Ambivalence or Melancholia: The Ontogenesis of Religious Sentiment

Chuansong Huo and Fei Ju *

School of Humanity, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China; tongjhcs@126.com
* Correspondence: tjuifei@163.com

Abstract: The psychoanalytic explanation of religious sentiment is genetic, meaning that it probes the psychological processes behind the formation of such sentiment. Freud ascribed the genesis of religious sentiment to human infantile helplessness and ambivalence towards the father. This explanation encounters a dilemma when confronted with the sense of completeness and infinity in religious sentiment and fails to address components related to death, such as the transcendent and surmounting nature of the believer’s fear of death. Experience has shown that numerous religious sentiments occur through a process of emotional transformation, from a melancholic state of extreme mental anguish to a state of blissful, complete joy. This process, from a psychogenetic perspective, is essentially a defense of the self-preservation impulse. In this transformation, the ego removes chronic suffering by identifying itself with the superego. Therefore, the ego undergoes a symbolic death, through which it regains the energy of life.

Keywords: religious sentiment; psychogenesis; ambivalence; melancholia; psychoanalysis

So long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term. (James 1929, p. 488)

1. Introduction

Emotion is an essential property of humanity. With the progression of science, distinct perspectives for comprehending affections have arisen. Neuroscience, regarding emotion as the bio-chemical activity of neurotransmitters, is the most widespread approach currently. However, a critical question is posed: do new techniques and developments in cognitive and brain research help us to understand our emotional and affective side (Du Toit 2014)? While the naturalistic perspective, in the scientific context, can reduce diverse human activities to a variety of biological indicators, it seems not to respond to the individual subjective experience and inquiries. The implication of an emotion lies, first and foremost, in the fact that it is experienced and apprehended by the subject. Among the variety of emotions, religious sentiment is a specific and crucial one. Even rationalists, like Descartes (1989), would regard emotion as a passive function of the soul, in which a spiritual element is present. But how does religious sentiment arise in the subject? What is its specificity? Can we reduce the generative process of religious sentiment in a comparative study with other familiar conditions?

Different theoretical perspectives have been adopted in the investigation of religious sentiment, including sociology (Durkheim 1995; Weber 1993), descriptive psychology (James 1929), cognitive science (Veldsman 2014), psychoanalysis (S. Freud 1961c; Rizzuto 1979; Meissner 1984), etc. As a science of subjectivity (Lacan 2006), the psychoanalytic quest for religious sentiment consistently lands on the individual life history, aiming to answer the origins of such sentiment from a rational and genetic perspective.
Whether one stands with theists or atheists, and regardless of whether various religious elements can obtain their justification in rationality (Van Huyssteen 1988), we must acknowledge that a certain form of religious sentiment exists in numerous individuals' spiritual worlds and their derivatives over the generations. In these forms of emotion, a large amount of psychic energy, or libido, is cathected into singular or multiple entities, which can be either material or spiritual. These sentiments are concordant from fetishism in early societies to idol worship in contemporary times and from the less systematized totemism to the highly institutionalized Christianity. Even though the cathectic process is ubiquitous, the peculiarities of religious sentiment compel us to contemplate how it occurs in specific individuals, i.e., the ontogenesis of religious sentiments.

The specificities of religious sentiments are not only in the quantitative difference in cathexis but also in the fact that, to some extent, they violate the most fundamental aims of living organisms, such as self-preservation and reproduction, causing the emotional part of the mind to vastly outweigh its intellectuality and rationality. Death is fearless when it comes to emotion and faith.

The most notable story is Abraham’s sacrifice of his child Isaac to God. In the Old Testament, Genesis 22, God tests Abraham: “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Genesis 22:2). Instead of reflecting on this requirement, Abraham responds to it immediately. Even when his son Isaac expresses his confusion, Abraham’s response is still based solely on faith: “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8). It seems that in this story, Abraham is not confronting sacrifice and death; the power of faith outstrips the instinctive dread and avoidance of death in the human mind, rendering death as something not to be feared in the presence of God. Different scholars interpret this story in various ways. For example, Fischer (2007) argues from a historical perspective that it was not unusual in those days for nobility to sacrifice offspring to their various gods. Green (1982) explores the story in terms of ethics and Jewish tradition. He mentions that if Jews regard God’s commands as absolute, they also find it unthinkable that these commands should ultimately defy our human sense of right and wrong. Girard (1979) views sacrifice as a substitutive mechanism that aims to deceive violence. For this article, this story reveals a serious perplexity, similar to Green’s opinion: how could faith in God transcend death? Does such a power exist in other mental processes beyond religion? Once again, these queries direct us back to the investigation of the genesis and origin of religious sentiments.

A similar assertion can be found in Durkheim’s examination of the origins of totem worship in early societies. “And so, at every instant, we must submit to rules of action and thought that we have neither made nor wanted and that sometimes are contrary to our inclinations and to our most basic instincts” (Durkheim 1995, p. 209). He traces this origin back to mana, a kind of non-material force empowered by society. The object of genuine respect is Society. Nevertheless, Durkheim is forced to acknowledge that the impact of Society is felt through mental channels, and “It moves along channels that are too obscure and circuitous, and use psychic mechanisms that are too complex, to be easily traced to the source” (Durkheim 1995, p. 211).

Fortunately, psychoanalysis has carved out an avenue of investigation into the individual psyche, with countless psychoanalysts venturing forward to provide a genetic interpretation of religion.

2. Ambivalence and Obsession: Freud on Religious Sentiment

Freud provides a straightforward statement about the human psychological need for religion: “The ultimate basis of man’s need for religion is infantile helplessness” (Freud and Jung 1994, pp. 283–84). Infants are in a permanent state of absolute dependence on their nurturers, the only source they can rely on to provide the necessities for their survival. This infantile helplessness ultimately points to a desire for an omnipotent figure, which, in the context of a patriarchy, is the father. “As a substitute for the longing for the father, the
superego contains the germ from which all religions have evolved” (S. Freud 1961a, p. 37). Infants admire their fathers’ ownership, intelligence, and power, expecting their fathers to fulfill all their desires, to answer all their confusions, and to impose no conditions of compensation. From helplessness comes infinite desire.

However, before Freud, the tendency to attribute religion to human helplessness flourished. Ludwig Feuerbach (1854) sees religion as an expression of human dependence and weakness. His theory has acquired even more vitality in the sociological analyses and explorations of the early social stage of humanity, namely the theological stage. Auguste Comte, for example, regards the era of theological philosophy as the infancy of humanity, when humans used religion and theology to explain the natural phenomena they encountered, from where animism arises. Comte posits that the need for religion is a combination of ignorance and desire: “In their earliest development, which is necessarily theological, all our speculations spontaneously disclose a characteristic predilection for the most insoluble questions on subjects radically inaccessible to any decisive investigation. By a contradiction which, in our days, must at first appear inexplicable, but which is really in accordance with the initial situation of our intelligence, at a period when the human mind is still incompetent to the solution of the simplest scientific problem, it eagerly and almost exclusively inquires into the origin of All Things, the Essential Causes—whether first or final of the various phenomena which impress it—and the fundamental mode of their production; in a word, it aspires to absolute knowledge” (Comte 2019, pp. 2–3).

Interestingly, we can still observe remnants of panpsychism in the ideology of children (Piaget 1963).

Freud’s distinct insights into the origins of religion stem from a comparative study with neurosis, in which he reduces religious sentiment to a universal emotional feeling. He offers two alternative interpretations of the genesis of religion: one is ontogenetic, relating to human development through early childhood, and the other is phylogenetic, oriented towards the legacy of human history and evolution. In both interpretations, obsessive neurosis serves as a benchmark.

Freud’s first exploration of religious psychology originates in his February 1907 essay Obsessive Actions and Religious Practice, which begins with a direct assertion of the similarity between religion and neurosis: “I AM certainly not the first person to have been struck by the resemblance between what are called obsessive actions in sufferers from nervous affections and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their piety. The term ‘ceremonial’, which has been applied to some of these obsessive actions, is evidence of this. The resemblance, however, seems to me to be more than a superficial one, so that an insight into the origin of neurotic ceremonial may embolden us to draw inferences by analogy about the psychological processes of religious life” (S. Freud 1959, p. 117).

In Freud’s view, the resemblance between religion and obsessive neurosis is more than a concurrence in manifestations, such as rigidity. Identical emotions, i.e., ambivalent feelings toward the father, underlie both phenomena. The child’s emotional attachment to and need for the father is accompanied by an unconscious hatred. Both religious rituals and stereotyped behaviors in obsessive neurosis are defenses against the guilt caused by this unconscious hatred. In this context, Freud argues that a ceremony is a protective measure. It is also in this context that we see religious sentiments as the suppression and reaction formation of aggressive impulses. Thus, the “sin” of the religious sentiment can be comprehended: the guilt comes from the unconscious aggressiveness towards the father, who is also the object of love and protection. This is Freud’s elaboration of the ontogenesis of religious sentiments.

However, the guilt of obsessive neurotics seems incapable of reaching the same intensity as the Christian doctrine of original sin. In Totem and Taboo, Freud proposes the “Original Father Theory”, which posits that humanity carries a debt to be repaid throughout the development of the race. This theory is a phylogenetic and “historical” one. The basic model of it is Darwin’s observations of advanced hominids, primarily chimpanzees. Darwin (1874) believes that early human communities have a male head who holds absolute sexual power over the females of the tribe and forbids other males from engaging
with them, leaving the other adult males either killed or expelled. Freud extends this Darwinian hypothesis to explain the origins of totem worship, the original form of religion. “One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde…… The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion” (S. Freud 1955a, pp. 141–42). For Freud, the totem is the return of the father image, and it is the ambivalence towards the father that causes the tribal society after patricide to be gripped by remorse and guilt. They assuage negative emotions by re-establishing the prohibitions their father had placed on them while alive and by enshrining and worshiping their father’s image, which becomes the God image in subsequent religious beliefs. On the historical level, human ancestors committed the heinous crime of patricide, leading to the perpetuation of guilt in the collective human psyche.

In both ontogenetic and phylogenetic dimensions, Freud reduces religious sentiment to ambivalence towards the father. This hypothesis excellently explains numerous aspects of religious sentiments that can be observed in psychoanalytic clinical materials, such as the religionist’s fear of becoming a heretic, the dichotomy between good and evil in religious images, and the uncontrollable impulse to desecrate the sacred. In the case of the Wolf Man, piety and blasphemy coexist in his ideational system. As he kisses the holy pictures fervently, notions such as “God-shit” keep invading his mind, to the extent that his associative system unconsciously identifies three heaps of horse-dung with the Holy Trinity (S. Freud 1955b). This emotional response of ambivalence appears to be highly generalized in the Christian context. Pere Mateu (1986) describes an obsessive neurotic profoundly affected by the folie du doute of religious content, whose central symptom is an uncontrollable impulse to doubt the notions of original sin, faith, and divine doctrines, usually ending in blasphemy and sometimes even resulting in depersonalization. These instances support Freud’s analysis of religious sentiment. The religious sentiment is generated by ambivalence towards the father, and the image worshiped in religion is a father substitute; in other words, a dead father. It is precisely in this significance that Christ is bound to suffer death. Only if the father is symbolically dead can the guilt be triggered into repeating the grievous crimes committed by human ancestors.

Plenty of scholars have discussed and criticized the Freudian theory of religion. In fact, these criticisms are literally overwhelming, both from psychoanalysis and from other disciplines, such as anthropology, theology, etc. Palmer (2023) summarizes the theoretical assumptions underlying these criticisms, which include some of the concerns explored in this article, such as the mother–child relationship and cultural universality. Kenny (2015) divides the contemporary psychoanalytic critique of Freud’s theory of religion into three groups: 1) those who agree with Freud and seek to incorporate God into psychoanalytic theory; 2) those who criticize Freud and define psychoanalysis as a form of religion or spirituality; and 3) those who want to find a middle position between psychoanalysis and religion and reserve space for religion in the sense of experience and mental health. Rizzuto (1998) and Akhtar (O’Neil and Akhtar 2009) even employ a psychoanalytic method to explain Freud’s attitude towards religion. Freud does have an ambivalent attitude towards religion, and even his last book Moses and Monotheism has intimate connections with this domain. It is difficult to say whether Freud identifies himself with Moses and believes he has to lead the psychoanalytic community out of its predicament. Psychoanalytic theories have always contained the theorists’ own conflicts and ambivalence, but it does not detract from the scholarly debate on the theories themselves. As Gay (1987) argues, if Freud had been a believer, he would not have developed psychoanalysis. It would be a real tragedy if the only reason we ignore the explanatory power and potency of a theory is simply due to the subjective experience.

For this article, I intend to provide some inspiring comments and criticisms on the following aspects:
1. The infantile helplessness and ambivalence towards the father are universal. If we accept Freud’s hypothesis, given the existence of the family and the Oedipus complex, it is impossible to maintain a homogeneous feeling towards the father. Consequently, it seems, by this logic, that everyone is a believer, and that the human existential condition predisposes us to an innate tendency toward belief, for infants are entirely in an absolute dependency from birth. If one steps forward, we would be compelled to pose a question contrary to Freud’s concern: why do some people not believe in God? Psychoanalytic research would then shift to the questions that Kenny (2015, p. 113) raises: what experiences in infancy presage non-belief? Could it be that some infants do not long for their fathers? What special qualities do non-believers share? Apparently, these are not the intent of Freud’s theory of religion. Additional elements need to be considered in order to address the differentiation between atheists and theists from a Freudian stance.

2. Guilt or shame? Guilt or original sin is an anchor point in Freud’s discussion of the origins of religious sentiment. However, there are tremendous cultural differences regarding this point. In China and Eastern countries influenced by Confucianism, shame is much closer to an ontological position than guilt. An analysis of the evolution of Chinese characters reveals this distinction. In Chinese characters, “罪” (sin) is a concept of social norms, which focuses on the juridical significance and refers to the punishment. The predecessor of this character was “羞”, originally engraved on bronze. Meanwhile, “羞” (shame) is found on tortoise shells or animal bones, which are closely related to religious practices, such as divination. The evolution of the character “羞” (see Figure 1) shows that the earliest form of it is a hand holding a goat and offering the goat respectfully. As a verb, the character can be interpreted as a religious act of sacrifice. As a noun, “羞” also means a delicate and delicious meal, which derives from the food offered to ghosts or spirits. Therefore, the feeling of shame is more suitable to describe the religious practice and religious sentiment of the Chinese than the sense of guilt which Freud has elaborated upon laboriously.

![Figure 1. The evolution of the Chinese character “羞.”](image.png)

Even in Christianity, the relationship between guilt and shame is complicated. Capps distinguishes the two as follows: “Whereas guilt can be externalized by distancing ourselves from the action, shame cannot be externalized in this way. When we experience shame, we do not even try to argue, to ourselves or to others, that the total self is not involved” (Capps 1993, pp. 74–75). In his opinion, guilt tends to act as a cover in order to hide the shame behind it. As in the Garden of Eden story, the experience of shame produces a series of divisions and alienations. Shame is a deeper religious sentiment compared to guilt. Basically, Capps follows Kohut’s self-psychology and develops a theology of shame. He regards acedia as the center of a theology of shame when he talks about the depleted self, which is similar to this article’s subsequent exploration of how melancholy is at the center of religious sentiment.

3. Romain Rolland describes an affection, “oceanic feeling”, to Freud and claims that many religionists have experienced this infinite, eternal feeling. As Freud mentions in Civilization and Its Discontents: “He entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments” (S. Freud 1961c, p. 64). Rolland argues that this oceanic feeling is the origin of the religious energy that could make one a true believer. This sentiment is a feeling of completeness and infinity and is more consistent with the believer’s experience: the individual witnesses the infinity and eternity in miracles, but instead of feeling inferior and shifting to envy and hatred, a sense of completeness and peaceful delight is generated, as if one also owns these
qualities. Freud argues that this feeling stems from the early mother–infant relationship, in which the infants have not identified the mother as an external object, but as part of themselves. According to Freud, the oceanic feeling is the ego’s regressive resort against an external threat, returning to a state of unfettered narcissism where the undifferentiated state of the early mother and infant is restored. In “oceanic feeling”, it is the identification rather than ambivalence that is at work. Here, Freud explores the religious sentiment in the dimension of the mother–infant relationship and ego–object relationship, which underlie the foundations of object relation theory. After Freud, Klein and Winnicott further develop the object relation theory. Based on their theories, Rizzuto (1979) defines religion as a transitional intermediate realm and God as a special transitional object. These all suggest that the relationship between the ego and the early object, the mother, forms a crucial part of religious sentiment. We will return to this relationship later in the discussion of the melancholic prelude to religious sentiment.

4. If the contradiction between religious sentiment and organic instincts is taken into account, the ambivalence towards the father does not address the question posed at the outset of this paper—namely, that religious sentiment transcends two basic human instincts (sexuality and self-preservation) and allows the individual to face death unafraid.

In melancholia, the previously mentioned issues of object relations (primarily object loss), death, identification, and the feelings of shame and self-loathing will all be covered. I will now move on to an exploration of the relationship between religion and melancholia.

3. Melancholia and Rebirth

In Birth of the Living God, Rizzuto proposes an explanation of religious beliefs that paints a fabulous and slightly somber scene. This explanation is fabulous regarding free will, “No child in the Western world brought up in ordinary circumstances completes the oedipal cycle without forming at least a rudimentary God representation, which he may use for belief or not” (Rizzuto 1979, p. 225), but is somber regarding God’s image, “Often, when the human objects of real life acquire profound psychic meaning, God, like a forlorn teddy bear, is left in a corner of the attic, to all appearances forgotten” (p. 199). She regards God as a transitional object and assumes that the image of God is universal. The question she is truly answering is exactly the one I mentioned earlier: why do some people not believe in God? The problem is that religious faith is not a pendulum, and God is not a toy teddy bear that can be picked up in times of suffering and tossed aside when the distress disappears. Descriptive phenomenology presents us with a religious sentiment of such intensity that many believers and writers undergo an extremely agonizing transformation and thereafter dedicate their lives to religious practice. As psychoanalysis attempts to comprehend the normal through particular pathological experiences, our interest and question is as follows: is it possible to understand the believer through the non-believer? Is religious sentiment a form of normal emotion with its specific formation process? In what sense and by what mechanism does religious sentiment have its peculiarities, such as the intensive power that can even transcend death? The mechanism of melancholia, and its opposite, mania, open up the possibility for the intensity of such emotions. Here, I start by presenting some objective and subjective materials to demonstrate the intimate relationship between religious sentiment and melancholy. The ideas of Freud and other psychoanalysts will be discussed later to elucidate the mechanisms of the ontogenesis of religious sentiment.

1. Dichotomy and transformation in religious life. A duality exists in the studies of religious sentiment, namely between once-born conversion and twice-born conversion, the religion of healthy-mindedness and that of the sick soul (James 1929). The former describes the religious sentiment generated from an optimistic mentality. The mind does not undergo a process of wrestling, struggle, or transformation; in this sense, we call it a once-born conversion. The conversion results from experiences of feelings such as euphoria, harmony, and romance. This process is not within the scope of our study. On the one hand, explaining the genesis of religious sentiment through religious experience is a tau-
Religions 2024, 15, 867

Religion deviates from the path of science, easily leading us into the trap of occultism; on the other hand, this category, which includes groups that become believers simply because of cultural and family influences, describes an inheritance relationship rather than the formation and transformation of religious sentiment. We are particularly curious about the religious sentiment in a “sick soul”, not only because of its psychopathological significance, which is highly valued by psychoanalysis, but also because understanding the genesis and transformation of this category is immensely beneficial in understanding atheists’ conversion. In this process, the individual experiences a rebirth when conversion happens. Before religious sentiment arises, the individual is in a state of chronic or severe distress. Hope and happiness are reincorporated into life in religion, i.e., being “twice-born” or undergoing rebirth.

Similarly, a transformation can be found in the religious life of early societies. In the corroboree, a kind of collective celebration, the whole society is transformed. In his description of religious life in Australia, Durkheim mentions that: “Life in Australian societies alternates between two different phases… These two phases stand in the sharpest possible contrast. The first phase, in which economic activity predominates, is generally of rather low intensity… The dispersed state in which the society finds itself makes life monotonous, slack, and humdrum. Everything changes when a corroboree takes place… There are transports of enthusiasm” (Durkheim 1995, pp. 216–17). It is a state of extreme euphoria for individuals and of insanity for society. All kinds of forbidden behaviors are allowed in the corroboree. Moral norms and punishments disappear. Durkheim suggests that the religious idea is born out of this effervescence. On this path, religion arises from the transformation between two different states, which seems to be a reasonable consideration.

2. Subjective experiences described by writers. Extensive experiential materials, especially writers’ confessions, reveal the occurrence of religious sentiments. The transition between distinct emotions and between life and death is so stark in these materials. In religion, the emotional transformation from a melancholic state of despair and helplessness to a state of blissful completeness is extremely important. As William James put it: “The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed… They are essentially religions of deliverance: the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life” (James 1929, p. 162).

The most emblematic example is Tolstoy, who earnestly expresses in the opening of Confession that he has never seriously believed in God and only trusts in a belief derived from adults and education. After a series of meditations and practices, however, Tolstoy returns to religion and God, rediscovering the meaning of life in religious knowledge. Before he truly becomes religious, Tolstoy is in an extremely miserable and melancholic state. In this state, the meaning of life disappears, and infinite self-doubt and self-blame remain, along with an uncontrollable urge towards death. His descriptions are eloquent and poignant: “I grew sick of life; some irresistible force was leading me to somehow get rid of it. It was not that I wanted to kill myself. The force that was leading me away from life was more powerful, more absolute, more all-encompassing than any desire. With all my strength I struggled to get away from life” (Tolstoy 1983, p. 28). Gripped by this uncontrollable urge towards death, Tolstoy continuously investigates the meaning of life: why does one want to live even though life is full of repetition, distress, disease, senility, and death? Secular facets such as wealth, erudition, and family seemed meaningless in the face of life proper. After reflecting on and scrutinizing rational, religious, and existential knowledge, Tolstoy ultimately comes to God, rediscovering life through religious sentiment. “The shore was God, the stream was tradition, and the oars were the free will given to me to make it to the shore where I would be joined with God. Thus the force of life was renewed within me, and I began to live once again” (Tolstoy 1983, p. 76).

As James asserts, religion can “Easily, permanently, and successfully… transforms the most intolerable misery into the profoundest and most enduring happiness” (James 1929, p. 172). There is an essential state of melancholia before the conversion: the individual experiences a state of mental anguish characterized by extreme lethargy, self-blame, and
self-doubt. In his misery, Tolstoy grasps a transcendent being, enabling him to undergo rebirth in religion. A conversion happens, before which the life itself is lost. He experiences a rebound of life energy, embodying a bottoming-out rebound of life after approaching death—a process that I call the “automatic defense of life”. This process can be analogous to the state of an organism before it dies, metaphorically known as the “Return of Light”, where the organism on the verge of death sends out a distress signal and switches to “contingency mode”, facilitating changes in glandular secretion and creating an illusion of vitality. Contrary to the biological organism, the life force can be sustained in religion.

3. The hidden thread in Freud’s writings. Psychoanalytic research, such as Freud’s proposition of ambivalence, aptly confirms that ostensibly antagonistic emotions can be interchangeable, and for the energetic resources of impulses, they are inherently interconnected. If we view religious sentiment as a complete state of energetic fullness, it is reasonable to assume that there exists a melancholic, low-energy state preceding this exuberance. As Tolstoy’s formulation suggests, this low-energy state may represent a situation in which life energy gradually diminishes. Similar to religious ceremonies of early societies, such as the totemic meal where the ecstatic process is often preceded by mourning, in melancholia, a rebound manic state exists—a symptom modern psychopathology has named bipolar disorder.

Indeed, melancholy as a prelude to the onset of an individual’s religious sentiment is a hidden thread scattered throughout Freud’s discourse. In Freud’s myth of the “Original Father”, when the children unite to murder their father, they are consumed by a deep sense of guilt. Initially, they adopt a mourning ritual to lament the loss of their father and the patriarchy. This process not only represents the children’s ambivalence toward their father but also, more immediately, deals with the profound sense of object loss. Recalling Freud’s connection between mourning and melancholia, the role of melancholia in the genesis of religious sentiment becomes strikingly apparent once again. Moreover, when considering that demons are also products of religious sentiment, this conclusion becomes even more intuitive. In Freud’s A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis, the protagonist, Christoph Haizmann, suffers from melancholic depression, an inability to work, and a constant horror of the future. According to Freud’s analysis, it is the death of Haizmann’s father that plunges him into a state of melancholia. In this melancholic condition, “Here was a person, therefore, who signed a bond with the Devil in order to be freed from a state of depression” (S. Freud 1961b, p. 81). This illustrates a defense mechanism against melancholia, as well as the operation of the organism’s impulse for self-preservation and self-maintenance. Therefore, in the genesis of religious sentiment, the dialectic of life and death constitutes the central tenet. Religious sentiment and mania share a structural and generative process of isomorphism—the same defensive reaction of life to a melancholic state. This defense mechanism bestows upon the individual a second birth. In this sense, religious sentiment represents the rebirth of the individual.

4. Melancholy in the intersection of theological and psychoanalytic studies. Christianity believes that human wickedness consists of the seven deadly sins, including pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. However, Capps mentions: “The major omission from the original lists of eight is melancholy, or tristitia. It was merged with apathy, or acedia, and apathy came to be the accepted name for the combined sin until in English versions the sin was called sloth” (Capps 1987, p. 12). In this respect, melancholy is included within religious sentiments, since what is described by the deadly sins is almost this sentiment. In addition to noting the connection between melancholy and the deadly sins, Capps (1987) also conducts excellent work: he examines the deadly sins under the developmental dimension based on Erikson’s life-cycle theory. I think that the only shortcoming of his work is that he attributes the sin of melancholy to mature adulthood. His analysis of melancholy is phenomenological and dynamic, ignoring the mechanisms of melancholia—although they appear sporadically in his texts. For example, he (Capps 1987, p. 69) mentions personal bondage and isolation as important dispositional roots of melancholy. Both of these dispositions depict a condition: the subject is unable to break out of
himself and make a connection with the object or the external world. The ability to turn toward external objects is clearly based on trust in infancy when infants use their mouths to establish a stable bond with their mother’s breast and other external objects. Thus, the underlying logic of infancy gluttony is the desire to form a stable and secure connection with the world, which for infants can only be obtained through the oral passage. Now, I will move on to a description of the mechanism of melancholia.

5. Psychoanalytic research on the mechanism of melancholia. In Modernity, Melancholy and Predestination, Westerink (2019) offers a wealth of experiences that demonstrate that religion and melancholy have a correlation from the perspective of the history of religions. In the last part of his book, he moves from Burton’s “religious melancholia” to a discussion of psychoanalysis, and mentions that “Freud’s model of melancholy—which is rooted in a long tradition influenced by religion and which is time and again, from Burton to Kraepelin, described in relation to religion—offers a heuristic instrument with which to understand the Protestant preoccupation with predestination and spiritual abandonment” (Westerink 2019, p. 156). Then, what is the Freudian model, or psychoanalytic model, of melancholia? Why is it necessary for me to reduce the genesis of religious sentiment to the structure of melancholia?

Freud illustrates the psychogenesis of melancholia in comparison with mourning. As his poetic statement goes, “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (S. Freud 1957, p. 246). Interestingly, Freud constructs melancholia almost exclusively in terms of the relation between the ego and the object rather than the Oedipus complex. He attributes three primary elements to the predisposition of melancholia: loss of the object, ambivalence, and regression of libido into the ego. Briefly, the model of melancholia is as follows: the loss of the object causes the libido that originally cathected on it to lose its object and to have to withdraw itself from the outside. But because of the ambivalence towards the object, the ego denies the fact that the object is lost by identifying itself with the object. It incorporates the object into the ego and thereby maintains the connection with the object. It is the loss of the object that directly initiates the process of melancholia. But what is lost? Freud seems to talk about the loss of a loved object, but Westerink (2019, p. 150) consistently emphasizes that it is “something” lost, rather than a specific object, and that this special something is nowhere to be found. I agree with him and want to add an additional point: in melancholia associated with religious sentiment, it is life itself that is lost, as in Tolstoy’s case. Life, or connections to the world, is built on the security of the mother-infant relation. This is what Erikson’s (1959) description of the first stage of development, trust versus distrust, tells us. On this point, Kristeva also gives a reasonable comment, “Freudian theory detects everywhere the same impossible mourning for the maternal object” (Kristeva 1989, p. 9). This refers not only to the impossibility of mourning the maternal object loss under the Oedipus complex but also to the impossibility for some to mourn the loss of the early mother-infant linkage. This is also reflected in Lacan’s articulation of melancholia. For Lacan, loss and identification in melancholia are both object a. At the end of Seminar X: Anxiety, Lacan mentions Freud’s work on mourning, “As for us, the work of mourning strikes us, in a light that is at once identical and contrary, as a labour that is carried out to maintain and sustain all these painstaking links with the aim of restoring the bond with the true object of relation, the masked object, the object a” (Lacan 2004, p. 335). Object a is associated with absence; it is the part that is not processed by the symbolic function. In melancholia, all objects do not have a symbolic significance due to the loss, and the subject loses this significance as well because of its identification with the lost object. Thus, the melancholic lacks and identifies with the absence which is also the source of impulses. There is no significance, only a hole (Leader 2023).

I also want to emphasize the third element of melancholia: the regression of the libido into the ego, which Freud considers as the main difference between melancholia and obsessional self-reproaches (S. Freud 1957, p. 258). After the regression of the libido from the external world, there is a split within the ego, creating an opposition between the critical
agency, which Freud later includes as part of the superego, and the criticized ego. The ego is debased to nothing by the cruel superego, and eventually, the latter (also the lost object) triumphs. Freud accurately identifies this sadism in melancholia.

As a preliminary hypothesis, the ontogenesis of religious sentiment can be described as follows: pious religious sentiments are generated through a transformation before which the individual suffers a state of chronic melancholia due to external or internal causes such as illness, psychological distress, trauma, and so on—a typical scenario for which, as Freud hypothesizes, the ego is too small and the superego is overpowering. The energy of the ego (the life energy associated with self-preservation) keeps shrinking towards zero, i.e., death, which triggers the ego’s defense mechanism to seek something fresh to re-energize life. This search is directed towards the inner powerful superego, which allows the ego, suffering from a chronic state of melancholia, to regain its energy by identification with the superego.

This mechanism bears a remarkable similarity to the manic mechanism described by Freud. When the ego is chronically suppressed, either by the superego or by external objects, life tends to seek means to combat or escape distress, as seen in cases of chronic illness where individuals prefer euthanasia to enduring the pain. Mania operates on the same principle: when the cathexis and energy accumulated in melancholia are released and transformed, massive amounts of libido are placed on the ego or other external objects. The ego triumphs and overcomes the object loss. Another mechanism for the ego to avoid distress psychologically is identifying itself with the source of punishment, a mechanism described by Anna Freud as “identification with the aggressor” (A. Freud 1993). The hypothesis of religious sentiment as a defensive product gains credence based on the transformation and defense mechanisms outlined by Freud and Anna. In melancholia, the persecutory superego serves as the source of self-blame and self-loathing, yet simultaneously becomes an object of identification via the mechanism described by Anna. God is the superego, which represents the internalized father image and is wrapped up in the entire history of cultural and familial development. “The past, the tradition of the race and of the people, lives on in the ideologies of the super-ego, and yields only slowly to the influence of the present and to new changes” (S. Freud 1964, p. 67).

Drawing on melancholia and its psychopathological mechanisms, we depict the ontogenesis of religious sentiment as follows:
1. Religion emerges as a product of the superego, with religious figures like God and the Devil serving as substitutes for the parental figure.
2. The individual experiences a chronic state of melancholia triggered by various factors such as illness, trauma, or loss. Something special no longer exists except in one’s ego.
3. This melancholic state progressively diminishes the individual’s life energy and draws it inexorably towards zero, reminiscent of the infantile helplessness experienced in early mother-infant relations.
4. Faced with this despair and helplessness, the ego activates unconscious defense mechanisms in an effort to alleviate suffering and reclaim life energy.
5. The ego finds the inner superego and undergoes a rebirth through identification with it, thereby replenishing its life energy.

In conclusion, religious sentiment emerges as a manifestation of the ego’s response to death—a product of the self-preservation impulse. The ego symbolically reincarnates within the superego, representing a transformation and the individual’s striving to seek vitality in existential distress.

4. Conclusions

Religious sentiment is not merely the complexity of ambivalence; it is also the dialectic of life and death. Freud’s psychoanalysis reveals that emotions stem from the same energetic source, or “complex”, serving different purposes and natures. It also indicates the accessibility of transformations between emotions. Building on this, we reduce the ontogenesis of religious sentiment to the melancholic model. This conclusion is similar to
Kristeva’s (1989) attribution of beauty and the sublime to melancholy. Although reductionism seems rigid and stubborn in many cases, it does aid us in locating a starting point for discussion. In geographic research, it is imperative to establish a model that is free of the influence of ocean currents and monsoons. Freud’s reductionistic stance also discards elements such as culture and history. But it is for this reason that later scholars can continue to consider cultural and historical elements in Freud’s meta-psychological project, such as the work carried out by De Certeau (1988) and Westerink (2019).

Just as the birth of the shaman in early religions necessitated symbolic death and rebirth (Mircea Eliade 2024), religious sentiment also represents a second life. The appearance of the Messianic figure in Christianity testifies to the world’s distress and tribulations. Prophecy delineates the finale whereby, after the coming of the Messiah, people are rescued, healed, and restored to their bright homeland. Religious ideas are actually projections of individual religious sentiment. The imagery of salvation embodies the individual’s redemption in death, later projected into a fantastical image. The essence of the image is rooted in psychological processes.

Through the ontogenesis of religious sentiment described in the previous section, the two remaining questions raised in the second section of this article can be further explored. First, regarding the “oceanic feeling” that serves as the wellspring of religious sentiment, we can perceive it as arising from the ego’s identification with the superego. The ego undergoes a transformation by identification with the superego, which comprises numerous collective components. Thus, the ego acquires a collective identity. In other words, the superego supplants the ego, and the latter is integrated into the collective image. Similar to Jung’s (2014) interpretation of the ocean as a symbol of the collective unconscious, the oceanic feeling also comes from the collective agency. Simultaneously, this transformation implies the demise of the purely individual ego, which serves as the primary personality structure mediating interactions with external objects and reality. The dissolution of the ego signifies a detachment from external reality and foretells that the individual exists primarily in the collective superego. Here, the imperatives of faith and morality predominate over and transcend the confines of reality, elucidating the inherent irrationality and capacity to transcend death within religious sentiment. Indeed, the ego’s prior experience of annihilation engenders a fearless attitude towards mortality.

We certainly will not overlook the connection between the sense of guilt or shame in religion and the intense self-reproach experienced by melancholics. For example, melancholics believe that they do not deserve something special, that they do not deserve to be alive. Meanwhile, the melancholic model provides insights into different emotional states, such as expectations of salvation and feelings of completeness. While employing a pathological model to explain the genesis of religious sentiment might be met with skepticism and criticism from some believers, it remains a valuable approach for attempting to understand religious sentiment through the lens of universal rationality. Melanie Klein (1935) describes depression as a state of integration wherein all individuals must reconcile previously divided good and bad objects throughout their mental development. This process compels the subject to acknowledge that they cannot permanently retain the good object while eliminating the bad one. This is not only a universal course but also a mandatory trajectory for the advancement of the human mentality towards higher levels.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, C.H. and F.J.; resources, C.H.; writing—original draft preparation, C.H.; writing—review and editing, C.H. and F.J.; supervision, F.J.; funding acquisition, F.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, grant number 19BZX094.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.
Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes
1 Terminological confusion lingers in the study of emotion. Affect, sentiment, feeling, and emotion can all be used interchangeably in a broad sense to express personal subjective experience. However, in Freud’s terminology, the word affect is equated with energetic forces and associated with physiological impulses; feeling emphasizes psychological changes; and emotion is a psychosomatic manifestation (Jacobson 1971, pp. 4–7). To avoid the complexity of mind–body questions, this paper uses ‘sentiment’ to express subjective feelings about religion. Additionally, the word sentiment has a poignant connotation that resonates with the core assumptions of this paper. We use ‘religious sentiment’ in the broad sense, including not only beliefs under Christianity but also several preliminary forms of religion such as totem worship.

2 Descartes’ book for this argument is Les Passions de L’âme, literally translated as Passions of the Soul; however, She (2023) argues that this translation fails to capture the precise meaning of Descartes’ text. The term ‘passion’ is a continuation of ‘passio’ in medieval philosophy, as opposed to ‘actio’, which loosely refers to a change in the mind that does not arise from itself, rather than the extreme feelings in contemporary discourse. In this way, les passions are those moderate emotions for the subject.

3 The disciplines mentioned above are all based on the rational methodology that constitutes the basis of science in the modern era. The distinction between them and psychoanalysis lies in the fact that those disciplines deal with an objectifying science, such as in Durkheim (2014), who defined the subject of sociology as social facts. Simultaneously, however, the striving for pure objectivity created a dilemma in their comprehension of religious sentiment since they were compelled to ignore those subjective components, preventing them from providing an ontogenetic explanation. Psychoanalysis has been clinically working with individual impulses and fantasies from the very beginning, leaving plenty of room for subjective experience.

4 The psychoanalytic term ‘libido’ is also a concept of force, which constitutes the drives behind our behaviors and is an energy that is between mind and body.

5 Durkheim regards the religious force as the obligatory strength of unsurmountable society, so I capitalize the “S” here. The point is that when considering ontogenesis, it is the nurturer, the father or mother in the clan, who is perceived (consciously or unconsciously) by the newborn as the object. The power and efficacy of society are transmitted to a specific person through the intermediary of the family and parents. In Durkheim’s society, i.e., the clans, kinship is also central. Thus, we can see the subtle consistency with Freud’s theories.

6 William James’ psychology of religion also began here. However, he offered only a phenomenological similarity and consistency without further exploring the mechanisms behind neurosis and religious behavior.

7 The historical theory here refers to events that have actually happened in history, that is, Freud assigns a kind of reality to the original father theory.

8 It changes to “罪” during the Qin Dynasty because of its similarity to “皇” (emperor).

9 I would like to thank my colleague Zixiao Liu for the explanation of the character “罪”. For a detailed description of this character, please refer to the website “https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E7%BE%9E” (accessed on 1 July 2024).

10 One of the criticisms against Freud is that the mother is not present in his theory of religion (Kenny 2015). In fact, aside from religious theory, he also centers on the father complex and the Oedipus complex in other parts of psychoanalytic theory. However, as shown here, in his latest years, motherhood and the pre-oedipal phase enter into his discourse.

11 Freud and Klein are separated in this respect. For Freud, the discovery of the object does not happen at birth. Libido goes through the diverse stages of development of auto-eroticism, narcissism, and object-love, and it is only when it comes to object-love, in which the infant identifies the mother as an external object, that the differentiation between the ego and the object becomes clear. In Klein’s theory, however, the infant is born with an ego, which means that the ego-object is differentiated at the outset, and what the infant undergoes is the development from a partial object to a whole object, not a transition from absence to presence.

12 The advantage of descriptive phenomenology lies precisely in the unbiased representation of individual subjective materials. Although the methodology is different from psychoanalysis, it can provide these materials for psychoanalysis to reduce and construct the genetic process of religious sentiment.

13 This melancholic state before conversion is not exclusive to Tolstoy but can also be observed in the personal experiences of figures like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and others. According to Erikson (1993), before Luther became a monk, he was in a perpetual state of emotional tristitia and melancholia.

14 Rizzuto also considers religious belief to have a defensive trait. However, she assumes that the defense is motivated by the need for self-esteem or narcissism.

15 I want to emphasize “not deserve” here because it is a state of shame combined with guilt.


Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.