
At first glance Tony Thwaites’, Reading Freud: Psychoanalysis as Cultural Theory, may not appear to be a necessary read for a scholar studying religion. Thwaites’ overview of Freud pays particular attention to Freud’s psychoanalytic theories and how cultural theory is not a new application of Freud to culture. Instead Thwaites focus’ on how cultural theory has been a part of Freud’s theories from the very beginning.

For the scholar of religion Reading Freud offers insight into the connection between the unconscious, sexuality and the social to culture. Thwaites moves us away from the popular discussion of Freud as anti-religion, and instead offers us critiques of Freud’s major trains of thought in connection to culture- a category important for the discussion of religion since religion develops and changes within various cultural groups and individual cultural settings. Thwaites divides his discussion of Freud and culture into three categories, though he admits there is some overlapping of these categories; the unconscious, sexuality and the social. Reading Freud is admittedly an overview of Freud’s theory, meant to help the newcomer understand Freud’s work, but it will also provide those familiar with Freud further insight into how psychoanalysis and the human subject “are never separable from questions of culture” (xiii). A scholar of religion may find this useful for discussing how religion and the psyche are never separable from culture.

Particularly interesting is Thwaites’ discussion of the social world and Freud’s Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. Here Freud discusses the “group bond” and the desired object. “For the group, this object may be a beloved or admired leader, certainly, but it may be all sorts of other things as well, from God to Nation (the church and the army are two of Freud’s major examples) to some far more modest common passion or activity (as in fan groups or hobby groups)” (128). Freud suggests people identify with members of their group because each person loves and admires the leader of the group. This leads to a libidinal relationship with the object (leader) as well as identification with others.

Thwaites’ has broken free from the usual organization of a scholarly work which contains a lengthy discussion of Freud supported by quotations within the text. Instead Thwaites has allowed the main text and his argument that culture is inseparable from the human subject to take centre stage. Quotations from Freud are placed into “breakout boxes”, which allow Thwaites to cite at length from Freud’s work. These boxes allow the reader to continue with Thwaites’ argument while at the same time reading Freud’s own words in order to gain an understanding for his psychoanalytic theory. The other somewhat unorthodox set up for this book is a series of inserts into the text which describe Freud’s principle works. Thwaites argues that setting up Reading Freud this way offers multiple vantage points for different kinds of readers. One who is already familiar with Freud will be able to follow the argument about Freud “in the light of various recent influential uptakes of his work” (xiii). While those who are new to Freud will receive not only a survey of his work but also see how his work has shifted and developed throughout his career.

Psychoanalysis appears to revolve around the individual and the individual’s connection to the social. Such a view, according to Thwaites, would imply that there is an initial separation between the individual and the social world which is overcome. But, psychoanalysis, and Freud in particular, is actually focused on the fact that the human subject “is always and already in the world, from the very outset” (3). Things do not just happen to the psyche, they are “constitutive of the psyche
itself, in a way which no longer permits a simple distinction between inner and outer, or between those structures which belong to the psyche and those which are part of the already social world into which it is born” (28). Thwaites’ book highlights the connection of the psyche to the cultural world, showing scholars Freud’s relevance for current discussions of culture and psychoanalysis.

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