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# Psychoanalysis and Islam: The Father in Islam and in Anthropological Reality

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## 1. The father in Islamic dogma and faith

The figure of the father has no part in the construction of Islamic dogma. From the start, the Koran takes particular care to separate any reference to God from a representation of paternity, even as a metaphor. Proclamations of the unicity of God radically exclude any notion of divine generation or procreation. The surah called *Purity of faith* describes divine nature as follows:

« Say : He is Allah the One and Only; Allah the Eternal Absolute; He begets not nor is he begotten; And there is none like unto Him[1]. »

Commentators present this passage as a refutation of the Christian God the Father. The word “absolute” is intended to exclude God from the order of sex and procreation – by contrast with the open nature characterising humans, who are sexed beings – since in Arabic the word for sex (*farj*) means hole, defect, incompleteness.

Therefore, we might say that in Islam there is an explicit prohibition against conceiving the humanity of God, and representing Him as an ideal Father. The expression God the Father would be considered blasphemous.

*The Koran* also denies the status of father to the founder of Islam: “*Muhammad is not the father of any of your men.*”[2] From the start, the prophet is placed in the position of son and of orphan, since one of the first names by which God addresses him is “*the Orphan*”. This means that God refers Muhammad at once to the dead father. Muslims do not see the prophet as either paternal or patriarchal. Contrary to Judaism, in Islam paternity never held an essential place in the alliance with Yahweh as the Father of fathers. Islamic monotheism has not adopted Judeo-Christian paternalism.

In general, Islam has not sacralised the Father, either when it was founded as a new religion, or throughout the history of its transmission. Moreover, the father is the object of a distancing, of insistent criticism found in the Koranic text. First, there are very few instances (seven) when the Koran refers favorably to what it calls “the first prophets”. [3] Several commentators have remarked that the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet (the *Hadith*) never use the term “father” in the singular, but only in the plural, as if **THE FATHER** as essential entity did not exist. The first prophets are: Ibrahim first, Ishmael second, then Isaac and Jacob;

reference to them as “fathers” is made through a character in the biblical text, rather than directly by the Koran.

We must also point out that in most cases the plural “fathers” is used in a context of negative events, characters or judgments: fathers are wrong, they are delusional, they fall into temptation, they are idol worshipers and forgetful of God. They are called to order, denounced, summoned to believe in Allah the One and Only, and are sometimes forgiven their trespasses.

Ibrahim, the central figure among *first* fathers in Islam, is presented as the model of the founding of monotheism on the disobedience of the son, since Ibrahim rejected the polytheistic religion of his father Terah, and left him to undertake a geographical and spiritual journey to encounter Allah the *One*. This migration represents a liberation from the law of the father, his clan and his customs, in order to embrace the law of Allah the One and Only. Thus, in Islam, the spirit of monotheism is associated with an exile allowing the son to encounter Allah the One, free of a father.

Yet even Ibrahim, who refused to sacrifice his son – a fact commemorated every year by Muslims –, is not exempt from the faults associated with the figure of the father. Indeed, the Koranic text presents a version of Ibrahim’s incitement to sacrifice one of his sons (without specifying whether it is Isaac or Ishmael) which differs from the versions presented by Christianity or Judaism. This version is coherent with the perspective I just outlined: Ibrahim, the father, was wrong when he was ready to commit infanticide.

In the Koranic version, Ibrahim dreams that he is sacrificing his son; under the influence of the dream, he is about to kill the child when God stops his hand at the last moment: « *We cried out : Ô Ibraheem, you have indeed fulfilled your dream.* » [4]

In the cry with which God stops the infanticide, an accusation is heard concerning the fact that Ibrahim obeyed the images in his dream. Based on this interpretation, Ibn Arabi, one of the key spiritual figures of Sufism (13<sup>th</sup> century), developed a very elaborate theory of the interpretation of the dream and the sacrifice, providing a carefully thought-out concept of the spiritual origins of the question of the father in the Islamic version of monotheism. This author points out that Allah’s disapproval can only be related to Ibrahim’s failure to interpret his dream. It is because the father makes the mistake of not interpreting his dream that he conceives the desire to kill his son, and that Allah intercedes by providing the ram as a substitute.[5] *Thus, the sacrificial desire of the son corresponds to the missing interpretation of the father.*

What is the missing interpretation? According to Ibn Arabi, if Ibrahim would have meditated on his dream, he would have understood that he should sacrifice himself, since he was in a symbiotic relationship with his son. He had to separate from him in order to become a father in reality instead of being an essential entity. Interpreting the dream would have made it possible to limit the father’s imaginary omnipotence, which was that of the animal at the dawn of the human race. By substituting the ram for the child, Allah showed Ibrahim that it was the animal father in him that had to be sacrificed, not his son. We can see that Ibn Arabi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century author, developed a theory greatly resembling Freud’s interpretation of the sacrificial animal, a theory reiterated by Jacques Lacan, who pointed out that the ram is a figure of the father of absolute jouissance.[6]

Thus, not only can the God of Islam not be assimilated to the figure of the father, but He appears, more radically, as a God critical of the father, who makes up for the lacking interpretation which created the wish for infanticide. In short, Allah, who is not human, fills a symbolic function lacking in the human-inhuman father in regard to his son.

Clearly, the last monotheistic religion, created in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, appears from the start to raise an objection to the theology of divine paternity by placing a genealogical desert between Man and God. This has numerous consequences, at many levels. First, at the level of historical development, we will remember that Hegel attributed the rapid success of Islam to its very “abstract conception of the spirit” and to “the highest

intuition of the One.”[7] Christian Jambet has shown how this element of the teachings led to the birth of an ontology establishing an equivalence between *god* and *Being*, between *One* and *the identity of the real*. [8]

In his French translation of the *Koran*, Jacques Berque has shown the similarity between the Purity of Faith surah quoted earlier, and one of the earliest definitions of One indivisible divine, in Parmenides’ *Poem*. In the translation of Fragment 8, the similarity with the verse in question is striking:

« [...] *Being unbegotten, He is also imperishable, One, Unique, unshakable and without end.* »

Nor was [it] once, nor will [it] be, since [it] is now, all together, One, continuous. »[9]

Marcel Conche’s commentary explains how the completeness of this divinity, One, “unbegotten”, establishes the idea of a god radically different from any being, a god who is “being”, from whom nothing can be taken away and to whom nothing can be added. Thus, the God of Islam can be said to be Parmenidian.

What can explain this anti-paternalistic position of the God of Islam? My research on the subject shows that the founder of Islam found himself in a genealogical situation presented in *The Genesis*, where it appears that Abraham’s son Ismael was born to Hagar through natural conception, while for Isaac God had to intervene in the procreation, since Sarah was over seventy years old. This same intervention would take place with Mary, to beget Jesus. Ismael’s real father is Abraham, while the divine Creator is not involved in the procreation, since Abraham, like Joseph, are symbolic fathers. In my view, this genealogical positioning of the myth of the father in monotheism explains the fact that in Islam God is not a father. Strangely, comparative studies of monotheistic religions have never discussed this essential point.

The other major event in the biblical story is that Abraham sends his son Ismael and his mother into the desert, exposing them to the risk of death, from which they are saved by divine intervention. Thus, in Islam, the figure of the father is marked by the question of the abandonment of the son and the mother, to which the temptation to sacrifice the son is added, although the Koranic text describes a reconciliation between Ismael and his father during the reconstruction of the temple at Mecca. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the problems related to Abrahamic paternity led the founder of Islam to relinquish the idealization of the father, in favor of formulating from the start the concept of a God who is *Being*, the source of a separate symbolic function for the father and the son, which separates them. In other words, a language function.

## **2. Consequences at the individual level**

In Islam, the prohibition to depict Allah as the Father or to liken Him to a paternal figure has consequences at the individual level. It has led to a subjective antinomy for the Muslim. Indeed, like all children, the Muslim subject idealizes his father and projects this idealization onto the representation of God. Moreover, the social and legal organization of the patriarchal system, widespread in the Muslim world, has the same orientation: it grants the father a position of absolute authority in the familial realm, going so far as to speak of him as “the god of the household”(Rab ad-dâr). This creates a contradiction between the demands of the religion, which commands the believer not to conceive of God as a father; and the psychic reality of the child along with the anthropological normativity which places the father at the summit of ever structure.

This contradiction subjects the Muslim to a tension I would describe as antipsychic, since it attacks the imaginary father and opposes his function. This commandment could be formulated as follows: “Thou shalt not take God for thine father.” *I believe that such a commandment intensifies superegoic anxiety regarding God*, since the function of the imaginary father is precisely to reduce this anxiety; he represents a source of love and consolation even when he punishes. The fact is that in the dogmatic tradition of Islam, Allah is not a god of love, except in Sufism, which is a spiritual reversal of dogmatic trends in Islam.

But Islam is not the only religion which produces such psychic contradictions; the Christian commandment “Thou shalt love thine neighbour as thyself”, which interested Freud, is one of those injunctions that run counter to the superego’s tendency to channel the libido into one direction or another. In the case of Islam, the dogma effects a drastic reduction of the figure of Allah as imaginary father. This reduction is at the root of the recurrent forms of malaise in Islamic civilisation, like those we are witnessing today. It is what explains the proliferation of preachers, attracting tormented individuals who venerate a terrible and cruel God of Islam who demands punishment and sacrifice. These preachers hate Sufism, advocate its destruction and burn its books, like those of Ibn Arabi.

### 3. Freud and the father in Islam

Freud had the remarkable intuition that the views of Islam concerning the father in relation to God were significantly different from those of Judaism and, above all, those of Christianity.[10] This was due to the fact that what he knew about Islam at the time contradicted his hypothesis that nostalgia for the father[11] was at the root of the creation of gods and religious beliefs. He tried to resolve the contradiction by means of a solution which, in my view, introduces an even greater contradiction in the theory.

Specifically, in the section dealing with the difficulties left unsolved in *Moses and Monotheism*[12] Freud discusses Islam as a monotheistic religion. It is one of the few instances where he speaks of Islam, a rare instance where the cultural role of the father is discussed. After apologizing for his limited knowledge concerning Islam, Freud proposes a two-stage description: 1) the Arabs adopted the primitive Father (*Urvater*), and by so doing enjoyed successful development for a time; 2) but because Islam did not recognize *the murder of the father*, the internal development of this religion was halted.

The serious contradiction evident in Freud’s proposition is the following: how can we conceive of a civilization founded on the restitution of the primitive father, a figure antagonistic, by definition, to the demands of the law and the limitations of drives imposed by culture? Of course, we know that there is no murder of the father in Christianity or Judaism, any more than in Islam; this “murder” is a construct allowing Freud to transpose into the sphere of culture something he encountered in the psychic reality of the neurotic. The fiction presented in *Totem and Taboo* had already carried out this transposition. It is founded on a principle underlying Freud’s anthropological theory, *that of concordance between organizing elements of psychic reality and the foundation of culture*. We might say that the concordance principle is, in psychoanalysis, the postulate of solidarity between psyche and culture throughout human existence everywhere and in all eras of its history.

Therefore, the case of Islam as presented in Freud’s hypothesis **constitutes a departure from this concordance**, since this religious institution of civilization is not in keeping with its creation based on longing or nostalgia for the father (*Sehnsucht*). Unless we place Islam outside the sphere of civilization, and with it many other anthropological systems in which there is no correlation between the father and god, we must consent to new effort and reconsider the question of concordance between psyche and culture.

#### *The father and the question of concordance between psyche and culture*

This approach to the case of Islam allows us, I believe, to place in perspective Freud’s hypothesis concerning the concordance between psyche and culture in terms of the father of religious beliefs. Moreover, I believe that today the general question of the father cannot be analyzed accurately without placing this Freudian hypothesis in perspective.

Here, we must deal with a central element in this necessary placing in perspective; specifically, we must deconstruct the radicalization of the father in the elaboration of the Christian dogma. Indeed, starting with

Mary's immaculate conception to beget Jesus, repeated in Sarah's conception of Isaac, it is the Apostle Paul who theorizes this radicalization using the syntagma "God the Father", in the *Epistle to the Galatians*, when he distinguishes between the son born by the flesh and the son born by the Spirit, the latter referring to Isaac, the prototype of Jesus, as opposed to Ishmael, the son born by the flesh. In the name of God the Father, the son born by the Spirit is blessed and considered superior to the other son, who is placed in eternal servitude because he was conceived according to the flesh by his mother, Hagar.

Thus, Christianity presents an intensification and extension of the notion of "Father" not seen anywhere else in monotheism, or in the secularized normative order until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us remember this passage in the Gospel (John 14:10), in which Christ asks:

« Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? »

The father is inside and outside. He is container and content: a total, inclusive category of identity. This is what made Christianity a "holopaternalism" of God until the incarnation. Now, the father is no longer a metaphor; he is embodied through the son, He lives in him, takes possession of him and abandons him to die a horrific death on the cross. This excessiveness of the father is a Christian particularity, specific to its religious doctrine, its spirituality, its institution – and goes much further than patriarchy, which is a form of social and judicial organization based on male authority, in which the father is the master of the household and of the familial community.

When Freud attempts to conceive of psychoanalysis as both an individual and a collective psychology, he falls into Christian holopaternalism. From that point on, the father is the guardian of the concordance between the psychic and the social. As we have pointed out. The primitive scenario depicting the murder of the father and his ingestion is the equivalent of the Christian rite of communion. Freud's *Christianocentrism* is most evident in regard to the question of the father. As a result, Christian holopaternalism becomes the universal truth connecting the psychic with the social in psychoanalysis, an extravagant hypothesis in disagreement with so many other anthropological perspectives of humanity. Indeed, many of these perspectives completely eliminate the father's role as guardian at the dawn of human history. There are many other figures of excessive jouissance besides that of the supposed father of the horde, such as that of the cruel master or sovereign, and that of the double – imaginary twinning as a figure of original omnipotence.

Psychoanalytic research over more than a century, so abundantly rooted in the paternal, has much in common with Christian holopaternalism: the father of the horde, the father in personal history, the father of reality, the father of the law, the symbolic father, the imaginary father, the real father and finally the "Name of the Father" with its many forms that go back to the major principle of secularized Christianity, sometimes barely recognizable in them.

Isn't it time for us, psychoanalysts, to give the father a less extravagant place and leave room for the study of other configurations which involve other types of psychic-social correspondences than those centering around the father? Culturally and spiritually, humanity is constructed by various means, not all of them related to holopaternalism. Moreover, are we not seeing in the Western World, where father-centered Christian fanaticism once reigned, the scaling down of the pretention that the father concept can govern simultaneously the psychic, the social and the political realms? In many respects, the emancipation of women and the acquisition of new rights which upset the traditional structures of parenthood usher in a new order not governed by the father or by patriarchy. In general, the hypothesis of a correspondence between the psyche and the culture must be placed in perspective, particularly since in periods of historical upheaval the individual subject usually lags considerably behind the transformations occurring in culture, a fact which causes the emergence of dissonances, which are sources of anxiety, conflict and even wars.

At one point, Freud did place his holopaternalism in perspective. We will remember that in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Freud put forth a hypothesis stating that one of the sources of

freedom revealed by Leonardo's work, in the context of his era, was the fact that "he had learned to relinquish the father" from childhood, and throughout his life he no longer needed to rely on the transfiguration of the father into God, to conduct his daring experiments which led him to move away from "the Christian conception of the universe." Nevertheless, Freud does not present Leonardo as an unbeliever, since he points out that da Vinci "never failed to express his admiration for the Creator, the original source of all these marvelous mysteries." [13] However, Freud points out that *relinquishing the father* opened a space of "games and pranks" which Leonardo allowed his imagination [14], and by means of which his mind could subject nature to his personal research. We also know that in the case of Lacan, the idea of foregoing the name-of-the-father became part of his psychoanalytic theory. Naturally, foregoing the name-of-the-father does not mean eliminating the need for the father. But let us note that the theory of the name-of-the-father has a name whose resonance is Christian and therefore goes beyond the father.

Of course, not all men have Leonardo's genius, but cultural and spiritual paths do not all have to involve the father. Although the genesis of the subject as an individual corresponds to a metaphor beyond the maternal Other, the metaphoric is not essentially a paternal domain. Indeed, all the outstanding advances made since the European Renaissance in human civilization in terms of human rights and dignity were not carried out in the name of the father, nor in the name of God, although some symbolic orders owe their longevity and solidity to them. It is vital for psychoanalysis not to remain attached to the dogmatic idea of concordance between the psychic and the cultural, locked in place by holopaternalism.

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## Notes:

[1] *Koran*, 112, 1-4.

[2] *Koran*, 33, 40.

[3] *Al-abâ' al-'awwalîn*

[4] *Koran*, 37, 101-112.

[5] Ibn Arabi, *The Wisdom of the Prophets*, Suhail Academy Lahore, 2011.

[6] J. Lacan, Seminar XI, Lesson delivered Nov. 20, 1963: "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar", unpublished.

[7] Hegel, G.W.F., *The Philosophy of History*, Dover Publications, 2004.

[8] Jambert, C., *The Act of Being*, Zone Books, 2006.

[9] Parmenides and Empedocles: *The Fragments in Verse Translation*, Wipf & Stock, 2011.

[10] In Christianity, God's explicit paternity is a central theme; it is also a prominent theme in the *Bible* and in Jewish religious literature. As Jean Carmignac points out (in "Recherches sur le 'Notre-Père'", Éditions Letouzy & Ané, 1969), in the Judaic prayers of the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, YHWY is depicted both as the Father of the Jewish people, and the Father of each individual person.

[11] In *Totem and Taboo*, “longing for the father”.

[12] Freud, S. (1939). *Moses and Monotheism*, Vintange Books, 1955.

[13] Freud, S., op. cit. p. 127.

[14] Freud, S., *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, S.E. 11, London: Hogarth, p. 127.

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