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**Abstract:** Every day we make use of a huge variety of signs. For the most times, we do it deliberately, creating a wide range of messages and meanings. However, sometimes we use signs unconsciously. So, do we still creating a wide range of messages and meanings using signs unconsciously? A sign can be used without any intention of the emitter to communicate anything? Meanings are made everywhere. In the religious field of meaning-making, can we imagine religious practices and rites without symbols, meanings, Gods or feelings represented in images? My primary focus is on how semiotics can be used in the social study of religious symbolism; my following focus is on the patterns and structures of signs used in religious practices, conditioning the meanings which can be communicated and understood. I will also focus on the relations between signs in a social and cultural context; the connections between signs, myths and ideology. So, as I ask in the title: Is religious fear a disease? Is it rational? If not, why God remains a “grammatical ghost”, according to George Steiner’s expression? If it is, what’s the role of semiotics to religious belief and practice? My purpose is to reflect if religious fear is a mental and mythic disease and if religion is deeply tied to mythic meanings forming ideologies for beliefs in God.

**Keywords:** Fear, meaning, religion.

## Mythic meanings and ideology for beliefs in God: Is religious fear a disease?

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“The fear of society, which is the basis of morality, and the fear of God, which is the secret of religion, are the two things that govern us.”  
(Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*)

In a small book entitled *Nietzsche, Freud and Marx*, Michel Foucault summarizes the pretentious and burned down human nature as follows: “According to Freud, there are three major narcissistic wounds in Western culture: the wound imposed by Copernicus; the one made by Darwin when he discovered that man descended from the ape; and the wound caused by Freud when he, in turn, discovered that consciousness arises from the unconsciousness” (Foucault, 2000: 51-2).

The Freudian wound comes from the understanding of religion as the extension of the more archaic illusions, i.e. religion expresses infantile wishes projected in adulthood; it is the manifestation of hidden meanings of unconscious drives.

Human nature is, in general, suggestible and imaginative; it is likely to believe in reality or metaphysical entities. This is, for example, the conviction of Spinoza, who said that individuals would not be superstitious if they were able to govern all their circumstances by a set of rules or if they were well-off. On the contrary, individuals are often driven on narrow paths, for which they need rules, oscillating between hope and fear. Therefore, individuals are, concluded Spinoza, prone to credulity, to blindly believe in superstitions engendered, preserved and nurtured by fear. Spinoza pointed out this fear that leads to the gullible in the Preface to his most well-known work *Tractatus theologicus politicus*, meaning that it is the fear that, on the one hand, promotes beliefs and superstitions and, on the other hand, guide the conduct.

On the phenomenology of religious life, Heidegger (2010: 255) sustained the same: “it is the fear that guides”. But fear is a genuine fear, a reverence. Heidegger mentioned this idea from Kierkegaard, who believed that the fear discovers the fate. Considering beliefs as product of the fear or feelings of inferiority will be designing a human psychological conception of religion. In the same context of Spinoza, David Hume argued in 1757 in his *The Natural History of Religion*, a vision of religion based

on naturalism and psychology of individuals, insofar as he held that the idea of religion emanated and developed according the uncertainty and fear towards life and not according to reason.

My purpose is to develop a psychological perspective about religion as a psychic reality, the result of a sort of mental construction of reality, and an emotional mechanism of collective meanings, like the fear. Both aspects of this negative perspective guide people over the social practices.

## **2. RELIGION AS A PSYCHIC REALITY AND A HIDDEN MEANING OF FEAR**

This psychological perspective of religion is close to a phenomenological conception. Rudolf Otto represented this phenomenological perspective, which conceives religion in a psychological dimension, exploring the sacred as a mystery. The representation of the sacred as a mystery has important advantages, as recognized by Niklas Luhmann (2007: 56): “what we perceive becomes strange, but it leaves it in the condition we may perceive”. The sacred is presented as a mystery, i.e. prohibition or impossibility of communication that defines a certain sense to the sacred object that raises mystery.

Rudolf Otto looked at to understand what he called “the experience of the numinous”. According to Roger Caillois (1988: 16), Otto’s work is about the subjective dimension of the subject, that is, it’s about the feeling of the sacred. The sacred is analyzed from a psychological perspective and in an almost introspective way.

In his infamous work, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto (2005: 21) summarized the experience of the numinous as “*mysterium et tremendum fascinans*”, a mystery that causes fear and, simultaneously, fascination. The sacred is an unique category of the religious domain, it is ineffable and escapes from the rational domain, giving rise to complex, original and particular feelings, i.e. the essence of religious experience. Therefore, the subject of an experience of the numinous lives in a relationship with the sacred as a level break that allows him to enter into a totally different order of reality.

According to Otto’s view, religion can be understood only through the notion of holiness, an *a priori* category, a non-rational feeling or intuition of the numinous. This is a feeling of fear and mystery, an experience of something “totally other” which is manifested in various religious and mystical experiences of devotion. Currently,

religious experiences continue to reveal these feelings of fear and mystery, explaining that this is the sense that supports any religious belief. Thus, in a context where individuals feel full of uncertainties and fears, religion asserts the contributive role to the maintenance of the values of life as the ultimate reward, the possibility of success, happiness and prosperity. In other words, these are the bases of human nature.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James demonstrated the psychological feature of human nature, in general, and that of religious experiences, in particular. In a mixed environment of a certain radical empiricist (or pragmatism) and a transcendentalism, James pointed out religion as a subjective experience, i.e. a solemn, serious and emotional attitude. The conception of religion proposed by James (as the feelings, acts and experiences of individual in their solitude) is refuted, for example, by Daniel Dennett (2006: 11). According to Dennett, by focusing on the individual and their private religious experiences, James would have no difficulty in identifying a solitary believer as someone with a religion. For Dennett (2006: 11), James believed that the beliefs, rituals, components and political hierarchies of organized religion were distractions from the essential religious phenomenon, but also social and cultural factors affecting the structure and content of the experience of individuals.

If the meanings of things and situations are not products of effective and concrete causes, but the creation of subjective individuals, then, a psychological view of religion can better understand the meaning and the sense of religious experience. The idea of religion conceived as a “collective unconscious”, a shared psychic reality, also fits the psychological perspective of religion and human nature. The work of Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, is representative of this idea, by suggesting that religion is not just a sociological or historical phenomenon, but also has a deep psychological significance. Like Otto, religious experience is understood as being submissive to a cause or an external power and superior to the human realm. A religious belief is seen as psychologically true, since the underlying idea exists in someone’s mind, that is, someone believes in that idea. Jung defined religion as a numinous experience which appropriates and controls human domain. By designating the religion as “collective unconscious” Jung identified some crucial functions to the personality of individuals, to the extent that meanings were linked to the existence. But it also revealed a therapeutic role.

These meanings and therapies are due, according to Jung, to the fact that people

believe in religious illusions and unfathomable ideas like God. There is an empirical reason for people to believe in these illusions and ideas that can never be proven: these illusions and ideas are known to have a given utility. People normally need to believe on general ideas that assign meanings to their lives and lead them to seek a place for themselves in the world.

Religious beliefs are, in the sense proposed by Jung, a kind of mental therapy to the many limitations of people (suffering, ignorance, anxiety, rage, illness, old age, death, etc.). Jung not only reduced religion to a psychological phenomenon, he also raised the unconscious as a religious phenomenon. In addition to understanding religion as a psychic reality, Jung also considered religion as an expression, a subjective expression of an objective reality.

## 2.1. PSYCHO-PATHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

In the Introduction of this article, I mentioned an interesting idea expressed by Foucault regarding the Freudian narcissistic wound in Western culture: the unconsciousness. When he presented a detailed and realistic picture of human condition, Freud pointed out a scientific therapy aiming to make people soft to be “worked” and not make people good (Murdoch, 2001: 50).

In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (2006a: 52) presented a negative and critical view of religion as a “universal obsessive neurosis of humanity”. Religion is an illusion (Freud, 2008: 9). George Steiner (2003: 32) argues that the book *Civilization and its Discontents* offers an ironic and desolate diagnosis of the tensions, deletions and distortions undergone by the *psychê* in the process of their adjustment to the economies of organized society. Reflecting about the misfortune, apparently inherent to the human species, caught in biological and social drives and constraints, Freud’s get increasingly interest into the mythical (Steiner, 2003: 32).

According to Freud (2008: 20), people are governed by false standards they seek for themselves to serve as “religious consolation” or palliative face the difficult and painful threats of external world. Religion answers to people’s desires, because it offers promises of happiness to the eternal question of the meaning of life. For Freud (2008: 26), this is the happiness of the ataraxy or “artificial paradises” that lets escape from the pressures of reality. The religion is a collective illusion; it is a hallucinated

reconfiguration of reality. The religion imposes to everyone and equally the same path to happiness and the same defence against suffering; it plays a deleterious influence (Freud, 2008: 34-5).

When someone chooses the path of religion, he is choosing not to suffer due the prepotency of nature, the fragility of the body and the failure of social institutions that rule relations between men in the family, state and society (Freud, 2008: 37). Given the social origin of suffering, people activate certain mental mechanisms of protection. The faults or deficiencies lead people to the need to eliminate such faults or deficiencies through civilizational resources (a set of values, actions and useful skills or achievements giving protection against nature and regulation of human relations) which are subterfuges. For example, Freud considered the ideal of omnipotence and omniscience created by men and embodied in his gods. Believers assigned desires to these gods and to the civilizational ideal, whose satisfaction seemed impossible or forbidden. According to Freud (2008: 44) man became a prosthetic god.

*The Future of an Illusion* pointed out a critical psychological perspective, but also a grammatical perspective, considering that people, especially the more educated, dissecting the meanings of words until the last effort to ascertain their senses, calling “God” to a vague abstraction that they previously created for themselves.

## **2.2.MYTH AND MYTHICAL MEANINGS**

The humanity records many myths invented and sustained by human beings. This fact reveals that the surrounding reality for all people is not limited to the visible material world, but also involves a hidden and intangible dimension, which serves the demand for a more comfortable and rewarding existence. In various cultures and societies, myths distinguish the passage and retention of human beings in the world, through the fertile and necessary human capacity to have collective metaphysical ideas which serve to overcome the tangible everyday experience.

People produce, consume, use and seek meanings to understand why they are gregarious and consciousness beings about the past. The distinguishing feature of the human mind to skilfully create and own ideas and experiences that cannot be rationally explained inspire our symbolic imagination. With this faculty (the symbolic imagination) we may reflect or not about several mysterious issues. The symbolic

imagination is provided by the representative power of signs, indispensable elements in any myth. According to Karen Armstrong (2006: 8), the imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology, whether in contemporary mythic thought eventually come under discussion, questioning or discrediting and therefore be rejected as irrational and serve the individual interests or desires.

If the symbolic imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology, both (religion and mythology) serves to widen the scope of human beings, because they allow us to live more intensely in a codified, symbolized and mythologized world. In this case, religion and mythology has always been assumed as more accessible and traditional ways of reaching ecstasy or rapture. For example, according to Karen Armstrong (2006: 21), most religions and mythologies of ancient societies are imbued with nostalgia for the lost paradise. That's why the primary objective was to show people how they could come back to this archetypal world.

The myth is a narrative, a story with evocative and exciting content conveyed orally. According to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (2007b: 261), the myth is a communication system, a message, i.e. the myth can be an object, a concept, an idea, in short, a speech in any medium. The myth is always present in the collective memory, but it is also susceptible to adaptations. It is the vehicle for conveying moral teachings about how to behave (Armstrong, 2006: 10). The myth has the power to manage desires or fears, motivating people to do certain things.

The myth is able to help people dealing with problematic human conditions, i.e. finding their place in the world. Another function of the myth is to organize the society, regarding an individual and collective psychology. The myth is true because it is effective, not because it convey factual information (Armstrong, 2006: 15). The myth is effective even if it reveals or shows an illusion or an impossible meaning. The myth is true and effective providing us a new insight into the deeper meanings of life, i.e. working as a guide.

The human existence would be bearable without myths? If it would be not bearable, it would certainly be more difficult to support human existence without myths, because they play a palliative role on the desires, anxieties and fears present in the collective mentality.

Nowadays, according to George Steiner (2003: 16), we need myths as never, i.e. we need a full explanation or an assured prophecy, because we cannot overcome and

resolve the existential antinomies and antitheses through rational processes. So, we remain capable of manufacturing myths, because we are a sort of “myth-*poien* primate” (Levi-Strauss *apud* Steiner, 2003: 40). Only we can build, shape and give emotional adherence to the myth-logic, “the mythical and the logical, the logical inside the myth” (Steiner, 2003: 40). This ability has not been extinguished yet, although we are increasingly in a secularized and post-modern world, which is marked by the globalization phenomenon of all human experiences.

### 2.3. THE SECULARIZATION OF POST-MODERN MAN

In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche sought to demystify the relative importance that people attach to certain entities. Nietzsche wanted to show that the foundations upon which we build our truths, especially the more sacred or absolute for us (those assuming the form of “our idols”) were a product of history. Therefore, Nietzsche proposed that we use reason to understand precisely the decision-making power, the will to power as an insatiable desire to manifest power that is most crucial, rather than life and nature. Nietzsche had an uncommon and orthodox conception of true. The truth was not conceived by Nietzsche as something we discover about the world. The truth is a moral quality and, therefore, something subjective, controversial and interpretable. Morality is the province of the collective, not of the individual. It is the collective that give us the concepts of “good” and “bad”, without allowing us to create our own conceptions.

Nietzsche’s nihilism and will to power marked the end of modernity. According to Gianni Vattimo (1998: 19) modernity was announced by Nietzsche as the final consummation of the belief in the human being and reality as objective data. Following this perspective, we have an illusory and socially constructed consciousness.

However, this collective consciousness is irrational, because it allows us to perceive and accept an unsatisfactory and dual reality, since it does not correspond to the expectations and hopes of a better life. This reality is based on meanings which cannot be universal. On the contrary, we use, produce and consume relative meanings regarding the social context in which we operate. Despite the post-modern societies were homogenized in their uses, customs, desires, needs and social behaviors, there are no universal meanings about social reality or absolute values, such as happiness,

because circumstances are different. We live in pure abstraction mediated by language, because we are beings who inevitably speak to each other through a shared code and shared abstractions of subjective experiences.

The Nietzsche's perspective shows the misconceptions of the "idea of God" or the "idea of God's love for his creatures". However, these ideas provide comfort to their believers. People act and behave in society and they face the reality based on the meaning that things have or take for them. The society is conceptualized and encoded through socio-cultural integrated systems of communication, i.e. systems of coded messages where the meanings of things are shared as social heritage.

In Nietzsche's perspective, God died. How? God's followers and believers learned not to lie, because God ordered, and they discovered that God was, after all, a lie created by the believers themselves. The death of God is an opportunity to incarnate and to empty the divine. Without myth, cult, ritual and ethical life, the sense of the sacred dies. The death of God symbolizes the uprooting of human beings and humanity itself in a world that become demythologized and unspeakable.

Then, the collective existential problem was: How to live without God, without illusions, without neuroses in a seemingly chaotic world? Against all the background of post-modernity, the individuals must become free from their own limitations, from the comfortable collective and constructed ideas of God and truth. The post-modern man, secularized, believes he does not need anymore the psychological and magical comfort provided by the idea of God and, therefore, he accepts the hypothesis that there are no transcendent powers able to guarantee the desired happiness. The post-modern man has learned, therefore, to live without fear of God or religion and he was cured of the sickness of holiness.

As product of a epoch, the post-modern man is forced to a) discard the spiritual comfort or the ancient nostalgia for the absolute, provided by the collectively constructed ideas of "God" and of "absolute and organized world"; b) accept his limited and finite human condition in a relative and chaotic world; c) engage in the search of a happiness that only depends on him.

This post-modern (deconstructive and post-structuralist) perspective rejected the concepts of a modern and romantic vision of the world. The rejection is due to the distressing and meta-narrative feature of this modern and romantic vision, i.e. to the fabricated stories and illusions about the reality (Spretnak, 2009: 45).

This post-modern perspective argues that there is nothing in human experience that is not a social construct. So, people do not have, in fact, any experiences or sensations that are not shaped or socially constructed. Connotations, shared meanings and collective concepts like “God”, “truth”, “knowledge” or “culture” are social constructions; they are created in order to obtain and maintain power over others (Spretnak, 2009: 45).

### 3.CONCLUSION

What is the possible relation between feelings of fear and religious feelings? Religion depends on fear? According to A. C. Grayling (2010: 35), fear is the basis for many social diseases. Fear gives rise to superstitions and feelings of antipathies or hostility towards new or different beliefs and practices. Sometimes fear is associated with ignorance: both have an inexorable logic in human attitude, harm people and inhibit free and bold actions; other times, fear arises through ignorance or through the refuse to accept the factual truth. For example, some religious beliefs foster the fear of death, because people simply do not want to die and would rather not think about it. However, death is inevitable and people know it even not want to die. Some religious conceptions promise what people want: eternal life beyond death, i.e. an alternative to the inevitable and inalienable death and fear of death in this world.

According to the classical view of Aeschylus, fear makes people weak. Grayling (2010: 35) develop this premise, saying that fear undermines confidence, affects the performance, weakens the decision and distorts perceptions, creating obstacles and monsters where they don't exist. According to Grayling (2010: 124), the religious attitude is marked by a strong refusal to accept things as they are, if this proves inconvenient. Interpreting the divine order is to accept the logical fallacy *argumentum ad baculum*, i.e. the answer of religion to the question of moral skepticism “Why should I behave in such a way?” will be “Because God says so”. Grayling explained that this is a euphemistic way of expression to say “Because you'll be punished if you don't behave this way”.

The paradox of the logic of *argumentum ad baculum* is based on the fact that it consists in a threat. This threat cannot be a logical justification to act in a certain way. So, if there is a God (or a certain divinity) with punitive and vindictive character (like

the Judeo-Christian god) it might be wise to obey and, consequently, avoid the flames of hell. But the threat of punishment is not a reason, based on principles, to obey (Grayling, 2010: 125).

It is obvious that the perspective of religion, as Grayling recognized, would strongly argue that the reason to act morally is not (and should not be) the threat of a divine revenge, but only love (in the Greek sense of the word *agape*, altruistic love, and Latin sense *caritas*, charity) for God and for other human beings. If love is, in the religious view, the only or the most compelling reason to act and be moral, what is the relevance of God existence? That is, if there are human feelings of altruistic love and charity, so why God would exists to push an ethical life? The existence of God would only be justified if God would assume a supervisory role over what people do, based on the criterion of good. But this divine existence would lead to a context of fear, threat and punishment.

Before death, God is like an invisible policy; after death, God is threat of terror to bad actions in life. Both situations certainly do not contribute to the enrichment of the moral life, since the foundation they offer consists of fear and threats of punishment. Exactly what, among other things, a moral life gives us if we follow it (Grayling, 2010: 126). Given this paradox, why religion has so much power to influence our conduct?

Oscar Wilde's proposition (presented as an epigraph to this article) means that the fear is an integral element of human nature and serves as a mechanism of defense against unknown superior forces and can bring some protection to the man himself, who need or prefer to believe in them. According to Oscar Wilde (1999: 36), the fear is the secret of religion, because religion feeds on the fear that creates in people. Religion arouses fear by horror stories about the end of (sinful) life, the apocalypse or death through the proposal of salvation from the evils of the world. By accepting the proposal of salvation, believers have to undergo, be afraid not to sin or do not have free will in action and thought.

In his most famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote that courage disappeared from our race and perhaps we never really had it. So, the only way to get rid of a temptation is to fall into temptation. If we don't give up, our soul become sick wishing forbidden things (Wilde, 1999: 37). It is only in the brain, according to Wilde, where the great sins happen. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible (Wilde, 1999: 41).

The psycho-pathological perspective of religion shows adverse psychological effects caused by religious beliefs, keeping us away from factual truth and proposing a idyllic scenario on which we should/must believe. For example, arguing that the function of some inconvenient truth is to destroy the lie and, in doing it, it affect the happiness of the subject; seek and find the truth is to find a personal fate, because it is like to find a poisonous truth, i.e. it is to leave from an illusion that even provides peace of mind while we move away from the truth.

It is not easy to deal with feelings, as Freud (2008: 10) admitted. In particular purely subjective religious feelings, which are not associated with any certainty. An immediate strange feeling for Freud (2008: 11), because it would represent, for believers, a supposedly indestructible union and a belonging to external world.

Religious symbolism plays an important role in the mental construction of reality. To create mythical meanings (in order to justify religious beliefs) shows fear. It seems to be a natural consequence of an inherent sickness of holiness. The religious fear is a consented sickness and, therefore, it is irrational. The religious fear is a mental sickness, benefiting from the fact that religion is deeply linked to the formation of meanings related to mythical beliefs in God.

This religious fear is also social, because what happens is taken as an expression of divine will. The feeling of guilt is caused by the fear of authority, and this requires the renunciation of instinct's satisfaction (Freud, 2008: 86). Religion needs the authority to impose itself and to impose commandments. While moral system, it is based on social values in order to be useful, requiring them to all who want to live under it. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, religion is a feeling or sense of absolute dependence.

The religious sentiment is entirely irrationalness. The idea of God is an anthropomorphism of consciousness, i.e. it is to give individuality to consciousness (Pessoa, 2006: 33). If it is required a predisposition for each disease, a predisposition of the soul and body for the disease (a sort of abnormality), then the Freudian conception recognizes the human nature his own predisposition to collective neurosis that is religion.

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