Jacques Lacan and the Theory of the Religious Subject

Dmitry Uzlaner

# **Abstract**

Jacques Lacan’s theory of the subject is put forward in order to correct what the author calls “the naïve theory of the subject,” which sociologists of religion tend to utilize by default in numerous quantitative sociological studies based on mass surveys and oriented towards obtaining exact, scientific, positivistic knowledge. This article applies Lacan’s three registers—Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—to the religious sphere and demonstrates their potential implications for the sociological analysis of religion. An analysis of the empirical research on Russia’s post-Soviet religious situation reinforces the author’s argument that an uncritical theory of the subject attends only to the superficial layers of the subject, which end up being devoid of actual subjectivity, according to Lacanian logic. The more fundamental layers of the subject, capable of making it “the subject” in the full sense of the word, seem to be completely outside of sociologists’ current field of vision. This critique directs the reader’s attention to the shortcomings of sociological surveys, and the author argues that a more robust under- standing of the subject could enrich the sociology of religion, particularly by further developing certain conceptions, such as Grace Davie’s “vicarious religion.”

This article concerns the theory of the subject and, particularly, the religious subject. It aims to ascertain (1) what constitutes the religious subject as seen through the lens proposed by Jacques Lacan and (2) how this psychoanalytic lens can enrich sociological research of religion. It does not attempt to develop or specify any tenets of the French psychoanalyst’s extraordinarily complex system. Rather, this article endeavors to see the believer (as well as the unbeliever, atheist, agnostic, etc.) from a more complex, multidimensional perspective. Several scholars have recently been applying Lacanian ideas to theology and religious philosophy (Žižek 2003; Davis et al., 2014; Dunlap 2014), but the current article focuses on the question of how sociologists of religion could benefit from taking Lacan seriously. The religious situation in modern Russia provides illustrations for some of the proposed theses below. Before considering Lacanian theory, however, an obvious question must be addressed.

# **I Why Does the Sociology of Religion Need a Theory of the Subject?**

One often encounters claims that the field of sociology is facing difficult times. Peter Berger (2002), for example, maintains that sociology has lost its prestigious status and is no longer able to attract the brightest and most gifted students. As for the sociology of religion, Berger (2006: 160) considers it “a pretty depressing field with individuals and some centers doing good work.” One of the reasons for this state of affairs, he holds, is what he calls “methodological fetishism,” the essence of which is “the dominance of methods over con- tent” (Berger 2002). Methods are becoming more and more positivistic—with an abundance of numbers, tables, and graphs (right down to the motto, “that which cannot be quantified cannot be studied” (Berger 2006: 160))—and the results are all the more banal and routine. Positivism and the endeavor to imitate the exact sciences leads to a disdain for theory (or, as Berger (2006: 160) states, to “an abandonment of asking the big questions”) and, consequently, to an uncritical acceptance of certain naïve assumptions and tenets that further exacerbate the isolation of sociology of religion from sociology as a whole, as well as from other disciplines (Beckford 1989: 2003; Davie 2007a).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The theory of the subject is no exception to this trend of disdain for conceptual questions, especially in light of sociology of religion’s “proclivities to investigate outside rather than within” (Chancer and Andrews 2014: 10). Sociological researchers are rarely inclined to tackle such complicated theoretical issues as subjectivity, especially in connection with psychoanalytic overtones. Lynn S. Chancer (2013: 452-68) points to the regretful marginalization of psychoanalysis and its emphasis on the complexity of the individual within American mainstream sociology. For example, in his SSSR Presidential Address, Rodney Stark (2004: 465) dismissed Freud as a mere “charlatan” as compared to the “big three” of sociological theory (Weber, Durkheim and Marx). Despite such dismissals, an ongoing revitalization of interest towards psychoanalytical and psychosocial study is underway (see Chancer and Andrews 2014).

The theory of subjectivity has a most immediate bearing upon sociological research, or more accurately upon the correct interpretation of its obtained results. Indeed, in the framework of the theory of the subject, questions concern the human person, the function and status of the “I” / “ego,” and such things as “how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understand- able, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (Hall 2004: 3-4). Finally, the theory concerns the issue of whether one can ever speak of “subjectivity,” of a person’s individuality in contrast with a depersonalizing “objectivity” and total dependence on external factors such as economic, political, and cultural structures (Gagnier 1991: 9). Without an answer to, or at least a serious consideration of, such questions, it is impossible to ascertain how to properly make sense of the data collected as a result of sociological surveys and questionnaires. For instance, how does what a person says reflect who or what he or she is? And how should scholars interpret what remains unspoken or indirectly spoken, or to which layer of subjectivity the unspoken speech corresponds, etc.?

Many interpretations of sociological research on religion derive from what can be called “a naïve theory of the subject.” In other words, they proceed from the assumption that “the subject” is a conscious subject, who is identical with “the ego.” Sociologists tend to believe that a person knows what she thinks and can coherently tell an interviewer about herself, and that her statements such as “I think . . .” or “I believe . . . ,” if sincere, correspond to who she is. This naivety, which “takes individuals to be rather simple and unitary, decision- making bundles of interests and preferences,” is a well-established, positivistic orientation to precise scientific knowledge that can hardly be reconciled with attempts to go “beyond the surface,” or to consider the individual in all his or her complexity and contradictoriness (Calhoun 2014: x).

This frequently encountered “naïve theory of the subject” is insufficient for the interpretation of the data social scientists acquire as a result of large-scale quantitative and qualitative research. The gathered results regularly contain internal contradictions. Instead of the connected picture we would logically expect to see from a conscious subject, we find an array of contradictory data, which testifies either to the absence or to the serious defects of that very consciousness. For example, Russian data reveal a constant discrepancy between high figures for self-identification with Russian Orthodoxy and low figures for religious observances and belief in traditional Christian tenets (Filatov and Lunkin 2006). Zhan T. Toshchenko (2008: 356-61), a scholar with extensive experience in the study of religiosity in post-Soviet Russia, summarizes such discrepancies as follows: (1) a contradiction between declarations of religious revival and faint changes in the actual level of the population’s religiosity; (2) a contradiction between the external demonstration of religiosity and the persisting secularity of public consciousness (e.g., people’s attitude toward the Church and its standpoints has changed very little); (3) a contradiction between various understandings of “the level of religiosity” and “the verity and extent of faith.” These contradictions hardly derive from any qualitative defect of sociological research in Russia. Similar contradictions have been recorded in Europe, with the paradoxical “believing without belonging” or “belonging without believing” (Davie 1994; 2000; 2007a). As Grace Davie (2007b: 27) notes, “[E]ver more sophisticated survey techniques indicate right across Europe a growing mismatch between what might be considered the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ indicators of religious life—both in terms of activity (the regular attender versus the nominal member) and in terms of belief (the believer in the creedal statements of the Christian, or indeed any other, church versus the acceptance that there is probably some sort of God or spirit but nothing very specific).”

To explain these contradictions would require the development of a more multidimensional and complex theory of the subject. Otherwise, the gathered facts would only remain opaque and not liable to any sort of convincing explication. Certain steps in this direction have already been taken.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For instance, Davie (2007b) has advanced a thesis of so-called “vicarious religion,” the hypothesis that in modern society, an active minority can believe not only for themselves, but also for the more passive majority. Notwithstanding its detractors (Bruce and Voas 2010: 243-59), this theory brings into question the main postulates of “the naïve theory of the subject.” The postulate concerning the conscious subject is undermined by a situation in which a person may “not believe” at the level of consciousness and self-consciousness while at the same time continuing to somehow believe, if only through other people who stand as a proxy for him or her in that faith. Moreover, it turns out that the subject is not autonomous in relation to others, who account for a significant part of the subject’s own constitution. Thus, if there were not others who believed, the subject’s unbelief would likely be seriously shaken. In Davie’s (2007b: 28) analysis of “vicarious religion,” she continues to lead us away from “the naïve theory” by utilizing the metaphor of an iceberg: “It is easy enough both to measure and to take note of the part of the iceberg that emerges from the water. But this is to ignore the mass underneath, which is invisible for most of the time—but without which the visible part would not be there at all.” In other words, in addition to “the ego,” or the visible part of the metaphorical iceberg protruding from the water, there is another part of the subject, for which “the ego” is only a small yet crucial element of the iceberg, in the phenomenological sense.

If our hypothesis is valid, then the phenomenon described by Davie turns out to be only a localized example of a much larger general phenomenon.[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, “vicarious religion,” which undermines the “naïve theory of the subject,” is not the exception, but the rule. It barely opens the door to the gigantic underwater part of the iceberg. Just as an unbeliever might become uncomfortable if the churches and the believers attending those churches were to disappear from his or her surroundings, so too would a believer be uneasy if one day there were no one left who doubted, because their doubts incorporate the believer’s own doubts, though the latter are seemingly driven out and projected onto others. Through this, one immediately discerns the possibility of the existence of “vicarious skepticism.” Another example is the curious tendency towards “vicarious offence,” an understudied phenomenon in which people are offended not for their own religious sentiments, but for those of other people. A characteristic formulation of this trend includes the statement, “It does not upset me, but there are genuine believers who would be upset.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These examples make it apparent that scholarly reflections concerning the religious subject are relevant as never before, for they can enrich the sociology of religion with new insights and can make the approach to the results and conclusions of conducted research somewhat more nuanced.

# **II Why Jacques Lacan?**

The theory of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is a useful means for resolving the issues set forth above, because he succeeded in proposing a theory of the subject, which wonderfully corresponds with socio-political analysis. As Jean-Luc Nancy and Philipp Lacoue-Labarthe (1992: 30) note, “[T]here is no subject according to Lacan which is not always already a social subject, that is, a subject of communication in general.” The Lacanian subject cannot be conceptualized *in and of itself* outside the context of its relationship to and even its appropriation by “others.” The term “others” here is used in both the sense of *autres* and *Autres*—others with a small “o” and Others with a big “O.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The Lacanian subject is by definition *not* self-sufficient; the very possibility of its existence and adequate functioning depends upon others (*autres*/*Autres*). For this reason, the Lacanian symbol of the subject is “$” (or a barred “S”) to denote that the subject has lost some of its original fullness and autonomy.

As explained by Yannis Stavrakakis (1999: 36-7), “The subject meets lack and alienation where it seeks fullness and identity. . . . The constitution of every . . . identity can be attempted only through processes of identification with socially *available* discursive constructions . . . By locating, at the place previously assigned to an essence of the individual psyche, a constitutive lack, Lacanian theory avoids the essentialist reductionism of the social to the individual level and opens the way to the confluence of psychoanalysis and socio-political analysis, since this lack can only be filled by socio-political objects of identification.” Correspondingly, one of the crucial features of the Lacanian subject is *its lack of an essence that could be expressed in certain essentialist terms. The subject acquires this essence, or more likely its apparition, only through its identification with or rivalry with “the other” and through its “embeddedness” within the Symbolic Order (i.e., within “the Other”)*.

Lacan is noted for his loyal adherence to Sigmund Freud’s “Copernican revolution” within psychoanalysis (Freud 1961), the refutation of a notion widely held by nineteenth-century scholars that a person’s internal world, or psyche, is identical to the consciousness to such an extent that “consciousness alone deserves the name ‘psyche’” (Jung 1970: 3). The second noteworthy feature of the Lacanian subject is, thus, *its decentering of the ego from its place at the core of the conscious part of an individual*. If we return to the above-mentioned illustration of the subject as an iceberg, then the ego is only the visible part under which is hidden the massive unconscious part that eludes consciousness. That is, the ego “no longer stands at the center of the sense-generating processes, but somewhere outside of them. Consequently, the subject is deprived of a center” (D’iakov 2005: 503). Moreover, according to Lacan, although the ego remains an important aspect of the subject—if only at a phenomenological level—it is simultaneously something that is not yet fully subjective. If one may use such an expression, the ego is “the object within the subject.” The critique of the postulate of “the conscious subject” originates here. Thus, the Lacanian theory of the subject not only establishes bridges between psycho- analytical theory and socio-political analysis, but it also problematizes the key tenets upon which the above-described “naïve theory” rests.

Immediately, a number of questions arise. First, what exactly is this ego, if, being part of the subject, it also resembles the object? Second, which of the subject’s aspects are decentered in relation to its ego? In order to answer these questions, this article will now consider Lacan’s three “registers” that were instrumental in his examination of the subject: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Slavoj Žižek (2007: 8) illustrates these three registers through the metaphor of chess. The Imaginary is the way the actual figures look (e.g., the king with a crown, the castle with its characteristic towers) and what they are named (“the king,” “the queen,” etc.). The Symbolic resembles the rules to which these figures are subject (the king can move only one space in any direction; the castle can only move in a line; the knight moves like the letter “L”). Finally, the Real consists of the unpredictable circumstances connected to the chess players themselves (the strength of their intellect, their level of weariness at a given moment, or the unforeseen circumstances that can interrupt the flow of a game, etc.).

# **III “‘Ego’ is an other,” or the Object within the Subject**

Based on Lacan’s assessment, the ego originates and exists within the Imaginary Register. He distinguishes between the “I” (the hidden self) and the “ego” (“the object within the subject,” under consideration in this section).[[6]](#footnote-6) Bruce Fink (1996: 36) writes, “[T]he ego, according to Lacan, arises as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images, tantamount to a fixed, reified object with which a child learns to identify . . . him or herself.” One’s parents play the formative role in determining which particular image will be adopted as the “ego.” In the case of the “mirror stage,” they fulfill the function of “the Other” (Lacan 1953). When a child looks in the mirror at her reflection, she notes the affirmation in her parents’ eyes, which predetermines her choice. That said, we should not understand the “mirror” literally, because another person could play the same function. For example, a child could see a cathexed image of himself in another child of a similar age, with whom he enters into the complex and contradictory relationship of imitation and competition (Chiesa 2007: 20).

Unsurprisingly, Lacan thus chose the symbol “a” (i.e., *autres*) to denote the *ideal-ego*, i.e. “i(a)”. This accords with his famous phrase: “Ego is an other” (Lacan 2005a: 96).[[7]](#footnote-7) In some sense, the ego is an alien formation within the subject, since, as Chiesa (2007: 15) states, it is “a psychic agency caused in the subject by his [or her] alienating identification with a series of external images. The ego is an other, since the *imagos*’ (de)formative power absorbs and captures the subject.” This external image attracts the subject, charms it, and in the end, fully captures it.

Yet one might say that the ego does not fully belong to the subject, since according to Lacan (2005h: 685), one’s consciousness, “in which the ego assures itself an indisputable existence . . . , is in no way immanent in the ego, but rather transcendent.” If the ego is not identical to the subject and if it is an external object that is internalized in relation to the subject, then in such a case the pronoun “I,” which figures in one’s speech when talking about oneself—saying “I think . . .,” or “I believe . . .,” or “I am . . .”—can in no way be considered an expression of the subject as a whole. It is only an expression of the object that has captured the subject, “who thinks of him or her self as X and not Y, as generous and not miserly, as open-minded and not bigoted, and so on. The personal pronoun ‘I’ designates the person who identifies his or her self with a specific ideal image” (Fink 1996: 38). This process takes place over the course of the subject’s life. The subject constantly identifies with one image after another, each of which she at one time accepts as her own ego and considers the authentic expression of her true self. The ego is merely a game of mirror images, in which a person comes to know himself under the affirming glance of “the Other” (or the *ego-ideal*).

One of the formative moments in Lacan’s early scholarship came when he drew attention to this situation while actively combatting the proponents of so-called “ego-psychology,” a movement in psychoanalysis that hinges on “a wholesale endorsement of the ego as an object of independent study” (Fink 2004: 39). According to Fink (2004: 40, 43), Lacan fought against this trend, since the emphasis on the ego as “conflict-free” obviates Freud’s foundational discovery—the decentering and disconnection between the person one considers oneself to be and the person one actually is. In this sense, ego- psychology is a denial of Freud’s “Copernican revolution,” to which Lacan remained faithful.

Why are these arguments important for the study of religiosity? As it happens, the interpretation of research reliant upon the “naïve theory” is the sociological equivalent to ego-psychology, so one might call it “ego-sociology.” Ego-sociology, based on the “ego level” and considering the ego basically self- sufficient, is characterized by two weaknesses. First, ego-sociology dissociates itself from the most fundamental and properly subjective dimensions of the subject—from both its inter- and trans-subjective dimensions. Second, ego- sociology plainly allows itself and those who still trust the authority of scholarly knowledge to be led into a state of confusion. The consumer of scholarly literature, instead of acquiring a model of the religious subject in its entirety, actually acquires a model of the ego, which only has an indirect relationship to the subject. In the case of sociological surveys and questionnaires, one can make several observations. Since the ego is an interiorized image, emulating the equal other (autre) and receiving affirmation in the eyes of the Big Other (*Autre*), the researcher hears only “the subject of the statement” (*le sujet de l’énoncé*) while listening to the stories of the respondent about herself.[[8]](#footnote-8) That is, the researcher sees only a certain socially approved image of the respondent, with which she identifies at that moment. This self-portrayal reflects that which is socially approved in the eyes of “the Other,” be it the State, the Church, majority opinion, cultural tradition, or any other authoritative entity. The complete subject in all its entirety—that is, “the subject of the enunciation” *(le sujet de l’énonciation*)—remains behind the scenes in this case.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Moreover, in the eyes of the respondent, the researcher could play the role of “the other”—i.e., the twin brother whose acceptance and sympathy the ego intends to win over (or in contrast, the opponent who must be disposed of aggressively). But the researcher could also play the role of “the Other”—i.e., the authority in whose eyes the respondent wants to receive affirmation. Thus, one must not be surprised in the least that a realistic verification of a respon- dent’s replies often reveals an exaggeration of the extent of his religiosity or, in equal measure, the extent to which he is not religious (Hadaway et al., 1993). This explains the regularly encountered regret among sociologists that survey results depend not only on the method and sequence, formulation and design of the questions, but also on the actual person who converses with the respon- dent (Kildeyev 2014: 140).

The phrase “I am a believer / unbeliever / agnostic / atheist” and the particular image brought forth on account of such a statement could reflect nothing more than the external image, which has captured the subject. This external image is often gleaned from newspapers, brochures, books, television, works of art, etc., and is then verbalized in the act of a “personal” confession. Yet socio- logical researchers often accept such statements as a sincere expression of a respondent’s authentic essence. Without a clear understanding of the subject’s structure in all its complexity, the researcher would be devoid of the necessary lens through which such unintended deception could be revealed.

In the iceberg metaphor, the Imaginary Register relates only to the visible portion above the water, so it is the most superficial but also the most convenient vein for studying the subject. Yet, as shown above, the Imaginary Register is devoid of subjectivity to a certain extent, however paradoxical that may seem. It is, therefore, insufficient to build an entire theory of the religious subject based solely upon the Imaginary Register. As such, the focus of this analysis now shifts from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Register, since it would be meaningless for scholars to explore the former on its own, apart from the latter. As Lacan (2005f: 6) himself wrote, “imaginary effects . . . give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them.”

Lacan often used the image of a Borromean Knot to illustrate the inter- relatedness of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real Registers. All three rings of this knot (i.e., all three registers) are joined together, and to separate one from the other would be to destroy the unity of the entire chain. In its con- sideration of the ego, this article has already demonstrated how firmly this object-within-the-subject depends upon the authority of “the Other,” which verifies and legitimizes the image with which the individual identifies himself (i.e., the “ego-ideal,” or “*I*(*A*),” verifies the “ideal-ego,” or “*i*(*a*)”). This author- ity of “the Other” is the very point at which the Imaginary intersects with the Symbolic.

# **IV In the Arms of “the Other”**

In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic Register is much more important than the Imaginary, because the former is “constitutive for the subject” (Lacan 2005f: 7). If the Imaginary Order pertains to the images with which the subject identifies itself, the Symbolic Order is concerned with the structure that regulates the horizontal and vertical relationships of the subject with *autres/Autres* (for this reason, Lacan designates the Symbolic as “the Other”). The Symbolic is the space of law and culture, and of the hierarchy established according to linguistic principles. In Lacan’s analysis of the Symbolic, he therefore employs the basic concepts from the study of linguistics—sign, significance, signifier, signified.

Only by having occupied a place within the Symbolic Order can the sub- ject acquire any sort of definition or concrete being. The subject becomes “the subject” only once she locates herself within the spaces of language and law, neither of which belong to her or were created by her, but within which she, for the very first time, receives a name and her own place in the hierarchy of social relations. *This* is what Lacan considers the unconscious.

We receive definition when we are born, when we are given a name, when we learn to speak, and when we become familiar with our rights and responsibilities, but in this definition, we also lose ourselves, since we are defined by both “the other” and “the Other.” Louis Althusser (2003: 55) argues that the Other (or the Order of the Law) is “lying in wait, from before birth, for every infant to be born and seizing on him from his very first cry to assign him to his place and role and thus his forced destination.” Thus, the emergence of the subject within the Symbolic Order is at one and the same time its alienation from its very self and its “castration” (Lacan 2005c: 480-85). Lacan depicts the subject with the expression “$” (or a barred “S”), therefore, since the trait encountered by the subject in the Symbolic Register signifies its alienation in “the Other.”

An individual’s subjection to the Symbolic Order does not end with her first experiences of childhood but continues for her whole life and is the foundational principle for the existence of the social order. Althusser (2001) attempted to demonstrate that this subjugation continues by way of interpellation (or hailing), the mechanism by which ideology works. The Other constantly confronts the individual with the question, “Are you here?” If the individual responds to this call, he thereby acknowledges that he is in his place, that he will not leave his ideological “cell,” and that he does not oppose that Symbolic Order into which he is framed.

The subject thus does not belong to itself. It is captured by a signifier—a word located in a system of relations with other words, all woven together into a network of law, order, and culture that ensnares the individual. The subject then becomes that which “[one] signifier represents . . . to another signifier” (Lacan 2005d: 708). The subject fades, pales in significance, and becomes a breach that occasionally intrudes into the links of signifying chains. *This alienation of the subject by a signifier is what we might otherwise call a person’s identity, which, instead of being an expression of profound essence, becomes the alienation from this essence and the individual’s framing into the Symbolic Order.*

Everything discussed above directly relates to research in the sociology of religion, which attempts to grasp the little-understood individual with the assistance of a standardized system of signifiers (e.g., “believer,” “unbeliever,” “atheist”) and in so doing, to frame him or her into the Symbolic Order. Lacan’s differentiation between “full speech” and “empty speech” illustrates this argument. In a psychoanalytic session, when the client employs fluent, sequential speech, the analyst must dismiss it as empty speech, or as a “dummy” the client presents outwardly in order to make an impression on “the other.” Empty speech is what the ego uses to present itself as a foreign object within the subject. The analyst must dismiss this empty speech and concentrate on those hesitations and slips of the tongue (i.e., full speech) that sneak into this smooth talk, and the analyst must interpret the client’s speech as a sentence where the smoothest and most connected parts of speech represent no more than meaningless interjections, but the hesitations and slips of the tongue represent the most valuable and fully meaningful aspects (Lacan 2005b: 206-11). Here, the task of the analyst consists in turning empty speech into full speech.

The task of sociology of religion is the opposite of that of psychoanalysis, in that it attempts to turn the subject’s full speech into empty speech. Take, for instance, the following example of a transcript of a conversation with a questionnaire respondent (a 72-year-old woman from Kineshma, Russia):

1. I: And ↓ so ↑ do you consider yourself a beliEving (.) person

2. R: (3.0) how can I say (1.0) I’m а believer and an ↑ unbeliever (1.0)

3. [like when I get sick: I ask

4. I: [well which do you lean ↑ to

5. R: I speak with God in civilian language when I need to

6. ↓ Although to be honest then >how can I say< he probably respects me 7. He helps [if I ever get sick I just kind of lie down he

. . .

27. I: =So what do you ↑ think

28. Do you believe more or

29. >are you having trouble answering <

30. R: (2.0) I simply you know what: (.) think that If you Want believe

31. ↓ if you want don’t believe—

32. I: well: then ↑ you=

33. R: =I don’t believe (Rogozin 2014: 90-91)[[10]](#footnote-10)

Here, we see how the subject slogs her way through her language—with pauses, hesitations, and varying inflection—to find the appropriate words to express herself. All researchers encounter this “full speech,” but the sociologist of religion empties it, reducing it to simple and clear standardized signifiers. Essentially, the sociologist thereby facilitates the framing of the individual within the Symbolic Order. This approach results in generalizations (e.g., “the majority think such and such”) and statistical facts, which suppress the individual by the power of their “objectivity” and work to reinforce “the Other”—a situation that is likely a byproduct of the ideological function of the social sciences (Althusser 2001; Fitzgerald 2004).

The Lacanian theory of the sign offers the next significant moment for our current study. If one were to take the classic theory of the sign, as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), the sign represents the unity of the *signified* and the *signifier*, whose connections are so strong they cannot be separated. According to Saussure, the *signified*—the concrete meaning of the sign (what the sign denotes)—is connected with the *signifier*—the col- lection of sounds and letters that express the given sign in speech or in writing (the sign’s tangible arrangement). Thus, in Saussure’s theory, the concept of the sign denotes the unity of the signified (primary) and the signifier (secondary).

Lacan transforms this theory. According to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1992: 39), Lacan offers us “[a] sign under erasure . . . [a sign] not functioning. None of the concepts of the theory of the sign disappear: signifier, signified, and signification are still there. But their system is disrupted, perverted.” Lacan thus overturns Saussure’s classic schema. Now the signifier dominates the signified to the extent that the former suppresses the latter (Lacan 2005f: 20-22; 2005g: 414-24). The signifier can exist without any signified, or as Lacan (1993: 185) states, “[E]very real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing.” The signifier is “first of all a meaningless material element in a closed differential system” (Evans 1996: 189). For Lacan, the only criterion that allows one to call something a signifier is its embeddedness into a system where it achieves worth at the expense of its difference from the system’s other elements (Evans 1996: 190). The crucial factor is not that one signifier carries a particular mean- ing, but that multiple signifiers organize a differential system in which one signifier could refer to another.

Yet how is the process of attributing significance (i.e., the integration of the signifier with the signified) possible? What happens to the meaning? In Lacan’s conception, meaning plays a subordinate role, and the act of attributing *significance* becomes the process of signifiance. This notion seems to indicate a slide along the actual boundary of significance, but one that takes place along the boundary beyond which the inaccessible meaning is located (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1992: xxii-xxiii). The meaning comes about as a secondary, retroactive effect of a system of compatible signifiers, when what Lacan (2007: 89) called the “master-signifier” appears and “quilts” signifiers to their signified, thereby stopping “the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification.” According to Žižek (1989: 95), “Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, ‘floating signifiers,’ whose very identity is ‘open,’ overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements.” With respect to various master-signifiers, he comments:

If we “quilt” the floating signifiers through “Communism,” for example, “class struggle” confers a precise and fiхed signification to all other elements: to democracy (so-called “real democracy” as opposed to bourgeois formal democracy as a legal form of exploitation); to feminism (the exploitation of women as resulting from the class-conditioned division of labour); to ecologism (the destruction of natural resources as a logical consequence of profit-orientated capitalist production); to the peace movement (the principal danger to peace is adventuristic imperialism), and so on (Žižek 1989: 96).

What does this mean when considering the composition of the religious subject?[[11]](#footnote-11) Those identifiers with which the subject describes herself (or with which others, like sociologists, describe her) can quite wonderfully exist with not one iota of meaning. Their function is not to have meaning, but to establish the subject within the Symbolic Order. As an example, let us take the signifier “believer.” What does this word actually indicate? Where is its “signified?” The paradox is that neither “believers” nor those who study them know the answers to these questions. A “believer” is an enigma, about which there is no consensus, even within religious traditions themselves. For example, for the Russian Orthodox Church, is a “believer” someone who takes communion at least once a year? Who visits service at least once a year? Who merely identifies oneself as “Orthodox” by virtue of baptism? As a result, constant debates arise concerning the actual number of believers in Russia. Is it seventy per cent (i.e., those who identify themselves as “believers”) or only two or three per cent (i.e., those who observe all rites and who believe all requisite things) (see Filatov and Lunkin 2006)? The only thing we really know for certain is that there is a signifier (literally a collection of letters and sounds) and that it does mean something. This “it does mean something” is the slide along the very edge, the boundary beyond which the meaning of the signifier “believer” (or “unbeliever”) is located, but this boundary can never actually be crossed.

The signifier (effectively a collection of sounds) exists neither to refer to a certain signified, nor to expose the inner workings of a person who expresses himself utilizing this collection of sounds. The signifier exists in order to refer to other signifiers that all compose a system of differentiating symbols, each of which exists primarily by virtue of its correspondence to the other members of that system. Signifiers are self-sufficient. They not only do not require a signified, but they also do not require any real phenomena to which they refer.

In order to fix the meaning of the signifier “believer” and all related signifiers, one must bring in the above-mentioned “master-signifier.” An example of a relevant master-signifier in the Russian Orthodox context is votserkovlenie (*entkirchlichung*, or “in-churching”), the process by which those who call themselves “believers” and “Orthodox” but who rarely attend church or barely believe in key theological concepts such as the Trinity can find their way to true Orthodox faith and full observance (Chesnakova 2005). There are several degrees of *votserkovlenie*: from simple identification and vague desire, to belief, to total immersion into the Orthodox way of life. After the master- signifier votserkovlenie appears, the meaning-neutral signifiers in the signifying chain acquire their meaning. This meaning appears *retroactively*, only after the enthronement of the master-signifier. Initially, we have a chain of signifiers (“Orthodox,” “faith,” “God” and their peculiar combinations), which mean nothing in particular, but once the master-signifier (*votserkovlenie*) appears, all other signifiers are suddenly filled with meaning. Alternative master-signifiers strive to be enthroned in the signifying chains and thereby to obtain the power to fix meaning. The real ideological struggle, therefore, concerns which master- signifier will totalize the free-floating elements of signifiers.

Through a Lacanian lens, the question “Do you believe in God?” and its cor- responding answer (“Yes, I do” or “No, I do not”), much like all other elements of the machinery of sociological surveys and questionnaires, turn out to be merely a code, an aggregate of meaningless sounds. What the word signifies in the consciousness of the one asking the question or of the one answering is not the most important factor, but rather the place this particular word—as an element within a code—occupies in the coded system. The signifier works as an algorithm, but, according to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1992: 47), “The algorithm has no meaning . . . due to the autonomous functioning of the algorithmic chain insofar as it is conceived as a chain of differential marks which mark nothing by themselves except their reciprocal positions and the relations . . . through which a ‘meaning’ is fabricated.”

Attempts to correctly interpret “the paradoxes of religious consciousness” thus actually obscure the simple fact that no “paradox of consciousness” exists. To put it more precisely, the paradoxes do exist, but the consciousness to which they are supposedly applied does not. These paradoxes derive from the mechanical overlap of various elements of the signifying chains, one on top of the other. These elements are thus interwoven not based on the will of the individual consciousness, but on the correlation of a concrete-historical Symbolic Order with a transpersonal logic. Outside of these signifying chains, there is nothing—no signified, no referent. Sociological surveys—which weave the illusion of a harmonic, symbolic system in which everything has its place—actually attempt to hide this. Jean Baudrillard (1983) shows that the masses are inversely proportional to meaningfulness; they exist in order to deprive or strip everything of meaning. Sociological surveys are only a way to hide this meaninglessness, or this implosion of meaning. Baudrillard (1983: 20) argues, “[P]olls, tests, the referendum, [and the] media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation.”

The observer of the dynamics of religious life in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia cannot help but see a precipitous transformation from a predominate number of “unbelievers” to a predominate number of “believers” (whatever those words have meant over the years). Tables 1 and 2 below illustrate this process (N.B.: These data begin from 1989, when “the Other” [i.e., the Soviet state—trans.] was already in crisis and a recoding had already begun.).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Table 1 *The Proportion of Believers Based on Survey Results, 1989-2012 (in % of those surveyed)*

Source: The All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) and the “Public Opinion Foundation” (http://fom.ru/obshchestvo/10434); V.F. Chesnokova, Tesnym Putem (Moscow:Akademicheskii Proekt, 2005).

Table 2 *The Proportion of Russian Orthodox and Unbeliever Respondents According to Information from Table 1 (in % of those surveyed)*

If these figures are accurate, they demonstrate neither certain changes in the referents, nor a certain new meaning, but rather a recoding of “the Other” and a rewriting of the code, which entailed a transposition of signifiers and corresponding elements of the algorithm. The algorithmic element written thirty years ago in the hieroglyphs “atheist” is now being written in the hieroglyphs “believer.” Moreover, as research has demonstrated, even memory has changed: people call their parents believers much more frequently than would have been expected given the extant sociological data from the end of the Soviet period (Kaariainen and Furman 2007: 12-15).[[13]](#footnote-13) What these elements mean in and of themselves has absolutely no significance (they might mean nothing); the important thing is their place in the system and in the algorithmic sequence.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, sociological research often records the changes endured by the Symbolic Order (the Other), rather than the dynamics concerning reality.

The above discussion, however, could give the false impression that the sub- ject itself, and the religious subject all the more, is a fiction or an illusion of subjectivity. The subject ends up being stretched between a “mirror reflection” and impersonal forces of meaningless signifiers. But is this “barred,” “castrated” subject all we can consider? Is the subject really doomed to be “split between ego . . . and unconscious . . ., between conscious and unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language (the signifying chain) in the unconscious” (Fink 1996: 45)?

# **V “What Do *You* Want?”: In Search of “the Subject of the Real”**

Lacan’s work contains an additional seminal dimension, which allows scholars properly to consider the subject to be “the subject” in the full sense of the word—the subject of the unconscious, or “the subject of the Real.” According to Fink (1996: 69), the Lacanian subject has two faces, “the subject as *precipitate* and the subject as *breach*. In the first case, the subject is but a sedimentation of meanings determined by the substitution of one signifier for another or the retroactive effect of one signifier upon another. . . . In the second, the subject is that which creates a breach in the real as it establishes a link between two signifiers.”

The Real and its presence in the subject (or the subject’s presence in the Real) does not permit us to place Lacan among the structuralists, or even the post-structuralists (Žižek 1989: 171-226). The Real is a certain non-symbolized nucleus, which cannot be expressed in words or images but around which is built what we call “reality.” The Real “resists symbolisation absolutely” (Lacan 1991: 66). It eludes any and all attempts to place it within the signifying chain. At the same time, it cannot exist without signifiers, since it needs to express itself. As opposed to the Symbolic, which is characterized by the constant ability to “change places[,] . . . the [R]eal, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile [the Real] from [its place]” (Lacan 2005f: 17).

What we might call “the genuine ‘I’” (the true self) arises particularly in the Real Register. This “I” is the one that figures in Freud’s well-known phrase *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, which according to one Lacanian translation is rendered, “Where it was, there must I come to be as a subject” (Lacan 2005e: 733-4). This “I” must take the place of the *id*. Another Lacanian conception of the Freudian phrase is: “I should dare to approach the site of my truth.” Žižek (2007: 3), in reference to this interpretation, asserts, “What awaits me . . . [at this site] is not a deep Truth that I have to identify with, but an unbearable truth that I have to learn to live with.” As Mladen Dolar (1998) explains, Lacan unseats the ego / *cogito* in order to restore it at a deeper and more basic level. The voice of “I” should ring out from the very depths of the Real. In place of the standard conscious subject, we receive the paradoxical unconscious subject, whose subjectivity is rooted in the mysterious abyss of the Real.

If there is truth to the paradoxical Lacanian concept that the subject “appears nowhere in what is said” (Fink, 1996: 38), how then can we capture its presence? In Lacan’s search for particular grammatical constructions where the voice of the unconscious subject could be heard, he concluded it could be heard only in the grammatical constructions that reflect a speaker’s doubt or quasi disagreement with what he or she is saying, rather than in the pronoun “I.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In living speech, the unconscious subject reveals itself in those pauses and hesitations encountered within the smooth speech of a person who is telling someone about her religiosity, as demonstrated in one line from the above- cited questionnaire response (Rogozin 2014: 90):

R: (3.0) how can I say (1.0) I’m а believer and an ↑ unbeliever (1.0)

Here, the unconscious subject is seen in hesitation and an upward inflection at the word “unbeliever.” Suddenly, in the midst of the smooth flow of signifiers, a glimmer of the unconscious subject slips in. One can see how the voice of the Real, always unsuccessfully seeking its own symbolization, breaks through. Yet frequently in sociological research and its interpretation, the subject’s most important, truly subjective dimension is marginalized.

One might be tempted to read Lacan as an anthropological pessimist for whom subjectivity is a fiction that masks the work of depersonalizing structures and desubjectivizing objects. In his work concerning the Real Order, however, one finds semi-utopian hints at the possibility of a full, “unbarred” subject (i.e., “S,” rather than “$”). An advance toward a substantive subjectivity is achieved by means of “subjectivization” and by means of the subject taking responsibility for his unconscious slips of the tongue, for his own words, and for the root of his desires. It is achieved when the subject no longer attempts to please anyone else and no longer falls into the trap of fantasies while trying to guess what “the Other” wants. When she can put herself in the Other’s shoes. When she does not ask herself the question about what the Other wants or who she is in the Other’s eyes, but rather asks herself the question, “What do you want?” (Fink 2004: 120)—or, in our case, “What do you truly believe?” At this moment, she steps out into the space of thought, the space of the search of an individual who has taken responsibility for what she does or does not believe.[[16]](#footnote-16)

If the Real is the failure of symbolization, and the subject reveals itself merely as a breach that appears occasionally in the Symbolic Order, the reality of any religious identity always presents itself through doubt, the feeling of inexpressibility, and the inability to capture one’s most authentic self adequately with the words at one’s disposal.

# **VI Conclusion**

The Lacanian lens permits us to see the subject, and particularly the religious subject, in all its complexity and inconsistency. In the Imaginary Register, the subject and subjectivity are no more than illusions arising from the identification with the ego as a foreign object that penetrates into the subject. In the Symbolic Register, the subject ($) is barred and colonized by signifiers that either mean nothing or, at best, mean something that no one can say for sure. The subject here is bound to these signifiers and subjected to their impersonal logic. Only in the Real Register do we finally encounter a subject in the full sense of the word, but this subject of the unconscious cannot be expressed with any words. It exists as a breach that interrupts the flow of the Symbolic Order. The inability to differentiate these registers or the components of the multidimensional subject can lead to a perverted description of actuality and to the acceptance of illusions and structural effects in place of a real and factual state of affairs. It thus can lead to a full disregard for the only thing that has a bearing on reality (i.e., the Real Register) and on what the Real actually is.

In its positivistic pursuit, the sociology of religion studies society and the religious subject “as they are,” not considering that there is originally no subject—or that there is a subject, but that it originally exists only in negation, as one caught in a game of mirror images (“Ego is an other”) and symbolic structures ($ is “the Other”). It can only *become* a subject, but this process of becoming directly resists the quest to capture a person within a network of signifiers that mean *nothing at all*, however paradoxical that may seem. Thus, Lacan not only offers us a more robust and complex theory of the religious subject, but he leads us out onto the other side of the sociology of religion and into a space of the individual, spiritual-philosophical search, in which only an individual person can reclaim his or her right to be a subject in the fullest sense.

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1. Such theoretical detachment could be regarded as a by-product of secularization. Once religion loses its social significance, it becomes possible to study society without taking the religious sphere into serious consideration. The marginalization of religion goes hand-in-hand with the marginalization of the discipline that studies religion. The current state of “desecularization” should, however, alter this situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Much has been done to address this issue in social theory, especially postmodern social theory (see works on “deconstruction of subjectivity” and “intersubjectivity” (Crossley 1996; Elliott 2013)); in anthropology (Jackson 1998: 5-16); and even in sociology of religion itself. Despite this, numerous areas of study remain almost completely deaf to the problematics of the complexity of the subject. Lacan’s theory of the subject is more nuanced and advanced compared with alternative approaches to subjectivity. For this reason, it deserves special attention, irrespective of the current state of affairs in sociology. Lacan’s approach is unique in that, on the one hand, he combines the structuralist and post-structuralist criticism/ deconstruction of the subject and subjectivity, but, on the other hand, he still tries to pre- serve the subject. In this sense, his approach avoids two extremes in the social sciences: (1) attempts to dispose of the subject and to become “subjectless” (see Rosenau 1991: 50-56) and (2) attempts to adhere to naïve and uncritical assumptions concerning the subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, Robert Pfaller’s (2014) theoretical elaboration of interpassivity reminds the author of this concept of vicariousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A recent example of such a phenomenon was evident in the Pussy Riot case in Russia concerning the collective offense of “Orthodox believers.” A small group of Pussy Riot’s active persecutors seemed vicariously offended (i.e., they were offended not for their own religious sentiments, but for those of “millions of faithful Russians” or “true Orthodox believers”) (Uzlaner 2014; Stoeckl and Uzlaner, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Small-o “other” (*autre*) refers to other people who are similar or equal to the subject. Big-O “Other” (*Autre*, or sometimes “the Big Other”) refers to the Symbolic Order of language, law, and culture, as well as to those instances and images that represent this order (for example, parents, church, state, God). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This distinction can be detected in Lacan’s dichotomies, such as “empty speech” / “full speech;” *le sujet de l’énoncé / le sujet de l’énonciation*; and “conscious subject” / “subject of the unconscious.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Word change and emphasis added. In Fink’s translation, Lacan states, “‘I’ is an other.” The author here is explicitly interpreting Lacan as referring to the ego. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Le sujet de l’énoncé* has also been translated as “the subject of the enunciated” or “the subject of the utterance.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The following situation demonstrates the difference between *le sujet de l’énoncé and le sujet de l’énonciation*. If a person we knows says, “I am a very kind person,” but we know that only recently, this person acted unkindly, we should not in this case confuse the “I” in the stated phrase, which is intended to portray the subject (*le sujet de l’énoncé*), with the “I” that is the actual person who spoke the given phrase (*le sujet de l’énonciation*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The current translator has modified line 2 to reflect the terminology “unbeliever” used throughout this article. For a key to the transcription symbols for the respondent’s speech, see Rogozin (2014: 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This article analyzes the “religious subject” with a nearly complete emphasis on the multi- dimensionality of the “subject.” The debate over the complexity and ambiguity of the notion of “religion” and its various derivatives (e.g., “religious”) remains beyond the scope of this article, though the author is well aware of the debate (see, for example, Nongbri 2013, including the comprehensive bibliography on pp. 231-61). The journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* remains the key academic platform for such debates. The critical study of “religion” could also benefit from considering Lacanian reflections on the signifier, the signified and relations between them, but this is a task for a separate article. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tables cited by Sinelina (2013: 243-4). See Ugrinovich (1995) for information demonstrating the success of secularization in the conditions of socialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While directing attention to the way the Soviet numbers differ from the data based on the memories of post-Soviet people concerning their Soviet past, Kaariainen & Furman (2007: 14) remark, “People in the Soviet period indeed could believe simultaneously the most contradictory things, could believe and not believe at the same time, and could believe one thing in certain situations and something else in other circumstances.” Yet for some reason, these authors attribute this state of affairs to “the consciousness of people in a totalitarian society,” not even allowing a thought that their analysis concerns a more universal phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is hardly surprising that field researchers of Russian religiosity, contrary to sociologi- cal data, often bemoan the nearly complete lack of believers in any significant sense. This is the opinion of one of the leading Russian empirical sociologists, Ivan Zabaev, who teaches at St. Tikhon’s Orthodox University of the Humanities in Moscow. Personal communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For example, a person could assert something at length and then ask, “Right?” Similarly, one could express doubts in something that he had previously pronounced with great vigor and certainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These reflections on full subjectivity may seem overly romantic and idealistic, but they are a necessary counterbalance to the previous sections, which portrayed the subject as a mere by-product of external factors (others and Others). Only by combining the three registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real—which co-determine and co-limit each other, can we get a nuanced understanding of whom exactly we face when we face the human subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)