

## The Ontological Status of God and Other Small Questions

Bonnie Miller-McLemore<sup>1</sup>

If Freud created psychoanalysis to resolve conflicts between scientific Enlightenment thought and orthodox religious beliefs, as Martha Robert (1976), Peter Homans (1979, 1989), and others argue, then it is an understatement to note that he did not quite succeed. Instead Freud has left an intriguing morass—a legacy of intrapsychic and religious turmoil about the validity of religious belief in a postmodern context, a context his extreme modernism actually helped create. The work of James W. Jones, clinical psychologist and religion professor, might be characterized as one further step in the struggle between the truth of modern science and the vitality of religious faith. *Religion and Psychology* (1996), I would note at once, is indirectly about Jones' own sometimes convicted, sometimes estranged faith, even if not explicitly explored, and, more important for our purposes, about the postmodern faith questions of many scholars in the nebulous field of religion and personality, a field partly spawned out of Freud's own turbulence. For this reason, as much as any other, this makes the book interesting to tackle in the context of a pre-session of Person, Culture, and Religion. The last two chapters, "The Dilemmas of Reductionism" and "A Nonreductive Psychoanalysis," take us to the heart of the struggle, but the other chapters provide nice expeditions into related questions.

In responding to Jones' book, I see my role as both theologian and feminist scholar. After briefly characterizing the development of his argument, I will address two concerns, the theological implications of Jones' epistemological and ontological arguments and his use of feminist theory. On both accounts, he alerts readers to problems that psychoanalysis as psychological science is incapable of elucidating adequately. This invites more

<sup>1</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Counseling at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Address correspondence to Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, TN 37027.

dialogue with theology and feminist theory than Jones alone is able to sustain.

## I

Questions raised by an earlier publication, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1991), lead Jones back into three further explorations in *Religion and Psychology*: Freud's influence on the interpretation of religion, the role of gender, and the theological implications of psychoanalytic views of religion. In many ways, Jones' objective is quite modest, at least in the first half of the book: to show how new, more receptive or non-pathological views of religion evolve out of recent changes in psychoanalytic theory. Reversing Freud's own position, British object relations theory and the American school of self psychology suggest that religion arises from pre-oedipal, maternal dynamics, rather than from internalized paternal authority or distorted narcissistic wishes, and plays a creative role in human well-being. Whether this answers or simply extends the problem introduced by Ludwig Feuerbach's unmasking of religion as a product of human imagination and desire is perhaps the biggest question left dangling throughout the book until the final chapters. Assessment of Jones' answer is especially important since he claims theological relevance for his investigation.

The book is divided into two parts, according to Freud's genetic reading of religion as a formation of the superego with the demise of the Oedipus complex and his functional reading of religion as a deviation of the id in narcissistic resistance to the reality principle. The first part on "being human" investigates psychoanalytic and theological theories of the relational dimension of human nature and the implications for religion and therapy. The second part on human "knowing" moves from new understandings of narcissism and the id into epistemological hypotheses.

Chapters in the first section move from Freud's analysis of the post-oedipal origin of religion to concise summaries of large bodies of thought, from W.R.D. Fairbairn and Heinz Kohut to Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, John Macmurray, and feminist and process theology, all of which presume as fundamental the constitution of personhood and reality in relationality. Relationality as a core construct, over against Cartesian models of isolated subjectivity and Newtonian views of reality, appears in various forms in physics, philosophy, and psychology. The fulcrum of human development and, in turn, pathology is not drives and oedipal resolution but the quality of early relationships. And religion is less a pathological aberration of mis-directed drives than a significant factor in the self's pursuit of cohesive structures in a relational matrix.

The therapeutic implications are rather obvious. If transference relations with the divine reflect pre-oedipal relational patterns present throughout the rest of life, divine imagery becomes clinically significant. In Jones' words, "the clinician might approach religious material obtaining a feel for patients' relational patterns within their religious worlds and listening for echoes for the same relational themes in other parts of their lives" (1996, p. 64). The clinician's ability to deepen a client's capacity for richer mutual relationships also enhances the capacity to experience divine reality.

Up to this point, Jones does not add much to his earlier work or the work of others. So people find and create gods in the image of human relationships. This, Freud (among others) established. What more do we glean from Jones' review? To my mind, the second part of the book, using recent psychoanalytic theories to revise understandings of knowing, is where the discussion gets interesting. Here Jones enters into the messy questions of the *human experience* of God's existence and epistemological, if not ontological, questions of *divine existence* itself. Changes in psychoanalytic understandings of narcissism signal important changes in theories of knowing, including knowledge about divine reality. New views of narcissism, the id, transitional process, and illusion as sources of creativity and imagination, rather than primitive states to be outgrown, signal important changes in psychoanalytic theories of knowing that cohere with philosophical arguments in Richard Bernstein (1983) and others about the inseparability of objectivity from subjectivity and data from theory. As W. W. Meissner remarks, "Illusion . . . is not an obstruction to experiencing reality but a vehicle for gaining access to it" (1984, p. 177).

## II

Jones uses the term "theology" in his subtitle. The majority of references to academic theology, however, fall in the first anthropological section of the book rather than the second section. This is significant since the second section wrestles with serious epistemological and ontological questions about religious knowledge and reality. Does the relative absence of a more genuinely dialogical interaction between theology and psychoanalysis mean Jones remains skeptical about theological or even confessional constructions? In this second section his study remains a psychological assessment of religious symbols. The "dialogue" is heavily weighted toward the psychoanalytic sciences and the secular audience even if respect and space is given to theological resources. In contrast to the optimism about dialogue in religion and psychology a few decades ago, one wonders whether it now makes more sense to acknowledge and explore

the significant influence and limits of context and audience upon one's work.

New understandings of religion and of the ways in which religious imagery revitalizes and binds connections within and between selves says very little about the nature or reality of the divine. In assessing the "ontological status of objects in the transitional realm" (1996, p. 140) in the final chapter, Jones ventures slightly beyond—but *just* slightly—Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) and William Meissner's (1984) functional view of religious symbols as fictive creations. In the first section, before readers get to the explicitly epistemological section of the book, Jones remains tentative, as perhaps he should, given his professional orientation, readership, and the current postmodern context: a new psychoanalytical perspective *may* suggest the validity of a "larger, sacred reality" (1996, p. 68). The very relational nature of personhood, he seems to want to believe, assumes a more universal, encompassing relational reality known as God (p. 77).

Jones, however, is careful to remain suggestive rather than declarative. He speaks through Buber, Macmurray, and others to image the eternal standing behind all relational encounters and does not rush into any claims of his own or consider in any extensive fashion scriptural or historical traditions or, as crucial, community practices. Without broader reference to religious traditions and practices, spiritual disciplines designed to open up avenues of divine interaction are greatly abbreviated. Jones makes unusually brief mention of prayer, devotion, meditation, and ritual as a means to religious experience and knowledge. Some theologians, best exemplified by a recent book edited by Dorothy Bass (1997), reclaim a broader array of disciplines all too often forgotten, such as hospitality, keeping the Sabbath, testimony, and discernment. But ultimately, Jones does not suggest that the therapist go beyond simply taking an interest in the religiosity of their clients to actively and self-reflectively addressing the ontological status of the client's religious ideation or daily practices. Perhaps all we can do at the moment is to admit that when it comes to talking directly about an ontologically "real" divine presence, "language limps badly," as John McDargh notes and early Jewish practice confirms (1993, p. 183).

Jones walks a tightrope between academic, clinical, and confessional worlds. While he does not deny agency to a realm *that we do not know* (see Jones, 1996, p. 143), he does not claim that it is really there in any way independent of our knowing, creating, and interacting with it. Agency then remains in the projections, desires, and other psychological dynamics of the individual. This cannot help but have a limiting effect on any kind of divine agency. The question I raise for our consideration—and it is one that I suspect most of us have not resolved—is whether he, or each of us in our own work, should venture further. Steadfast reliance on a therapeutic

epistemology that knows nothing independent of individual experience tends to render religious belief solipsistic and egocentric, forbidding the viability of the theocentric demands of most religious traditions that assert a mystery, power, and comprehension beyond human knowing. From a theological perspective, such a position exposes the inescapably limited, idolatrous, self-centered character of human understanding and the tendency to resort to utilitarian religion (that is, religion advanced almost exclusively or exclusively because of its benefits to adherents). This sort of instrumental use of religion for temporal human ends of happiness and social success is sometimes misplaced and possibly theologically wrong, if not morally tempting and common. While a theologian must take into account humanistic and scientific interpretations of religion, a theological view "will never be fully substantiated by the results of the scientific studies of religion" (Gustafson, 1981, pp. 27-28). And to carry such an analysis too far denies "God as God" (pp. 25, 84).

Nonetheless, for postmodern debates over absolute truth and relativism, Jones provides solid psychoanalytic infrastructures for a theory of critical realism. God is more than a mental construct. The reality of God exists in the intermediary space of interaction and is both there and not there, created and discovered. Objects of religious knowledge exist in the paradox of Winnicott's transitional space, with greater specificity within religious circles than without and accessible through spiritual disciplines. One gleans from Jones' reading of Winnicott and Hans Loewald a renewed appreciation and appetite for religious ritual and symbol. And Jones turns the table and provides a nice psychoanalysis of *unbelief*. The desire to reduce faith to witless or childish thinking embodies sexist repression of connection, idolization of objectivity, rejection of emotional experience out of fear of loss of control, and refusal to enter transitional space.

Jones also introduces a helpful distinction between heuristic and absolute reductionism. That is, he suggests the methodological necessity of the reductionism inherent in the social scientific study of religion as preferable to a reductionism that claims exhaustive explanation of religious phenomenon. But even heuristic reductionism—the study of one field in terms of another—can easily slip into absolute reductionism if one does not grasp something distinction about the original field on its own terms. And does this distinction itself still reflect the dichotomous world in which the scholastic study of religion continues to operate, one step removed from acknowledging its own fundamental commitments? Does heuristic reductionism assume a boundary between belief and unbelief that has already been crossed and obscured by the very postmodern theories Jones uses? Are we perhaps on the brink of some sea change in which we will see what we have been doing anew and finally move out from under an



enlightened prejudice toward specific religious beliefs in God? Jones himself suggests the insufficiency of the terms “subjective” and “objective” and names both his frustration that a third category will not resolve the dichotomy and his hope for a more “radical restructuring of our understanding of human knowledge” (1996, p. 140).

### III

In considering Jones’ use of feminist theory, I raise a red flag on four accounts. First, as bell hooks helpfully reprimands feminists, one must not use the word carelessly, with loose or poorly-conceived definitions (1984: 26). The term has had particular meanings, and those who use it have to define it clearly. It is interesting, perhaps problematic, to find a book so precise about certain categories, such as knowledge or religion or psychoanalysis, yet less careful about the term “feminism.” Discussion of gender analysis is not in and of itself feminist discourse. Nor do references to feminist theorists make this a feminist book (which is not Jones’ intent anyway) or a book which includes the subject of feminism (which the subtitle implies).

The text is open to both of these. As an interesting question, one might ask what else is needed to transform it into either. If Jones means by feminism, for example, the personal and political effort to subvert systems of suppression, oppression, and exploitation based on qualities of human nature, most particularly sexuality and gender, would the discussion take a different course? I think so. In her critique of the proposals of conservative pro-family feminism, Judith Stacey (1986) complains that one of the primary propositions of feminism drops out of sight: direct struggle against systemic, structural subordination of women and a conceptual framework that analyzes the social processes through which individuals, cultural forms, and social systems are engendered. The places where this kind of analysis appears in Jones’ explorations enrich the interpretation, for example, in analysis of Freud’s theories as an expression of the history and movement of patriarchal religion. Other theorists, whether Kohut or Buber, stand unscathed. With feminist analysis, fresh questions might also surface. For example, what is lost in understanding sexism and gender in the shift away from analysis of the body and sexual drives in Freud’s instinct theory to the analysis of subjective experience and relations in post-Freudian approaches (see Jones, 1996, pp. 33, 65)?

As important, only two pages of text concern “feminist theology.” And here Jones refers simply to Sallie McFague’s *Models of God*. The omission of contributions of other prominent theologians is odd, particularly those with obvious relevance. To mention just a few, Catherine Keller’s (1986)

outstanding investigation of relationality in psychoanalysis, myth, theology, and philosophy would have provided a fascinating means to explore the connection between sexism and separative models of selfhood. Elizabeth Johnson (1992) does the kind of historical retrieval of relational understandings of the trinity in classic Christian texts that might have greatly enriched Jones' analysis. And Marjorie Suchocki's (1994) combination of process and feminist perspectives in a fresh look at violence and sin would have shed light on the darker side of relational modalities. Given Jones' interests in both process and feminist theology, the oversight of Keller and Suchocki is hard to explain.

Second, Jones is aware of the tendencies toward dualistic or stereotypical reading of gender differences in some of the feminist theorists he uses. This is good. But even he reads these theorists, primarily Nancy Chodorow (1978), in a more skewed fashion than they might be read. Feminist psychoanalysis "stands Freud's argument on its head," Jones observes, seeing male, not female, development as problematic (Jones, 1996, p. 10). Yet Chodorow and others since her have seen both male and female development as problematic when undertaken in the current context of patriarchal parenting and society. Neither male nor female can find and internalize adequate models of differentiation and connection when primary parenting falls to the mother and social structures reinforce misogyny. If men tend toward denial of connection, women tend toward enmeshment and weak ego boundaries.

The work of Jessica Benjamin (1988) merits attention. She demonstrates the tensions in early development between being recognized and recognizing the other and the ways in which ongoing sexism and socially constructed gendered injustices between men and women in public and private spheres perpetuate distortions in early development and prevent genuine mutual relations. On a related question of interpretation, is it accurate to say pre-oedipal issues "displace" the father with the mother (e.g., Jones, 1996, p. xi)? Displacement seems a more assertive term than required by theories that emphasize preoedipal development and multiple, rather than single, lines of development. Or perhaps the term reveals the extent to which men and fathers do feel replaced and abandoned.

Third, Jones illustrates with two cases that oddly revolve around ambiguous father—not mother—images. With more time, we could have an interesting discussion of the cases themselves and the relevance of feminist theory for reconsidering the primary issues of each client. In this regard, I have a few related thoughts on Freud's theory itself. In Jones' lecture-style summations, Freud's perceptions of the father as a feared authority and dominating presence appear exceedingly dated in a post-patriarchal world in which fathers are either absent or, if present, struggle with lost authority

in the midst of ill-defined gender roles. And Freud's assumption that "common man understands . . . his religion" in terms of a "system of doctrines and promises" also seems out of step with a postmodern world in which a pluralism reigns and the search for "religious feeling," that Freud so casually brushes aside, creates an entirely new market for New Age religiosity (Jones, 1930/1962, p. 21).

At the same time, Jones' synopsis confirms that at least one reason why conservatives hold so tightly to patriarchal definitions of God is a repressed rejection of erotic desire for the mother and the imposition of paternal law and order. None of this will be undone easily. Is it possible, more than Jones' acknowledges, to see the veracity of both Freud's reading of religion and the fresh readings of recent psychoanalytic theory, depending on the nature of the religious phenomenon or experience under observation? I am less willing to drop Freud's analysis in part because it does a better job explaining why there is still a lot more patriarchal religious practice than otherwise. Having sat as one panelist next to a conservative Promise Keeper on the television set of a news station through six hours of coverage of the Promise Keepers assembly in Washington D.C. in October 1997, I am not sure I want a "friendly assessment of religion" (Jones, 1996, p. 23), given its current apparitions. Some religious ideation does seem heteronomously imposed on the individual during the oedipal phase in service of instinctual control. Religion still seems to operate as an instrument of power rather than empowerment, as much as we might wish it otherwise.

Finally—and this returns to thoughts with which I began—in a book with feminism in the subtitle, one might expect more explicit contextual location of the author, more risks naming one's subjectivity, instead of a detachment from self-experience that Jones himself finds troubling in his clients (for a different approach to epistemological questions see Miller-McLemore, 1992; 1994, pp. 134-36, 146-49). One senses that for Jones religion is more than a clinical interest. But perhaps he cannot help but fear the dangers of religious belief that he identifies—that it arrests individuation, threatens regression, or signifies infirmity (Jones, p. 68). Readers are reminded regularly that religion can reflect more than pathology. But doth thou protest too much? And what kinds of redemptive possibilities has it held for the author?

In bringing gender into the analysis, one must ask whether Jones' position is more revolutionary for male theorists and clinicians than for female. And in bringing theology into analysis, one must ask whether Jones' position is more revelatory for secular theorists and clinicians than for believers. It is simply less surprising to me, socialized female and habitually faithful, that "selfhood and interconnection are not antithetical but poten-



tially mutually strengthening" or that religious practices contribute positively to health and growth (Jones, 1996, p. 68).

Nonetheless, Jones makes important claims that new psychoanalytic and psychological theory is necessary if one is to understand the intrapsychic and cultural role of religion in a changed world, a world secular and religious in ways that it has never been before. Freud is less wrong than short-sighted. The real question becomes whether there is a psychological theory capable of understanding the realities of psychological and spiritual life today and, as important, whether faith-committed theologians and communities can pick up the discussion where Jones leaves off.

### REFERENCES

- Bass, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Practicing our faith: A way of life for a searching people*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination*. New York: Pantheon.
- Bernstein, R. (1988). *Beyond objectivism and relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Freud, S. (1962). *Civilization and its discontents*. New York: Norton. (Original work published 1930).
- Gustafson, J. M. (1981). *Ethics from a theocentric perspective: theology and ethics*. (Vol. 1). Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Homans, P. (1979). *Jung in context: Modernity and the making of a psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Homans, P. (1989). *The Ability to mourn: disillusionment and the social origins of psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston: South End.
- Johnson, E. A. (1992). *She who is: The mystery of god in feminist theological discourse*. New York: Crossroad.
- Jones, J. (1991). *Contemporary psychoanalysis and religion: Transcendence and transference*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jones, J. (1996). *Religion and psychology in transition: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and theology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Keller, C. (1986). *From a broken web: Separation, sexism, and self*. Boston: Beacon.
- McDargh, J. (1983). *Psychoanalytic object relations theory and the study of religion*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- McDargh, J. (1993). Concluding clinical postscript: On developing a psychotheological perspective. In M. L. Randour (Ed.), *Exploring sacred landscapes: Religious and spiritual experiences in psychotherapy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McFague, S. (1988). *Models of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Meissner, W. W. (1984). *Psychoanalysis and religious experience*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miller-McLemore, B. (1992). Epistemology or bust: A maternal feminist knowledge of knowing. *The Journal of Religion* 72 (2), 229-247.
- Miller-McLemore, B. (1994). *Also a mother: Work and family as theological dilemma*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Rizzuto, A. -M. (1979). *The birth of the living God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Robert, M. (1976). *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud's Jewish identity*. (R. Manheim, Trans.). Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor.
- Stacey, J. (1986). Are feminists afraid to leave home? The challenge of conservative pro-family feminism. In J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (Eds.), *What is feminism? A reexamination* (pp. 208-237). New York: Pantheon.
- Suchocki, M. (1994). *The fall to violence: Original sin in relational theology*. New York: Continuum.