm for action that fits in with a grand world strategy that will fascinate youngsters with diverse motivations’ (Roy 2017: 72). It is here that religion – in its global jihadist rendering – makes its best use, in my view, of that capacity to secrete ‘colorful meaning’ that Lacan posited as central to our times. A direct relation is thus established between the increasing expansion of the Real that Lacan linked to science – but which more broadly connects with the contemporary global processes of the desocialization, deculturation, and marketization of life – and the ability of religion ‘to soothe people’s hearts’ and appease their anguish.

Second, this religious and theological rationalization and secretion of meanings takes root within a preexisting youth culture, often organized around an esthetics of violence in which narcissistic, consumerist, and nihilistic drives coalesce in a context marked by symbolic derail. In this respect, Roy’s reference to Columbine syndrome is particularly productive in highlighting that behind the religious narrative that young jihadists hold, essential social traits are shared at some profound level between religious and nonreligious suicide killers.

Here, we are often reminded that rage, resentment, and generalized contempt mix together in the epic plan of high school shooters to work toward the accomplishment of wholesale destruction. Such an approach is well exemplified in the original aspiration of the two school shooters at the Columbine

High School to blow up the entire school. The esthetics of violence that perpetrators stage in their action often draw on a common imaginary of youth culture made up of figures from cinema, music, video games, and TV series. Both the statements posted on social media prior to the attacks and camera recordings made subsequently magnify and reproduce the horror of the assault endlessly, disclosing the anguish of the victims and the viewpoint of the attackers.

A desire for death – and not just the death of the other but also their own – combines here with the pervasive consumption and commodification of death. By exposing and showing ‘the horror of the flesh’ in its *real* and absolute dimension, this *death economy* expresses overlapping interlaced trajectories. Although pursuing a verification of symbolic authority and its crisis to some extent – we cannot avoid detecting a certain outstanding exposure of the ‘body of the condemned’, which points to a return of the Foucauldian ‘spectacle of the scaffold’ – it simultaneously sustains a narcissistic wish to leave a durable impression on the world, as we shall soon see.

In the case of global jihadism, this narcissistic drive fuels key tactical objectives, allowing jihadist organizations to use images and videos as tools of mediatic jihad. Employing this approach, *Daesh* has been particularly successful in implementing it in its propaganda activity. Dreadful videos of individual beheadings supplant the aseptic images normally associated with media coverage of war in the West (which removes individual instances of blood and bodies), bringing to the forefront what is the repressed, individualized, and corporeal dimension of death, then to be sublimated in the hyperreal imaginary of blood and violence of Hollywood cinema.

It is in this esthetics of violence that I suggest with Baudrillard that ‘the spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle’ (Baudrillard 2001). Whether in the macro propaganda activity of *Daesh* or the single terrorist actions of suicide mass killers, the speechless anguish of the other requires exposure and solicitation. The victims in contemporary suicide attacks across the West are transformed into a terrified and powerless quarry to whom, in a sadistic fashion, an unresolved castration can ultimately be transferred. In contrast, attackers reconstitute themselves as empowered superheroes.

Despite common underlying challenges and traits, however, we think that the eschatological imaginary orienting the jihadist drive signals a difference between Islamic terror and nonreligious mass killing and cannot just be dismissed as purely imaginary support. Fethi Benslama observes in his analysis of Islamic radicalization that most of the radicalized youth in question are teenagers and

young adults who might experience a sort of moratorium period of adolescence, which prolongs the structural state of crisis through which the identity of the young is normally constituted (Benslama 2016: 41).

While it is typical of this age to pass through a painful process of disidentification and reidentification marked by intense phases of depression and exaltation, this condition is felt with dramatic intensity by those who are most exposed to global processes of deracination and desocialization played out in contemporary society. In this sense, radicalization functions as a ‘way of healing’ for the young, especially those whose social, cultural, and family roots – a term constituting the very etymology of radical (*radix*) – have faded away under global challenges, while the possibility to ‘root again’ is increasingly restricted (Benslama 2016: 51).

For Benslama, Islamism intervenes here as an ‘anti-political utopia’ offering a way out of this condition (Benslama 2016: 51). Emerging as a fundamentally anti-modern discourse aimed at the restoration of the traditional and patriarchal shield, Islamism stands in all its forms as a symptom of the crisis of Islamic civilization. We now witness the transformation of the Muslim into a *super-Muslim*. The existential imperative of its melancholic imaginary is not to ‘become’ but to ‘go back to being’, to find roots in that perfect Islamic society displayed only in the past, within the Golden Age of Islam.

While agreeing with Roy that no ‘political-programmatic end’ informs jihadist organizations such as *al-Qaeda* and *Daesh* (Benslama 2016: 25), Benslama extends this apolitical feature to any other Islamist manifestation, including mainstream groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Nahda*, and so on. Conversely, I would rather retain a canonical distinction here between global jihadism and mainstream Islamism, highlighting the eminently political and modern tone that has long informed the agenda of mainstream groups, whether in their anti-colonial struggle or in their involvement in contemporary domestic politics. I would thereby conclude that dismissing political determinations behind global jihadism too in the manner of both Roy and Benslama risks downplaying a vital component behind current phenomena of radicalization. Their approach risks overemphasizing mental pathology to disconnect, as François Burgat notes, ‘the European and Middle Eastern political theatres’, ultimately ‘exonerating’ Europe ‘of any responsibility’ (Burgat 2015).

To bear such an approach to these phenomena is not to deny some diminished political capacity of global jihadism, although we should restrict it to a millenarian and apocalyptic trajectory informing



the jihadist galaxy. Originally articulated as a radical alternative in the thought of Sayyid Qutb, this trajectory, which we could perhaps term *apocalyptic jihadism*, signals an abandonment of political *jihad* in favor of a radical quest for salvation and purification based on the eschatological ideal of the perfect Islamic society. It reflects Qutb's pessimistic impression that Islamic society might be lost forever in 'the vast ocean of *jahiliyyah* [unbelief] which has encompassed the entire world' and could be recoverable only after the Last Day (Qutb 2006 [1964]: 12).

The spectral dimension of the Islamic society – as one that no longer inhabits the plane of history but will be fully disclosed in the afterlife – allows here for a lugubrious encounter, resonating with the increasingly armed and apocalyptic precipitation of globalized capitalism. In the face of a market that is more and more presented by a global fideistic discourse posing as an eschatological revelation – as best exemplified by Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* (Di Cesare 2017) – in its millenarian incarnation, global jihadism opposes what we could call an eschatology of generalized catastrophe. It is specifically in relation to this apocalyptic trajectory that Benslama's and Roy's characterizations of Islamic radicalization gain particular efficacy, notably when considered in the light of that overall enfeeblement of the social bond and segregating drives that Lacan long emphasized in his later work.

While highlighting the intricacies underlying political, theological and socioeconomic factors, we might then describe the apocalyptic eschatology that Islamic terror instantiates as a response to a context in which deracination and precariousness emerge as holistic existential conditions. This approach demands that we fully underscore the impact of massive processes of uprooting and displacement, much as Roy and Benslama have done. At the same time, it also requires that the effects of the increasingly authoritarian and armed logic of financialization be thoroughly traced.

Central here is how that global homogenization of the markets to which Lacan pointed has been now fully permeated by an economic theology of a generalized indebtedness that, as a reaction, has stirred another dramatic type of self-immolation typified by the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi at the beginning of the Arab uprisings. While families, local milieus, and cultural and social environments are less and less able to offer solid roots, the precarities of working life produced by a neoliberal economic order have contributed to dismantling the old symbolic and imaginary parameters of wealth and social and political integration. In the case of Europe, these precarities have also contributed to the displacing crisis of its self-representation, while, in the wider sense, they have aggravated the type of social erosion that the capitalist discourse promotes (Mura, 2015). We can conclude here that they

have deprived young generations – now transformed into the social *precariat* we have come to know – both of time and of their ability to project into the future: to be the master of their present and future destiny. It is at this moment that contemporary jihadist eschatology achieves primary symbolic appeal as a discourse about time and truth.

Apocalyptic jihadism hence articulates its solutions in the light of this general scenario, standing as an invitation to find new ‘roots’ in the afterlife, as I would follow Benslama in stating. Such celestial re-rooting best evidences the return of God’s ‘baneful past’ that Lacan indicated in his interview to Miller, signaling a reversion of his well-known statement: ‘God is dead, nothing is permitted anymore’ (Lacan 2013 [1960]: 25). If God is no longer dead, his vengeful return is instead announced in the actions of the Islamic vanguard, manifesting the reality that everything is again permitted within the hands of said vanguard. Here, terror realizes the fantasy of an absolute liberation of the jihadi, an embodiment of divine violence that eradicates a corrupt human law, finally restoring divine justice.

At the individual level, a ‘furious desire of sacrifice’ permits the jihadist to reemerge in the afterlife and reunite with God, thus realizing an ideal of purity through martyrdom. Immolation and sacrifice finally enable the jihadist to disrupt the sign of time and corruption of the body while canceling any trace of singularity. As Benslama puts it, in escaping psychic dissolution, the desire for death allows the subject to find a unified identity finally liberated from all psychic symptoms. It is thus unity that death bestows, reflecting not only self-sacrifice and renunciation but also what Lacan termed the supreme narcissism of the Lost Cause (Benslama 2016: 59).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with a brief genealogy of psychoanalytic thinking in its broad reflections on religion. It first looked at Freud’s early modernist dismissal of religion, comparing this with Lacan’s valorization of the ethical quests that religion and psychoanalysis are said to share at the heart of their discourse. It then examined Lacan’s later pessimism in opposing the ‘triumph of religion’ in our times to an increasingly uncertain future for psychoanalysis. Moving from a conceptual discussion of these themes to an applied analysis of contemporary challenges, the chapter highlighted the contribution of psychoanalysis to an understanding of the esthetics of violence informing the eschatology of Islamic terror within contemporary global jihadism. Within the framework of such an eschatology, emphasis was put on the desire for self-immolation and sacrifice that infuses contemporary jihadism and that

allows the super-Muslim to reunite with God while achieving a final enfranchisement from the organizing function of the law:

they convert because of their desire to be above the law in the name of the law, a law they assume as superior to all others, through which they ennoble anti-social tendencies and sacralize homicidal impulse. The super-Muslim seeks a *jouissance*, which we would term ‘incest man-God’, for he claims to be confused with his presumed Creator up to the point that he can act in His name [...] If the Muslim seeks God, the super-Muslim believed he has been found by Him (Benslama 2016: 89).

In moving beyond Benslama’s characterization of Islamism, however, a distinction was crucially established between apocalyptic jihadism, which assumes salvation and purification as its supreme objectives, and all those Islamist and even jihadist formations that are substantively committed to a political agenda (whether at a national or transnational level). The latter will act from within the unfolding of time, placing the ummah in ‘the now’ of history, when concrete political interests may be posited and some form of compromise can always be found, even if this requires engaging in ‘political’ violence.

In the extreme form of killing, this split reflects the implacable choice between *killing oneself to kill others* or *killing to be killed*. By traversing this second route, far from affirming the historical grounding of the ummah and defending its concrete political interests, any opposition to unbelief is devoted to the salvific celebration of catastrophe and, at the same time, to the necessary purification required for the afterlife. Resistance to unbelief is not therefore aimed at the paradoxical preservation of the community of believers, which would inevitably postpone the Day of Judgment (*yawm ad-din*). With the ummah posited only as a quest for the afterlife, this eschatology of catastrophe neither restrains nor withholds but rather hurries toward a final reunion at the end of time.

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<sup>1</sup> **Note**

A pioneering international conference on this theme, ‘Islamic Psychoanalysis / Psychoanalytic Islam’, was organized by the College of Psychoanalysts UK, Manchester Psychoanalytic Matrix and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Languages (CIDRAL) at the University of Manchester on June 26–28, 2017. For a detailed review, see Mehdi 2017.

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