

Religion and the Theory of Masochism

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ABSTRACT: The various aspects of masochistic personality structures provide a useful model for examining familiar elements of ordinary religious life. Overall theories of masochism can be divided into six general categories which trace masochism to 1) a distortion of love, 2) a need for punishment, 3) a payment for future rewards, 4) a strategy of the weak or powerless, 5) a flight from selfhood, or 6) an effort to be an object for others. In each case, religious analogies can be found exhibiting the same dynamics. Thus, certain religious phenomena may provide cultural or collective responses to the psychological needs at the root of masochism.²⁴⁰

One of the major assumptions of the psychology of religion, particularly in the psychoanalytic tradition, has been that religious phenomena provide cultural and collective analogues to the universal psychological tendencies of individuals. Freud frequently pointed out that the psychological conflicts that give rise to neuroses are substantially the same as those that give rise to religion.¹ In particular, the impact of the Oedipal complex on religious practice and symbolism has been widely discussed.

There is another area in psychoanalytic theory, however, that has received comparatively little attention in regard to its implications for the analysis of religion. This area is the theory of masochism. Masochism has always represented to psychologists a puzzling and little understood phenomenon. A large number of theories have been offered to explain it from a variety of perspectives. One analyst goes so far as to say that *all* neuroses are ultimately efforts to deal with the danger of psychic masochism.² Others point out that some masochism is inescapable in human life, particularly in childhood, when every person must go through a period of passive surrender, submission, and dependence. Throughout history, moreover, masochism in its various forms has provided a means of dealing with such universal experiences as powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt.

Although masochism is most popularly associated with a sexual perversion in which sexual pleasure is derived from pain, in a larger sense it simply refers to a personality structure based on submission and dependence. The most common element of masochistic fantasies is a "feeling of being putty in the master's hand, of being devoid of all will, of all power, of being absolutely sub-

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jected to another's domination."³ The extent to which this personality structure is primarily defensive, adaptive, normal, or potentially religious will require closer study.

In this paper, I shall examine briefly some of the major approaches to masochism⁴ and consider some preliminary connections with common religious themes and phenomena, especially in the relationship between man and God. That religion and masochism are sometimes related there can be no doubt. As Erich Fromm points out, the defining qualities of each of them overlap. "Schliermacher's definition of religious experience as absolute dependence is the definition of the masochistic experience in general."⁵ The greatest cultural accomplishments of civilization may rest in part on deeper masochistic goals. In his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James observes that one of the fundamental mysteries of religious experience is "the satisfaction found in absolute surrender to the larger power," which is also one of the primary characteristics of saintliness.⁶

Masochism as a distortion of love

A number of psychological theories focus on the masochist's distorted understanding of a love relationship he needs to preserve at any cost. A masochistic relation reflects a peculiar way of both expressing one's own love and experiencing the love of one's partner. Otto Fenichel describes masochism as an outgrowth or exaggeration of falling in love or being infatuated with another person.⁷ The masochist regards the other person as an ideal self (ego-ideal). He lacks any sense of his own self's independence and autonomy. Rather, he lives through his partner, seeing his partner as everything and himself as nothing. His willingness to sacrifice everything for his partner reflects a feeling of his own insignificance and helplessness compared to the other's magnificence and omnipotence. Furthermore, he believes that voluntary sacrifice and submission are ways to express unshakable love and loyalty to his partner. The more suffering he is willing to tolerate, the greater his love must be. This kind of behavior may also serve as a technique to ingratiate himself with another person. Any sympathy or attention evoked by masochistic acts only tends to reinforce their repetition. Such absolute love and adoration for another inevitably lead to self-contempt and self-humiliation. Rather than developing his own personality, the masochist attempts to acquire the qualities he idealizes through a mystical union with his partner. In some cases, he may even develop fantasies of being incorporated into a powerful Other in order to overcome his own sense of inadequacy.

Masochists not only demonstrate their own love in a self-deprecatory way; they also tend to interpret abusive behavior from others as evidence that they are loved. The roots of this attitude are probably found in early childhood. Shirley Panken locates the source of much masochism in a child's experience of maternal ambivalence. A mother who is depriving, abandoning, and cruel at certain times and oversolicitous, self-sacrificing, and infantilizing at others can create a confusion in a child whereby ill-treatment and love are not distin-

guished. Or a child may think that his mother is being hurt by his father during sex, which he may conclude is the father's way of showing love.⁸ In other words, a masochist learns to accept suffering at the hands of another person as though it were love. He does not enjoy suffering *per se* but endures it in exchange for the feeling of being loved. No matter how abusive or cruel his partner may be, the masochist, like the child, prefers to accept mistreatment as a sign of love rather than be confronted with no relation at all. He may even unconsciously provoke abuse and rejection from those whose love he seeks, thereby perpetuating masochistic forms of relation.

In Western religious tradition a personal love relationship is the dominant expression of the divine/human encounter. It seems reasonable to say, however, that many elements of this relationship are portrayed in a way that resembles the masochistic style I have just described. Radical self-abasement, for example, is often an accompaniment of love of God. The monastic tradition sees total self-sacrifice as a means of honoring God.

By poverty he immolates his exterior possessions; by chastity he immolates his body; by obedience he completes the sacrifice, and gives to God all that he yet holds as his own, his two most precious goods, his intellect and his will. The sacrifice is then complete and unreserved, a genuine holocaust, for the entire victim is now consumed for the honor of God.⁹

Such an attitude is further perfected in the thought of someone like Calvin, where love and glorification of God go hand in hand with a deepening sense of personal worthlessness.

The interpretation of one's suffering as a sign of another's love is also common in Western religion. Theodor Reik points out groups that have endured much suffering in their history often connect the idea of being loved with that of being punished. They believe their suffering to be a way God has distinguished them as a chosen people with a special mission because he loves them best. "This is the ethno-psychological analogy to the infantile idea: father beats me and loves me."¹⁰ Richard Rubenstein, likewise, sees the Jewish idea of the chosen people and its role in history as a masochistic rationalization of national suffering.¹¹ The "suffering servant" described in Isaiah 53 and generally interpreted in Judaism as a symbol for the nation Israel submissively accepts suffering as proof of his election and God's love for him.

One of the most dramatic juxtapositions of suffering and divine love is found in Lamentations 3. The speaker begins, "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath" (3:1) and proceeds to offer a litany of the forms God's wrath has taken:

He has driven and brought me into darkness without
any light;
surely against me he turns his hand again and again the
whole day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away and broken
my bones;

he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and
 tribulation;
 he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.
 He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
 he has put heavy chains on me;
 though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer;
 he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made
 my paths crooked.
 He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion
 in hidin;
 he led me off my way and tore me to pieces; he has
 made me desolate;
 he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.
 He drove into my heart the arrows of his quiver;
 I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the
 burden of their songs all day long.
 He has filled me with bitterness, he has sated me
 with wormwood.
 He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me
 cower in ashes;
 my soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what
 happiness is;
 so I say, "Gone is my glory, and my expectation from
 the Lord" (3:2-18).

In spite of all this, the speaker immediately consoles himself: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end" (3:22). Similar juxtapositions of God's wrath with praise for his love are not uncommon (e.g., Isaiah 63:3-7). More recently, Elie Wiesel reports being told by fellow Jews in the Nazi death camps: "If God punishes us relentlessly, it's a sign that he loves us all the more."¹²

In Christianity, the link between suffering and God's love:

. . . we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:3-5).

Or in a more direct association of suffering with divine love, he quotes Proverbs 3:11-12:

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
 nor lose courage when when you are punished by him.
 For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
 And chastises every son whom he receives (Hebrews 12:5-6).

Suffering, Paul continues, shows that God is treating you like a son, that is, as an object of his love. In his chapter on "Sainthood" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James says the saint assumes any pain or injury

suffered is the will of a loving God. Sometimes these experiences of God's love could be extreme. James quotes the account of a Catholic saint:

Often the assaults of the divine love reduced her to the point of death. She used tenderly to complain of this to God. "I cannot support it," she used to say. "Bear gently with my weakness, or I shall expire under the violence of your love."¹⁴

Christianity also gives dramatic expression to the tendency of masochists to identify themselves with the body of the all-powerful object of their love. In masochists this idea is often a defense against the fear of being abandoned.¹⁵

The sacrifice of "death" of the self and the renunciation of narcissism in the masochist are merely a preliminary to restoring narcissism through "resurrection" and fusion with the Other. Similarly, Jesus' emptying and sacrifice of his own self is only in order to identify with God the Father. The individual Christian, moreover, sacrifices his individual self in order to become part of the body of Jesus. In John's gospel Jesus says,

... even as thou, Father, art in me, I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me (17:21).

The so-called "Christ-mysticism" of Paul involves the same identification with the body of Christ. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (1 Cor. 6:15; cf. 1 Cor. 12:22-26).

Masochism as a need for punishment

When Freud realized that masochism is often unrelated to sexual instincts, he proceeded to describe the basis for "moral masochism." Moral masochism is primarily a defense against a powerful unconscious sense of guilt. The moral masochist suffers from an overly sensitive conscience, that is, a punitive superego. The masochistic response to this sense of guilt is a persistent need for punishment, expiation, and absolution. Punishment or sacrifice is much easier to accept than unrelieved guilt. The masochist seeks or endures suffering because he thinks he deserves it. He never questions the justice or reason of the one who punishes him. Berliner sees this need for punishment as an effort to elicit love. The masochist arranges to be punished himself so that his partner will once again find him good and worth loving.¹⁶ Freud says that punishment is initially sought from the father but that suffering at the hands of fate or God may later replace it. In his personal relations, moreover, the masochist will frequently pair off with a narcissistic, jealous, punitive partner.

The acceptance of suffering as punishment is a deep-seated biblical idea. The prophets in particular portray Yahweh as a jealous husband who is punishing his wife (Israel) with a beating (e.g., Ezekiel 16). The focus is almost always on the guilt of Israel rather than the justification of God's wrath. The universalization and individualization of guilt in the Christian doctrine of original sin are an extension of this masochistic phenomenon. The love of God can only be restored by willingly accepting guilt and punishment or identifying with someone else (Jesus) who suffered that punishment in one's place.

Masochism as payment for future rewards

Some analysts have described the masochist's feeling that the greater the humiliation and unhappiness he suffers now, the greater will be his future happiness at making up and reuniting.¹⁷ The masochist often expects some ultimate satisfaction commensurate with the suffering he willingly endures. As his suffering increases, moreover, he believes his future reward simultaneously grows closer. Reik sees this masochistic pattern as a defense against the anxiety that too much pleasure will bring punishment. Rather than contaminating his present pleasure with the fear of anticipated punishment, the masochist accepts punishment as an anticipation of pleasure. By seeking the punishment first, suffering becomes a signal of the nearness of pleasure. In sexual terms, the orgasm follows the beating.¹⁸ The masochist does not desire pain as such, but sees it as a promise of pleasure to come. Eventually, as in the case of parental ambivalence, the boundary between pain and pleasure may become blurred so that the former and the latter are indistinguishable. In this case pain itself becomes a form of pleasure. A history of the Sacred Heart order describes its founder in this way.

Her love of pain and suffering was insatiable. . . . She said that she could cheerfully live till the day of judgment, provided she might always have matter for suffering for God; but that to live a single day without suffering would be intolerable. She said again that she was devoured with two unassuageable fevers, one for the holy communion, the other for suffering, humiliation, and annihilation. "Nothing but pain," she said continually in her letters, "makes my life supportable."¹⁹

This type of masochism has close parallels in the eschatological mentality for which the intensity of present suffering is a sign of the proximity and glory of impending redemption. Most of the Old Testament prophets closely weave together their descriptions of the suffering and chastisement at hand with visions of a wondrous future restoration (e.g., Jeremiah 33; Ezekiel 36; Amos 9:7-15). Similarly, one of Job's comforters assures him that God ultimately compensates those who endure their suffering. "Behold, happy is the man whom God reprove; therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty" (Job 5:17-18; cf. Lam. 3:25-33). The man who suffers patiently is "happy" because he knows what is in store for him later.

Reik summarizes the strategy of the masochist as "Victory through Defeat."²⁰ Sartre captures the same idea in calling it a game of "Loser Wins." Suffering gives one a special claim on future rewards: ". . . the severest punishment becomes the switching point to bliss and salvation,"²¹ "The steps of suffering become the rungs of the ladder to heaven."²² Reik considers both Judaism and Christianity forms of group masochism to the extent that they glorify affliction as the path to paradise or heaven. Christianity, in particular, presents in Jesus the model of suffering and humiliation as the means to ultimate victory. Out of defeat and death Jesus rose to divinity and eternal life and conquered more of the world than any Roman emperor. It is no wonder that this

masochistic attitude gave rise to a tradition of martyrdom and asceticism in Christianity where abuse and pain produce a feeling of closeness to God. The themes of both victory through defeat and winning by losing are evident in Jesus' teachings to his disciples. Consider the following:

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven (Matt. 5:11-12; cf. 1 Peter 5:6-10).

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it (Luke 9:23-24).

Paul echoes the same idea when he tells the Corinthians;

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor: 12:10).

Masochism as a strategy of the weak

Paul's idea that there is strength in weakness suggests another aspect of masochism. Paradoxically, masochism is often a way of asserting power through powerlessness. Martyrdom, submission, and suffering often conceal an attitude of moral superiority. The masochist gains the prestige of knowing he is right and putting the other person in the wrong.²³ He is intent on showing the terrible deeds his partner is capable of.²⁴ The biblical story of Job contains elements of this idea. Job endures his suffering with dignity but refuses to accept the justifications for it offered by his friends. Ultimately, God responds to Job's demand for an explanation of the apparent injustice of Job's suffering. Yet God's response is less an explanation than an arrogant assertion of overwhelming power which need not explain itself to the likes of Job. In the traditional translation of Job's response to this divine appearance, Job utterly submits to God with sorrow for having questioned God at all. His final words are; "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). An alternate translation has been offered, however, which reveals the rebellion and anger of Job. John Curtis's examination of the Hebrew verbs in this passage results in the following translation: "Therefore I feel loathing, contempt, and revulsion [toward you, O God]; and I am sorry for frail man." God has proven himself unjust and unfeeling; Job emerges crushed but morally superior to God.²⁵ Curtis's interpretation offers a valuable example of the ambivalence sometimes underlying a masochist's submissive love for an omnipotent partner.

Masochism has other "tactical" uses. Jesus' advice to love one's enemies is not only a moral principle but a way of dealing with a more powerful opponent.²⁶ Ironically, by turning the other cheek when someone strikes, by offering your cloak as well when someone wants your coat, by going two miles when someone

forces you to go one mile (Matt. 5:39–41), you make it impossible for your opponent to achieve a true sense of victory. To defeat someone who offers no resistance, to punish someone who enjoys the punishment, only makes one feel guilty and exasperated. The prisoner who asks for even more lashes than he has been sentenced to thereby steals victory and power from his captor.

James cites the following triumph of religious martyrdom in the case of a Huguenot woman.

They drew the cord tight with all their strength and asked me, "Does it hurt you?" and then they discharged their fury upon me. . . . At this moment I received the greatest consolation that I can ever receive in my life, since I had the honor of being whipped for the name of Christ. . . . where affliction abounds grace is given superabundantly. In vain the women cried, "We must double our blows; she does not feel them, for she neither speaks nor cries." And how should I have cried, since I was swooning with happiness within?²⁷

Utter submission may in fact be a form of defiance. To punish and chastise oneself subverts the controlling power of outside authorities. Furthermore, the masochist's deliberate failure and suffering provide him with a certain sense of control over his environment. To take charge of one's own suffering eliminates the danger of unexpected punishment.²⁸

Reik notes that masochists tend to be very demonstrative about the extent of their suffering. Self-reproach and stressing one's own helplessness often are attempts to gain sympathy and protection. Sandor Rado sees a relation between masochism and religious sacrifice. Both are attempts to buy sympathy and can easily turn into a kind of blackmail.²⁹

Masochism as a flight from selfhood

Neo-Freudians such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney tend to divorce masochism from distorted love relations, the need for punishment, or strategies to gain power. For them, masochism represents a deliberate flight from the individual selfhood and responsibility which represent an unbearable burden to some people. The primary aim of the masochist is "to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself; in other words, to get rid of the burden of freedom."³⁰ Awareness of the freedom and independence of the self brings with it awareness of universal human problems and limitations such as suffering, death, and the feeling of meaninglessness. As an isolated individual, one feels the anxiety and alienation of a cold, hostile world in which one is largely helpless and insignificant. Masochism is not the *source* of feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, or helplessness. Rather, it is an adaptive response, an attempt to find some safety and security against these very feelings. William James quotes the German author C. H. Hilty on Christian consciousness:

The compensation for the loss of that sense of personal independence which man so unwillingly gives up, is the disappearance of all *fear* from one's life, the quite indescribable and inexplicable feeling of an inner security. . . .³¹

A saint, says James, replaces fears and anxieties with blissful equanimity. Likewise, the masochist is willing to sacrifice all individual decisions, responsibility, or interests and to find meaning, direction, and protection by submitting to some larger power. He identifies with a person, group, cause, nation, or religion which defines the meaning of his life and offers the prestige and strength he lacks as an individual. This form of masochism is associated with the authoritarian personalities found in both fascist and religious movements. The appeal of many religious "cults" is based on a similar process. In most cases the cult member willingly sacrifices all signs of individuality in thought and personality in exchange for the security and power offered by the group in general and the leader in particular. As Fromm puts it:

The feature common to all authoritarian thinking is the conviction that life is determined by forces outside of man's own self, his interest, his wishes. The only possible happiness lies in the submission to these forces. The powerlessness of man is the leitmotif of masochistic philosophy. . . . To suffer without complaining is his highest virtue—not the courage of trying to end suffering or at least diminish it. Not to change fate, but to submit to it, is the heroism of the authoritarian character.³²

The subordination of the self to some external power is neither unusual nor necessarily bad. Indeed, the political structure of most societies presupposes the submission of some men to others.³³ Fromm believes most people exhibit a mild form of masochism to the extent that their thoughts, feelings, and actions are often related to a power that provides care and protection. DeMonchy contends that a sense of social well-being and contentment in life seems to require service, devotion, or worship to something or someone beyond oneself. Some sublimated masochism is an essential part of healthy functioning for many people.³⁴

In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud describes how one of the major reasons for the development of civilization in general and religion in particular was to offer a sense of meaning and protection in response to the human experience of weakness and helplessness vis-a-vis the universe. To rephrase slightly what Freud says in that book, acceptance of the collective masochism of religion safeguards the believer against the risk of individual or neurotic masochism.

Although Freud feared the subordination of self in religion merely represented regression to the security of childhood, there may also be a positive element to this experience. Horney maintains that "both the preservation and development of individuality and the sacrifice of individuality are legitimate goals in the solution of human problems."³⁵ DeMonchy concurs: "The need for effacement or subordination of self to a higher authority is in many ways deeply rooted in the nature of man"³⁶ Religion in particular has traditionally provided a temporary experience of ecstasy or personal oblivion. Losing one's self whether through religion, sex, love, or nature is a normal human tendency which can even enhance the quality of one's life. It is this joy to which the mystics of all religious traditions testify. They seek blissful union through temporary annihilation of the self.

Although Western religion has given expression to the human desire to sacrifice the self, Western civilization's emphasis on the individual self as active and dominating discourages masochistic phenomena. Horney suggests the loss of the power of religion to provide a culturally acceptable form of "dionysian experience" or sublimated masochism may lead to more neurotic or extremist forms of masochism.³⁷ DeMonchy claims that masochistic impulses tend to be repressed in Western culture and may therefore reappear in distorted or destructive forms.³⁸ On the other hand, Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Taoism focus directly on suppression of the self and on identification with some larger force as the path to ultimate human fulfillment.

Masochism as the effort to be an object for others

Jean-Paul Sartre and Peter Berger describe masochism as fundamentally the desire to define oneself as an object for another person.³⁹ Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* emphasizes the conflict between the transcendent power of one's own consciousness and one's being in the eyes of others. Everyone, says Sartre, is responsible for what he or she is to the Other. The "look of the Other," the power of his consciousness to objectify a person is tantamount to a theological fall. Ontological shame arises when one realizes that part of his being has been constituted by the uncertain way that the Other sees him. In the biblical story of Adam and Eve the fall represents the dawning of awareness of the Other's look. Adam and Eve's fall occurred when "the eyes of both of them were opened" (Gen. 3:7) and they felt the shame of being naked objects in the eyes of each other and in the eyes of God.

For Sartre, the phenomenology of masochism represents the desire to be an object and to lose one's own subjectivity by identifying with that of the Other. The masochist finds the meaning and significance of his life in the eyes of others. He accepts himself as whatever kind of object he is to the Other.

The instability of masochistic relations lies in the fact the the masochist may suddenly *look at* his partner and allow his own subjectivity to reemerge by making the Other an object. Berger points out that *religious* masochism usually eliminates this possibility of the Other becoming a mere object of the masochist's consciousness rather than the definer of his existence. The concept of God provides a transcendent "looker" to guarantee permanently the meaning of one's being. Because God can never be looked at, examined, questioned, or avoided, He can never become an object for man. The religious masochist allows himself to be defined by the "look of God." God tells Moses, "No man may see my face and live" (Exod. 33:20). Conversely, there is no aspect of man that escapes God's sight (cf. Prov. 5:21; Ps. 139). The author of the apocryphal book Sirach says, "The eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun; they look upon all the ways of man and perceive even the hidden places" (23:19). Sartre describes a fleeting moment in his childhood when he experienced the existence of God after he accidentally burned a small rug.

I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt His gaze inside my head and on my hands. I whirled about in the bathroom, horribly visible, a live target.⁴⁰

In the case of Job, it is God who suddenly becomes an object at the end. If Curtis is right about the disgust Job expresses in his final words, it is significant that this comes after Job has seen God ("now my eye sees Thee") and judged him lacking in justice (Job 42:5).

Sartre's analysis of masochism as an attempt to avoid the anxiety of one's own subjectivity by becoming an object for others is also significant in relation to certain parts of Freud's discussion of masochism. For Freud the vicissitudes of sexual instinct that produce masochism are related to those that produce exhibitionism. Exhibitionism, says Freud, represents sexual curiosity turned inward on oneself.⁴¹ Sartre's position suggests that exhibitionism is one of the most blatant forms of ontological masochism, the desire to be an object looked at. The masochist wants to expose his naked self, either physically or psychologically.

Freud tends to relate a number of masochistic fantasies (being beaten on the buttocks, being passive in sex, being devoured, being blinded) to Oedipal conflicts, particularly the fear of castration. Rather than reducing these ideas to expressions of sexual impotence (castration), we may treat them as more general expressions of ontological impotence, symbols of powerlessness before others. To be beaten on the buttocks represents having one's back to the Other and thus doubly ensures objectness. Passive sex implies being merely a sexual object for the Other. To be blinded is to become an absolute object for the Other, seen but not seeing. Fear of death may not be a fear of castration, but both fears may represent falling into the hands of the Other. Death, says Sartre, is the ultimate state of becoming an object for others. It is a time associated with "judgment," that is, the attribution of meaning to one's life by others. In religion, man has always turned to God as the final judge of one's own being, especially at the moment of death.

Conclusion

The purpose of exploring relations between masochism and religion is not to claim finally that the religious person suffers from a particular form of psychopathology. The line between normal and psychopathological masochism is virtually impossible to draw. Masochistic elements in both religion and everyday life can be either morally contemptible or inspiring, signs of personal weakness or of inner strength. Some writers differentiate the religious surrender or submission of the saint from the masochistic personality. Ann Belford Ulanov suggests that the masochist is avoiding reality while the religious saint uses suffering or submission to discover new values and new levels of personal development.⁴² It seems more reasonable to say, however, that a whole spectrum of motivations exists for masochism in religion as elsewhere. James, for example, cites at least a half dozen different motives for practicing asceticism.

These include mortification as a sign of love for God, as an effort to expiate sin and relieve guilt, as a payment to avoid worse suffering later, as a desire for purity, as an expression of personal hardiness, and as a perversion that finds pain enjoyable.⁴³ By discussing the dynamics of masochism and religion, one finds that the widespread nature of both these phenomena rests on certain permanent needs of human experience. Freud believed that the study of neurotics could provide important insights into everyday human behavior. The study of masochism, likewise, can potentially elucidate the roots of ordinary religious life. In particular, religious phenomena such as mysticism, asceticism, "cult" experience, and theological issues pertaining to the nature of God and to theodicy are obvious subjects for further consideration in this context. One danger the psychologist of religion must guard against, however, is the implicit moral condemnation that is present in many discussions of masochism. Such moral considerations are ultimately necessary, but they lead the psychologist beyond the boundaries of his discipline.

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