

## ISLAM AND ITS EFFECT ON MY PRACTICE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Religion is an important constituent of a person's identity, whether it be a personal identity or an ethnic one. The ethnic religious identity is the seat of deep narcissistic attributes and could be a source of basic character flaws. Analysts and patients enter the analytic relationship with identities that have religious backgrounds, and their religions can have noticeable impact on their relationships. Although each religion has its own characteristics, all religions share some common features that affect the analyst and the analysand's reactions. The author approached Islam as a text that requires and invites a hermeneutic analysis. This approach distinguished it from psychoanalysis and lessened its impact on his practice. However, the author's approach to Islam was instrumental, in a profound way, in clarifying aspects of the classical theory of psychoanalysis, which would not have been easy to reach without taking Islam seriously as a subject of study.

Religious indoctrination starts in the early formative years, and before the child has developed critical abilities. Adults usually present religion to the child as a well-thought-of proposition and as part of his or her growing up to become like them, that is, identifying with them. By the time the critical abilities of the child have developed to allow questioning of the indoctrination, the child's religious identity is established and his or her resistance to questioning religion turns to a defense against the loss of identity. Both analysts and patients enter the analytic relationship with religious identities of some sort. Sometimes this identity is a simple personal religious belief, and sometimes it is a complex ethnic identity. The ethnic religious identity is the seat of deep narcissistic attributes and could be a source of basic character flaws.

As a child I was brought up a Moslem. Islam was introduced to me as a simple, logical, and correct way of worshiping God. Most important, it was emphasized that Islam has no mystical side, because God chose not to give the prophet Mohammad any supernatural powers to perform miracles (as he did Moses or Jesus). As a result, the Moslem's only

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source and confirmation of belief is the “perfection” of the Koran, which attests to its divine source, and the conviction that the prophet, who was an ordinary human being, was chosen by God because he was close to perfection, without being divine. If any of those two premises were questioned, there would be no foundation for faith in Islam.

Islam that might have had an effect on my practice had to be Islam in my time, and not today’s Islam. In the late 1930s and the 1940s the society of Egypt (my country of birth), and the Islamic world in general, were open, tolerant, and liberal in their religiosity. Religion at that time was a mild, pleasant way of worshiping God. Going to the mosque for Friday prayers was almost an educational event, because people flocked to the mosques that had enlightened and knowledgeable preachers (Imam). The reason, as I presume, is that the society as a whole in the 1930s and the 1940s was engaged in political struggles with an occupying force (Britain), and the religious leaders were sort of political leaders who presented people with political issues more than religious ones. Religion came second or third in the important problems people had to deal with on a daily basis. Islam and Christianity were not prominent features in the Egyptians’ identity. However, sometimes, identifying oneself as a Moslem or a Copt was part of patriotism, because it was a statement to distinguish oneself from the Europeans and the British. The only acceptable ethnic identity, at that time, was nationalistic. In other words, when the society was preoccupied by a more pressing objective, liberation—and seemed also to have faith in its capabilities of achieving that—religion was not a main preoccupation, as it is now.

It was possible in those days to be critical of Islam; one was free to be an atheist without being exposed to persecution or oppression. The politics of Islam were the same as the politics of the time. The political right leaned more toward religion, and the left wing was antireligion. I was impressed as a child by a talk I heard about the chief Egyptian religious figure in the early 1920s, who allowed open discussions of the holiness of the prophet Mohammad. In that social atmosphere, I started questioning Islam very early in my teens, to my parents’ consternation but not to their total prohibition. Four or five years later, I stopped public rebellion on Islam, because I became intrigued by it and began to study it as a subject matter. At that same time, I started studying psychology and psychoanalysis under the mentorship of three psychoanalysts who trained in France. They acquainted me with hermeneutics, which had relatively newly been introduced by Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. Hermeneutics became a point of confluence between my two interests, Islam and other religions on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other. At that time, I toed the classical line of understanding religion in terms of the psychodynamic model, which rendered it a psychopathological phenomenon.

I was directed early in my studies in psychoanalysis to read Freud as a text that needed deciphering and redeciphering, or as Laplanche once put it, “make the Freudian text work for you; ask it your most difficult questions” (verbal communiqué, International Publishers Association [IPA] Congress, Helsinki, Finland, 1981). In training I was also explained the essence of *working through* as the process of reading and rereading the patient’s association as the way to revealing new and more elaborately disguised meanings in the same material. I find it necessary, at this point, to clarify my current position regarding hermeneutics, hopefully to avoid the misunderstandings of its meaning that are common in contemporary psychoanalysis. In practice, I stay at the level of uncovering the unconscious meanings in the patient’s material, but I complement that by doing the necessary work of *construction* that aims at putting the factual events in the patient’s life within the revealed meanings. After reaching that stage, it is the patient who must take the next step of *reconstructing* his analytic experience as a whole, which becomes the core of his autoanalysis, a work of a lifetime. In other words, the meanings and the constructed

material revealed in analysis can be of value only when autoanalysis reveals their validity (determinism). The validity of analysis is not in the correctness of the revealed meaning, or the content of the interpretations. It is to be sought in the way signification was constructed and in how the meanings are hidden and how they are revealed. The closest example is in interpreting dreams. Revealing the latent content is only a step toward uncovering the *dream work*, which is the true work of interpretation.

Hermeneutics are also central in the work of the theologian as he or she reveals the embedded meanings in a religious text. It is up to the individual to decide for himself whether he should have faith that those meanings were God's or instead consider them to be contrived by a Jewish prophet or a disciple of Jesus or God's last messenger. The Koran for the Moslem is not an inspiration or a revelation from God to Mohammad; it is the exact words of God, in Mohammad's own language and dialect, recited to him as a message by the archangel Gabriel. It is a text par excellence and must be deciphered to yield its meanings. Reading and rereading it is supposed to reveal God's endless hidden meanings within his words.

This fact made me realize that the influence of Islam on me might have been more in my approach to psychoanalysis as a doctrine and less in my clinical work. Islam was a counterpoint: It served the function of a dialectical antithesis to analysis. Part of the reason I kept my interest in it was to safeguard my interest in analysis. However, if I had stayed at the level of thinking dismissively of Islam as a psychopathological phenomenon and not studied it as a subject matter, I would not have been well prepared to become an analyst. It was a limited way of understanding a major human condition and revealed an undesirable capacity for prejudice, which is a major flaw in any analytic practice. It would have also curtailed my familiarity with a sense of unsettlement, whenever my mind tended to settle—another necessity for good practice. My conviction that Islam is not a Godly message freed me to explore its nature and its place in the “collective mind” of the society. If Islam had an effect on me, it must have been through disputing it. Having come to this conclusion in my search for its effect on me, I was confronted with a paradox. If I have refused Islam as a religion, how did I still keep an interest in studying it, along with other religions? What is explicit in both the theory of psychoanalysis and Islam opened the horizons of Islam and expanded it beyond the limited ideas of the psychopathological viewpoint, and also widened the horizons of the psychoanalytic doctrine and allowed me to discover more potentials in the classical theory. What intrigued me in the Koran is its unusual suitability to be understood both as a specific moment (historically) and as a general set of edicts (ahistorically). For instance, in the Koran there is an *A'ya* (edict) that permits the Moslem to have up to four wives, conditional on being absolutely fair and just in treating the four. But the next *A'ya* that complements it says, “and you will *never* be absolutely fair to all of them.” That edict came down to Mohammad at a time when polygamy was the social rule; therefore, it had a historical justification. The annulment of the permission in the complementary *A'ya* is ahistorical, allowing it to be used to forbid polygamy at a later time, or under different circumstances. The Koran is full of examples of giving with one hand to respond to the specific and taking away by the other to address the general. In studying the Koran, I was always amazed at how the text was so brilliantly written to allow possible, different, and even contradictory interpretation without losing its integrity. It does not give a chance for the ill informed to notice those contradictions.

Quite early on, I recognized the difference between the Islamic text, with its flexibility, and the psychoanalytic text, with its unconscious meanings. They stood in opposition and contrast. The links between meanings in the Koran are equivocal, and sometimes problematic, although a faithful Moslem is supposed to see in that feature the glory of God's

words. In the psychoanalytical text, the links between the manifest and the latent are arbitrary. Only in expressing those links in free association do we encounter the equivocal signification in the *words* used but not in the *content* of what they denote. The words spoken by the patient embody both the revealing of the unconscious meaning and its disguise. The religious text has a multiplicity of meanings. Revealing them depends on the time and objective of the interpretation. On the other hand, the psychoanalytic text, whether it is Freud's or a patient's, has only one meaning that is structured as layers around one unconscious nucleus.

I have to say that there is nothing in Islam, as such, that goes against psychoanalysis. However, I realize now that if I had accepted the Islamic doctrine and identified myself with it, I would have been unfit to become an analyst. When I was in Egypt lately, I noticed that young people, at the age when they should be discovering ideas for themselves, were chained to the strong religious indoctrinations they were exposed to as children and were very leery of free thinking lest they lose their faith. I also had the experience of teaching the PhD students in the same department of psychology I had graduated from 40 years before. I encountered the same phenomenon of refraining from thinking independently for fear of contradicting the thesis supervisor. The preference of having "readymade ideas" overshadowed the satisfaction of making up one's own mind. The reasons are subtle but obvious. At the time the child's critical ability is capable of discovering the gaps in religion, it is too late. The result is a tendency to mobilize that faculty to prove religion to be right by any means, using what logicians call "begging the question." Religion is based on deductive thinking that starts from the conclusion (creation) to deduce the start (God). This way of thinking could be called analytic but not psychoanalytic.

Like all religions, Islam pays lip service to logical thinking, but if logic conflicts with faith it offers instead some metaphysical links between causes and effects, like fate, God's will, and "we are limited in understanding God's intentions." As an analyst, I cannot take an attitude of that nature and maintain the necessary neutrality and the ability to suspend judgment until the material for interpretation is available. I can give two good examples from Islam to support this idea. In the Koran the soul (*el-Rouh*) is mentioned in abundance, whereas the psyche (*el-Nafse*) is mentioned only three times, with three different attributes: Serenity and calmness, enticement to do evil, and culpability. Some Moslem psychologists see that tripartite division of the psyche to be similar to Freud's division of ego-id-superego. But when we consider the occasions the psyche is mentioned (the historical) and the context of that mentioning (the ahistorical), we cannot take them as implicit statements about a psychological theory that will be coming. The second example is of a Moslem mathematician (Hassab el-Naby, 1990) using three unrelated Koranic verses to calculate the speed of light. He built his calculations on propositions derived from three unrelated verses and came up with a figure close to the actual measured speed of light, within 5 meters per second (Fix, 1995). Once again, there was no connection between the three verses, and they were not meant to say anything about the speed of light. In terms of logic he begged the propositions to corroborate the thesis that the Koran contains divine knowledge.

There are similar situations in psychoanalysis, where a sort of begging the question applies. We already have a great deal of knowledge about dreams, symptom formation, early infantile experiences, object relations, transference, and so forth. It is tempting, if it is not actually happening, for analysts to use that knowledge in practice as the means to make practice validate certain theories of psychoanalysis. It is also tempting to use that kind of practice to substantiate and justify theoretical affiliations. In other words, a

practice of analysis based on “beforehand” knowledge (already knowing what you are looking for) will have deep features of the religious way of thinking. The classical psychoanalytic theory, which I advocate, is practical, as the practice of psychoanalysis is theoretic; therefore, it is not founded on a practice that applies a theory, or a theory that designs practice. Islam, in light of those distinctions, offered me a clear criterion for nonpsychoanalytic thinking, which I believe helped in keeping me focused on the defined attributes of the classical theory.

One of my early objections to Islam was the inequality between the genders in it. Male domination in Islam is a God-given right that is mentioned in the Koran. A Moslem male has no right to relinquish it, as a Moslem female has no right to question it.<sup>1</sup> I always thought I was liberated from that indoctrination of Islam and its possible effects on my practice. It was easy to think so, but I found out later that it was not true. When I came to Canada, 35 years ago, I felt more at home in that regard. Some circumstances forced me lately to return to Egypt for a few years, during which I practiced analysis. I noticed that I was exerting a great effort to refrain from arguing with my patients, male and female, about their attitude regarding male domination. My (secret) emotional response was obviously a defense of reaction formation. This could not be merely the result of an unconscious lurking attitude toward sex. It was a manifestation of a lurking narcissism, derived from an Islamic male chauvinism. In my early exposure to that aspect of Islam, the society was encouraging women’s emancipation, and it was easy to challenge the ideology of the religious right regarding women’s rights. Therefore, I did not notice then the intrapsychic conflict about renouncing my status as a male in the society. This aspect of Islam is usually the most affected by social change and the one that attracts most attention from Westerners. The reason is that sex is a magnet to all issues of morality, and female sexuality is a convenient target for projections. When a Moslem society deteriorates and its cohesiveness is threatened, the religious institution gets more powerful and resorts to sexual restrictions (mainly on women) as a means to controlling social immorality.

The interest in the subject of religion and psychoanalysis seems to stem from two sources: Does the analyst’s religion play a part in his practice,<sup>2</sup> and what would the analyst do with his patient’s religious beliefs? If we keep in focus the difference between religion as an ethnic identity and religion as a personal belief, we could address those two questions with some ease. Adopting the particular ideas of one’s religion (faith in the doctrine) comes much later in the individual’s life, if it ever comes. There are convincing indications that an ethnic religious identity is more resilient and remains quite central in the person’s identity, even if and after that person loses faith in his or her religion. This

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<sup>1</sup>The second country in recent history to have elected a female prime minister was Pakistan, which is very Islamic. The leaders of the only two opposing political parties in Bangladesh, another very Islamic country, are women. This is a good instance to show that religion follows societal changes and does not cause them. This also confirms that the power of the ahistorical meaning is stronger than the historical one in the Koranic text.

<sup>2</sup>The effect of the analyst’s religion on his theoretical preferences is an important but rarely studied issue. Generally speaking, psychoanalysis started and flourished in the societies that adopted the model of a God who resides in heaven surrounded by his angels while his creatures exist in a different universe, which he created for them. Analysis did not meet the same interest in societies that adopted cosmic models of religion where everything is within the same cosmos, that is, in constant recycling with no beginning or end. What is worshiped in those religions is the forces that keep the universe going. We have to wonder whether Jewish, Christian, and Moslem analysts, with their three heavenly religions, have preferences to certain schools of analysis, too.

phenomenon puts the effect of religion within the domain of narcissism, considering that breaking away from it has proven to be almost impossible, because it involves the roots of the person's identity. Even in the cases when someone denies his affiliation to his ethnic origin, he displays only rejection and not true freedom. Religion is possibly the prototype of all social identifications and ethnicity.

Religion as an ethnic identity involves aspects of narcissism, which could affect the analyst's practice and interpretation of the theoretical foundation of his practice. Religion as an active ethnic identity in patients could, and maybe should, be considered part of character defenses, because the ethnic religious identity is not a matter of choice. The individual has no means to claim that he adopted it willingly or that he denies or negates it, even if he is no longer a believer. Denying it can only take it away; it does not provide a replacement. Not being a Moslem does not make me anything else until I convert and adopt another ethnic identity. On the other hand, a personal religious system of beliefs could, and maybe should, be considered an aspect of the ego's ability or inability to secure an identity of itself. This is an important feature in both the analyst and the analysand, because it is a freely chosen or rejected identity and does not represent a source of narcissistic gratification derived from others.

The stronger hold the ethnic identity has over the individual's narcissism allows a young Moslem to blow himself up (for martyrdom). An analyst with an ethnic Islamic identity would be liable, as a rule, to experience strong problems with anger, hate, prejudice, and a host of other narcissistic disturbances, especially if his "authority" in therapy is challenged (as with my reaction to my patients' attitude to male superiority). A Moslem patient with an ethnic religious identity will present the analyst with a fragile and vulnerable personal identity, which is defended by a rigid Islamic one. Analysis of defense in that case would be experienced as an attack on a higher authority, which is considered by the patient to be unrelated to his or her problems or to the process of analysis. A personal religious identity, because it is freely chosen, does not challenge the analyst or constitute to the patient anything different from the other systems of belief that contributed to the formation of symptoms. It becomes amenable to the work of psychoanalysis without much resistance.

I do not see glaring reasons to consider Islam too different from other religions, but maybe religions look different at certain stages of their history, and under certain circumstances.

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