

JAN-OLAV HENRIKSEN

# Psychology in Nietzsche's Criticism of Religion

*Religion in  
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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Religion in Philosophy and Theology

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# Psychology in Nietzsche's Criticism of Religion

On Splitting and Loss of Orientation

Mohr Siebeck

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You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you refuse to let yourself stop to unharness your thoughts before any ultimate wisdom, goodness, or power; you have no perpetual guard and friend for your seven solitudes; you live without the view of a mountain-range with snow-capped peaks and fire in its heart; there is no avenger for you anymore, no final corrector of the text of your life; there is no more reason in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; no more resting place stands open for your heart in which to find and no longer seek; you arm yourself against any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace.

(Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 285).



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## Abbreviations of Nietzsche's works

HH	Human, All-too Human
HH-WS	The Wanderer and his Shadow
D	Daybreak
GS	The Gay Science
Z	Thus spoke Zarathustra
BGE	Beyond Good and Evil
GM	On the Genealogy of Morality
TI	Twilight of the Idols
AC	Anti-Christ
EH	Ecce Homo



## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Task

In *The History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell sets forth the following claim about Friedrich Nietzsche's relationship with religion: "Nietzsche is not interested in the metaphysical truth of either Christianity or any other religion; being convinced that no religion is really true, he judges all religions entirely by their social effects."<sup>1</sup> We can rephrase Russell's statement in two directions: First of all, from a philosophical point of view, it need not matter if God exists or if there is any truth in religion. Given that God's existence remains impossible to decide, a more relevant approach will be to focus on the consequences of religion and faith for human life, self-understanding, conduct, agency, and social formation, including morality. Whether a religion is true or not, its elements impact human life and shape the human mind. Hence, an approach that considers such impact might be commended. Second, and against Russell, not the social effects are at the forefront of Nietzsche's criticism of religion, but its *psychological* conditions, manifestations, and consequences.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Russell emphasizes the social, whereas Nietzsche is primarily interested in the individual psychological dimension. The point in question comes to the fore in Nietzsche's own words in *Human, All-too Human II*, where he writes:

A Christian who happened upon forbidden paths of thought might well ask himself on some occasion whether it is really necessary that there should be a God, side by side with a representative Lamb, if faith in the existence of these beings suffices to produce the same influences? If they do exist after all, are they not superfluous beings? For all that is given by the Christian religion to the human soul, all that is beneficent, consoling, and edifying, just as much as all that depresses and crushes, emanates from that faith and not from the objects of that faith.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy: And Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Routledge, 1961), 793.

<sup>2</sup> This approach allows for a more functional perspective on religion. Werner Stegmaier speaks, therefore, about "die Funktionalisierung der Religion" in Nietzsche. Religion is no longer anything unconditional but exists under specific conditions – a point that is strongly underscored in Nietzsche's perspectivism, but also in his psychological approach to religion. See Werner Stegmaier, "Nietzsches Religionsprojekt: Seine Kritik, Analyse und Funktionalisierung der Religion," *Nietzscheforschung* 27, no. 1 (2020): 55–74.

<sup>3</sup> HH II, 225. One can also see this statement against the backdrop of Nietzsche's genealogical method, which he uses to show how faith emerged and gained significance:

Given that we can bracket the question about religion's truth, the case for investigating Nietzsche's critique of religion can be articulated in terms of a *pragmatic* approach, as we ask: In what ways, and to what extent, does religious imagery, symbols and practices make a difference in human life, and how are we to assess the conditions of religion in the human psyche and its consequences for the same psyche? Such a pragmatic approach is very much in accordance with Nietzsche's own; he has often been seen as a philosophical ally of pragmatism.<sup>4</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche has always invited psychological interpretations. His vocabulary and frequent and varied psychological considerations provide rich opportunities for a psychological approach to his *oeuvre*. He is a keen, insightful, and pointed observer of the human psyche. It is also a profound interconnection between his psychological insights and his criticism of religion, especially Christianity. This book attempts to read Nietzsche as a psychologist of religion and thereby also as a critic of it. To do so is a task that several others have also taken on, so it is appropriate to identify new or original ideas in the current approach: Unlike many of his previous interpreters, I read him from the point of view of elements in a post-Freudian theoretical perspective. More on this approach below.

To read Nietzsche in this way is not meant to be exclusive: Nietzsche is a philosopher also when he does psychology, and the philosophical aspects of his interpretations of religion are, therefore, the basis for the following. Hence, the aim is to take seriously his philosophy of religion as an attempt to understand religion's preconditions and effects in the human psyche and to interpret his approach in light of recent psychological contributions that go beyond those that emerged in his cultural context. Thereby, the following study will make an assessment as to the lasting insights of Nietzsche, as well as pointing to elements in his thinking that need criticism.

Consequently, it is essential to underscore that the following is not an attempt to provide an analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche's psychological dispositions or to give an account of the wounds and traumas of his psyche. Although knowledge of his biography can provide some insights into, and motivate, further analysis of this type, his writings' content as an object for systematic and critical analysis, and not his psyche stands at the center of the present investigation. However, no study of Nietzsche is possible without considering elements in his biography that can shed light on where he gained his insights. The point is to read his criticism of religion and religious symbols

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Like many others, he seems to think that to the extent that one can demonstrate the origin of faith, any proof of the non-existence of God becomes unnecessary. Cf. D, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g., Jürgen Habermas, "On Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge: A Postscript from 1968." In: B.E. Babich, (ed.) *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol 203 (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999): 209–23.

such as “God” and the concomitant ideals that he sees in some versions of morality from a psychological point of view. The systematic aspect in the present task entails that I am more concerned with reconstructing selected and psychological themes and patterns in his work than providing a comprehensive and detailed overview of all relevant texts.<sup>5</sup> Hence, this is not a book about the development of Nietzsche’s criticism of religion. It considers what he said about different topics that we can address as relevant for the psychology of religion.

However, contrary to many previous interpreters, and as indicated above, I will interpret his work from a psychological point of view not developed by Nietzsche’s own theoretical reflections. It means that the analysis in the following entails that he is read against himself. Contrary to his and others’ focus on drives, post-Freudian psychology of religion is not so much interested in conflicting drives but in how the human psyche develops due to relationships with others.

The chosen psychological approach is nevertheless challenging: On the one hand, a reading of Nietzsche’s critique may shed light on how he views the impact of religious symbols and practices on the human psyche. On the other hand, his views concerning these matters call for a critical assessment, insofar as they are shaped by his highly individualistic and naturalistic approach to human psychology. Hence, we need to ask: What kind of human being does Nietzsche directly or indirectly advocate through his critique? Is his ideal human adequate and healthy from a psychological point of view?

Such questions, and the task ahead, emerge out of a shift in the psychology of religion: The Freudian approach to psychology – to which strand also many of Nietzsche’s insights might be referred and most easily interpreted<sup>6</sup> – has been supplemented (or corrected) by a more relational approach. The latter sees the inner world of the human as constituted fundamentally by its relationships with significant others. Hence, the present task is to consider Nietzsche’s psychology of religion based on a theoretical approach he was not familiar with or aware of – and thus to interpret his critique of religion from a different angle than those who have seen him in line with a traditional, drive-based or drive-

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<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the present study is not genealogical in any sense: it reconstructs themes and topics across Nietzsche’s oeuvre, without paying any respect to where in his works they appear. Moreover, one of the limitations of this approach is that I concentrate on his works from *Human*, *All-too Human* until *Anti-Christ*. I do not go into his early or unpublished writings.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g., Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002). See also for obvious parallels between Freud and Nietzsche, despite differences, the analysis in Katrina Mitcheson, “Techniques of Self-Knowledge in Nietzsche and Freud.” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 3 (2015): 328–48. The latter work also emphasizes the relational aspect of psychology in a manner similar to what I do in the following.



oriented mode of psychology of religion.<sup>7</sup> Thus, contemporary psychology, which sees drives as shaped by relational attachments, entails that understanding their activity seems to require exploring them in the context of the relationships with others towards which they point us.<sup>8</sup>

What, then, about Nietzsche's own psyche? Is it possible to write on his psychology of religion and his criticism of religion without taking it into consideration? In principle, this should be possible and even recommended. His insights can stand on their own feet without being traced back to his personal, psychological dispositions. However, bracketing all biographical information from a project like the following might also seem problematic because it would mean ignoring one important *contextual* dimension for the following study. Therefore, I have decided to provide some biographical information about Nietzsche's early life, insofar as I think it provides a backdrop and a *context of discovery* for some of the psychological theory that I employ when I offer an alternative interpretation of his psychology of religion to the one provided by Freudian-based approaches. To view his biography as a possible context of discovery has two purposes: It can make visible to what extent the theoretical approach may be related to an interpretation of Nietzsche's life, without claiming that it is the only relevant interpretative tool, and without trying to attempt a complete psychological analysis of his biography.<sup>9</sup> Thus, his psychology of religion will not be addressed from an arbitrary point of view but from a perspective integrated with his own life experience. In turn, I argue, this will strengthen the case for the chosen theoretical approach. Hence, it is possible to see Nietzsche's criticism of religion as related to and shaped by his own experiences with religion.

Thus, the approach chosen can be understood as a twist on the quote from Bertrand Russell above. The focus is not on the reality of Nietzsche's psyche, but on how his attack on Christianity reflects his perception of religion in its relationship to the self – not understood in terms of a Freudian, drive-oriented understanding of psychology (of religion) but in terms of how it sheds light on attachment and the formation of the self. Accordingly, the focus in the following chapters is shaped by attachment theory and insights from self-psychology, especially as the latter is developed in the wake of Heinz Kohut's research.

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<sup>7</sup> Sampsa Saarinen's approach is somewhat parallel to mine, insofar as he explores Nietzsche's criticism of religion in the light of his communication of mood. However, his analysis is not based on a theoretical basis similar to the one I develop and employ in the following. See Sampsa Saarinen, *Nietzsche, Religion, and Mood*, Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mitcheson, "Techniques of Self-Knowledge in Nietzsche and Freud," 328.

<sup>9</sup> A similar choice, not keeping the two topics fully apart, is also visible in Jacob Golomb, Weaver Santaniello, Ronald Lehrer, eds. *Nietzsche and Depth Psychology* (Albany: SUNY, 1999).

## Chapter 2

# Psychological Theories for Interpreting Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion

Nietzsche invites psychological reflections. It is impossible to ignore those invites if one engages fully with his work. The result is that many have taken up the gauntlet and written about his psychology – and either assessed his contributions by themselves or as related to or compared with those of others. These attempts to deal with his own psychology or his contributions to the psychology discipline (which is not the same) started already before his death.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, a bibliographic search for “Nietzsche and Freud” will reveal a considerable amount of comparative contributions, as will more historical studies of influence.<sup>2</sup> Much of the comparison with Freud is due to Nietzsche's repeated references to drives as the causes for human action.<sup>3</sup> There exist,

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<sup>1</sup> For the former, see already Lou Andreas-Salomé and Siegfried Mandel, *Nietzsche* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), and Max Riedmann, *Friedrich Nietzsche als Psychologe* (Leipzig: Kortkamp, 1911). For the latter, see H. Aschkenasy, “Voluntaristische Versuche in der Religionspsychologie,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 135, no. 2 (1909): 129–49, and Walter Kaufmann, “Nietzsche als der erste große Psychologe,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 7, no. 1 (1978): 261–87. Saarinen, *Nietzsche, Religion and Mood* discusses these latter contributions critically, stating that “taking an acceptance of his self-interpretation as a standard of judging whether a scholar has recognized Nietzsche as a psychologist can only result in a distorted picture of the history of scholarship” (34).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, Bernard Lauret, *Schulderfahrung und Gottesfrage bei Nietzsche und Freud* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1977); and Golomb, Santaniello, and Lehrer, *Nietzsche and Depth Psychology*. The major work on Freud's acquaintance with Nietzsche is the monumental work by Reinhard Gasser, *Nietzsche und Freud* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For the lack of a coherent theory about the drives in Nietzsche's work, see T. O. M. Stern, “Against Nietzsche's Theory of the Drives,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 1 (2015): 121–40. This theoretical insufficiency makes it hard to develop any comprising theoretical comparison with Freud's contribution. Accordingly, Stern claims that “Nietzsche did not have anything like a coherent account of ‘the drives’ according to which the self, the relationship between thought and action, or consciousness could be explained.” (121). Related to this fact is that Nietzsche's view on the self also leads to various interpretations, as is apparent in the literature referenced in R. Lanier Anderson, “The Psychology of Perspectivism: A Question for Nietzsche Studies Now,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49, no. 2 (2018): 224.

however, notable exceptions to historical and comparative studies, with clear systematic aspirations.<sup>4</sup>

Sampsa Saarinen's recent and valuable work on Nietzsche's communication of mood provides valuable resources for the historical reception of his psychological contributions and the present stance of scholarship on Nietzsche and psychology.<sup>5</sup> I refer to that work for more extensive elaborations on these matters. However, in that work, there is no mention of the psychological theoretical approaches that I employ in the present book, and which are presented below.

If Nietzsche clarifies one thing, it is that religion has a place in relation to the self and that, consequently, it is essential to see both the self and religion as dynamic entities that cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Religion does something to human beings, and human beings do something with religion. Accordingly, we cannot understand religion to be experienced merely as an object separate from the self; it is an experience *for* the self and *of* the self. On the other hand, *how* religion is experienced as dependent upon the experiencing self. These distinctions cannot be ignored, as this point also builds on the fact that religion exists and is constructed continuously as part of – and in the interaction between – the social and the inner/internal world of the self. Moreover, the impact of religion and religious symbols, such as “God,” on the development of the self may vary enormously, given the various pre-existing developmental conditions of the self in its emotional and social environment and primary relationships.<sup>6</sup> The following presentation of psychological theories selected as analytic tools serves to elaborate these points further. It will allow for a theoretical approach to the psychology of religion behind Nietzsche's criticism of religion that takes this insight seriously. The theories will allow us to understand some of the experiences that shaped his

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<sup>4</sup> Among them, Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). However, Parkes mainly focuses on Nietzsche's account of the drives, which is why I do not engage thoroughly with his work in the following. The present chapter offers the explanation for this choice. Also, Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2015) focuses on the role of the drives. For a critical discussion of the latter, see Saarinen, *Nietzsche, Religion, and Mood*, 42ff.

<sup>5</sup> Saarinen, *Nietzsche, Religion, and Mood*, 31ff. Saarinen also refers – relevant for the present study – Lou von Salomé's claim that “any serious study of Nietzsche's philosophy would essentially have to be a study in the psychology of religion” (3). His own approach to this claim is to specify it in terms of saying that “Nietzsche constructs religion in a way that inevitably leads him to ask questions about mood, if he indeed constructs religion in terms of a desire for another world” (15). Cf also *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for theoretical underpinning of this claim Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), and further, Martha Jane Reineke and David M. Goodman, *Ana-Maria Rizzuto and the Psychoanalysis of Religion: The Road to the Living God* (Lexington: Lanham, 2017).

criticism of religion without claiming that it is exclusively his individual and personal experiences that manifest themselves in this criticism.

To use psychological theories that emphasize the relational dimension in the psyche's development in my interpretation of Nietzsche also has a more philosophical backdrop. From a philosophical point of view, these theories resonate with a fundamental *Hegelian* insight: that human identity, experience, and self-perception are fundamentally shaped by interaction with other humans in the social world. Among the main contributions of these theories is the fact that they entail a "deconstruction of the cornerstone of Freud's theoretical architecture, i.e., the primacy of drive for forming initial relationships and in their subsequent development."<sup>7</sup> This deconstruction manifests a theoretical paradigm shift that can be formulated as a change from an individualist and *economical* to a *relational* and socially based conception of the self. Whereas the first sees the biological drive as the basis for any understanding of the psyche, the relational and dynamic mode of understanding the psyche sees attachment, which is "rooted in the child's need to be close to its initial object" as manifesting "the matrix for its subsequent psycho-affective development and relational potential."<sup>8</sup> Attachment theory thus contributes to a psychodynamic approach that moves the "center of gravity from the core (with drive) to the periphery (with attachment)."<sup>9</sup> An essential consequence of this, which will have relevance for an assessment of Nietzsche's position, is that it thereby sees humans as fundamentally and constitutionally social beings. They are not only considered from an individual, biological point of view.<sup>10</sup> Hence, focusing on individual drives appears as limiting.<sup>11</sup>

A similar point can be made about the contribution of self-psychology, which I will present in the next section of this chapter. This theoretical approach emphasizes the role of others for the development and formation of the self and that others contribute to shaping the self's experiences of both itself and the world. Hence, the self's development is not only determined by how intra-psychoic drives and conflicts manifest themselves, which is the main focus of Freud and his followers. Self-psychology also opens up to constructive perspectives on narcissism, a topic often discussed in relation to Nietzsche and his works.

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<sup>7</sup> Pascal Roman, "Clinical and Psychopathological Research on Attachment: The Contribution of the Psychic Envelopes Model," *Mental health, religion, and culture* 17, no. 8 (2014): 767.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> The limitations come clearly to the fore in Kjær's study of Nietzsche's relationship with his mother. See Jørgen Kjær, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Die Zerstörung der Humanität durch "Mutterliebe"* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990), 20 et passim. Kjær's study represents an important step towards a more relational approach.

Hence, the paradigm shift in psychology mentioned above may also shed some light on the understanding of religion. James W. Jones formulates it succinctly when he writes that “When Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Kohut shift the focus of psychoanalysis from instinctual control to the quality of experience, this shift parallels the difference between a religion oriented toward law and obedience and a religion oriented towards the transformation and expansion of consciousness.”<sup>12</sup>

It should be added here that some have suggested the possibility of bridging elements between the two theoretical approaches represented by a drive-oriented and a relation-oriented theory: It seems problematic to consider the drive system without simultaneously considering that towards which it is directed. Accordingly, the argument goes, drive satisfaction “is inseparable from the response of an *other*, at the risk of exhausting the subject’s relations and affective potential.”<sup>13</sup> However, this attempt at bridging cannot account for the fact that the fundamental perception of the psyche remains different in the ego-psychology of Freud and more relational-theoretical theories. In the first, the psychological developments and conflicts are perceived as situated within an intact psychic structure, whereas the latter focuses on disturbances and defects in the structure itself.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.1 Attachment Theory

Against the backdrop of these initial considerations, the focus in the present section is on attachment theory. It will concentrate on contributions to this theoretical approach that addresses the role of religion. Attachment theory focuses on the individual’s need for security and protection. To achieve these aims, she needs to develop an attachment to a significant other to meet this need. The other represents the site and the resources to provide what is needed. Already at this point, we see the other’s relevance for the self’s emotional content and experience: the feeling of safety and security depends on and is constituted by the relationship with the other.

Two things are noteworthy here: First, that the need for security and protection is the basis for attachment, and second, that attachment may take on

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<sup>12</sup> James William Jones, *Religion and Psychology in Transition: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Roman, “Clinical and Psychopathological Research on Attachment,” 768, with reference to André Green, *The Fabric of Affect in the Psychoanalytic Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sigmund Karterud, *Fra narsissisme til selvspsykologi: En innføring i Heinz Kohuts forfatterskap* (Oslo: Ad notam Gyldendal, 2009), 40.