

Freud's view on religion

Religion



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Freud maintained interests in the subjects of God and religion throughout his long career. Freud considered the practice of religion and religious rites to be some sort of neurological obsession. Taking the concept from Feuerbach, he also saw religious ideology as a projection of infantile wishes. If religion was a kind of neurosis, it is marked by an unhealthy dissociation between oneself and reality. If religion was a continuation of the childish tendency to project one's imagination unto reality, it is marked by an abnormal association between one's fantasies and the objective world.

Either way, religion is a sickness that needs to be cured. Freud gave the clearest expression of his views on religion in his book "The Future of an Illusion". In order to explore Freud's conception of religion, we must first clarify certain points. When Freud speaks of religion, he is usually talking about the traditional, fear-based, authoritarian, organized religion. There are other kinds of religion too. For instance, when William James talks about religion in his "Varieties of Religious Experience" and when Freud talks about religion in his "The Future of an Illusion" they are referring to wholly different approaches to God.

James is talking about mystical experiences, while Freud is indeed talking about infantile beliefs. Unlike James' profound investigations into sublime spiritual matters, Freud's observations are more or less commonsensical. Freud's theories of origins of religion are sometimes criticized for being unscientific speculations, but really there is not much of a need for scientific corroboration of Freud's views because they are just commonsensical.

When one looks objectively at the various religions and religious beliefs in our world, one is bound to reach to conclusions somewhat similar to those of Freud. Freud may have couched his observations in a more scholarly language, but essentially what he is saying is very simple and easily relatable. When he says religious rites are manifestations of obsessive neurosis, he simply means religions are mostly ridiculously lunatic affairs. And when Freud says religions are infantile projections, he means they are simply childish nonsense.

It is difficult to come to any other conclusion when we look at the whole phenomenon of organized religion from a rational perspective. Freud mostly has Judeo-Christian tradition in mind when he condemns religion. Though Freud's observations could be broadly applicable to many other world religions of the past and the present, they would make most direct sense when we keep the Jewish and Christian religions in mind. Freud's main proposition is that religion is a projection of human longings and desires. But desires and longings for what? — for security of course.

" The Future of an Illusion" and its sequel " Civilization and its Discontents" are Freud's reflections on the origins and nature of civilization. Freud talks about religion in the context of civilization. Before the advent of civilization, man lived in wilderness. In our modern times, surrounded by the innumerable comforts of science and technology, i. e. , civilization, we may not be able to properly appreciate the fact, but situations of life posed constant threat and continual hardship for wandering groups of early humans, and this was how we lived for literally hundreds of thousands of years.

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Civilization is relatively a very recent manifestation. Religion in its rudimentary forms most likely predates civilization by tens of thousands of years. Freud constantly ties up religion with civilization since they essentially serve the same function – provide security against fearsome, elemental forces of nature. “ The principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d’etre*, is to defend us against nature,” says Freud, and nobody would dispute this assertion.

Now, the principal task of religion too is the same, though it approaches this issue of security from a different angle. And while civilization provides real security, religion provides only imaginary one, nothing more than an illusory feeling. Outside the setting of civilization, the basic question before an individual human being as he tried to live his life and cope with his surroundings was: " how to survive, how to “ defend himself against the superior powers of nature, of Fate...?" The first step toward security is what Freud calls, humanization of nature: A great deal is already gained with the first step: the humanization of nature. Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage as they do in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil Will, if everywhere in nature there are Beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny...

This was how the first very primitive religions began, long before the advent of civilization. Say, if civilization began roughly 5 – 6000 years ago, and agriculture began some 10 - 12000 years ago, there is evidence for religious rites to have taken place as far back as 80, 000 years or in fact much earlier,
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going back to the dim beginnings of the species Homo sapiens. Religion was therefore the first effort of man to establish a rapport with nature.

The intention was wholly a noble one — to connect with the greater existence — but human minds were understandably extremely primitive so long ago in time, their lifestyle was totally brutish, there was no language either, and so instead of a poetic or philosophical reverence for Nature, men could only develop a routine of arbitrary, superstitious rituals in an effort to appease nature. Knowledge of our evolutionary beginnings was not well-developed in Freud's time, nevertheless his speculations were based on the intrinsic logic of things and so some of them were neatly corroborated by scientific discoveries that were made much later.

Superstitious religious beliefs did not really make man secure, but they at least provided an illusory sense of confidence: We are still defenceless, perhaps, but we are no longer helplessly paralysed; we can at least react. Perhaps, indeed, we are not even defenceless. We can apply the same methods against these violent supermen outside that we employ in our own society; we can try to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and, by so influencing them, we may rob them of a part of their power. Freud says, "life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors. This was the big project man was on. However, there was no way man could achieve this at a time when he could not even build a primitive shelter for himself and had to live inside the caves. Even in the modern times, with such fantastic advances in science, we are still far from achieving this. The primitive man could only project beings with whom he could relate unto the abstract Nature, and achieve some kind of consolation through such an effort.

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This was not an altogether futile effort; besides consolation, it could also have led to other practical benefits. A replacement like this of natural science by psychology not only provides immediate relief, but also points the way to a further mastering of the situation. " From these very primitive beginnings, religions too went on evolving along with man's growing awareness of his world. Freud continues with his logically derived conception of the evolution of religion. Freud has nothing against the way primitive religions evolved, because obviously human kind was in its childhood for all that time. Therefore it was only natural. What Freud is against are the present-day monotheistic religions of the world.

Monotheism first evolved after a few thousands of years of civilization. Freud's birth religion, Judaism, was one of the pioneers of monotheism. Although the monotheistic religion was a tremendous leap of abstraction over the primitive pantheistic religions, it was still an evolution of the primitive religions. Religion in whatever form, including the deeper spiritual and mystic modes, is a search for security, as is civilization. Whereas civilization has a valid basis, religion continued to be a purely imaginary enterprise.

Civilization is a reflection of intelligence, maturity and capability of man, whereas religion is its exact opposite, although civilization and religion have been going together for so long. With monotheism, religion attained a kind of maturity, but unfortunately all the deep childishness still remained with it, being only thinly concealed. Freud remarks the following about the evolution of religion: And thus a store of ideas is created, born from man's need to

make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race.

This store of childish ideas continued to serve as a basis for the supposedly monotheistic religions too. Religion turned out to be an essentially childish pursuit. The parallels between religious tendencies and child psychology run deep. A very young child lives in a space where reality and dream/imagination constantly merge. In other words, he is not capable of clearly distinguishing between reality and imagination. For him, fairies in the stories he read could be as real as his friends at school. Freudian psychoanalysis traces all the mental complexes of an adult person to his childhood. This is the essential modality of psychoanalysis.

The tendency of people to believe in religious doctrines is thus traced back by Freud to the tendency of children to confuse between reality and imagination. One needs this tendency or faculty first to indulge in any kind of mythmaking which is at the core of all religions, whether monotheistic or pantheistic — this capacity to take one's own and collective mental projections for reality. Once this is in place, a person can go on projecting whatever suits him. A human child is so utterly helpless if he had to live on his own in this enormously complex world, unlike juvenile animals which come more or less 'prepackaged'.

The child's overwhelming need is security. This security is provided by his parents. The child realizes his total dependence on the parents; consequently, the attachment to the father-figure or the mother-figure has gone very deep in the collective psyche of humanity. Security is very deeply

associated with the father figure, especially in Western cultures and the ancient civilizations they evolved from. And although the child grows up into a man, and becomes much more capable and stronger in fending for himself, he still remains weak and helpless in face of many situations of life.

The search for security continues, and the need for greater security is ever present. A benevolent and compassionate God watching over human affairs from his heaven – if he existed – would have been the ultimate protection for humans. But even if he does not exist, and no one has ever seen him, it need not present much of a problem because humans possess the faculty of confusing reality with imagination, and can easily make their own gods as well their own God. This faculty was particularly pronounced in people who lived in the early stages of civilization – which corresponded to the intermediate stages of evolution of religion.

These men belonging to the ancient cultures of the world created thousands of gods and elaborate mythological stories featuring them — all of them being nothing more than products of their fertile but childish imagination. In the subsequent ages, men became more mature, their rational faculties developed, and they sought to make meaning of their world in a more focused manner, instead of just seeking security and comfort. This development was helped by the fact that enough of security and comfort were present already, therefore a higher need to make sense of his world developed in man.

Religious cults continued to emerge and evolve; they were not simply arbitrary mythological stories anymore but contained more coherent

narratives that answered philosophical questions and provided a framework of meaning to human existence. These latter day religions were apparently much more sophisticated than most of the primitive religions, nevertheless they were still highly childish and nonsensical. Science is a legitimate way of seeking comfort and security, and philosophy is a legitimate way of seeking meaning of human existence, but religion is a pseudo way of seeking all these three.

Religion is like a drug that can provide a false sense of happiness and elation without in any way actually leading to greater happiness and joy. That was why Freud was so much opposed to the existence of religions, they essentially belonged to a childish, outmoded phase of human evolution, even the apparently more sophisticated ones. Religions are nothing but an illusion. They provide comfort, solace, security, meaning and significance to human life — but they only seem to do so, in reality they only provide fake substitutes for all these.

An illusion means an appearance without substance, and it is a very apt word to describe religions. There is nothing wrong in seeking greater meaning and security in our lives, in fact this search is what makes us human, this is a healthy need of human existence. But there is a much more prevalent neurotic version of this need which is easily satisfied by mere appearances and falsities, and which is easily catered for by the religions of the world. Religions are an outcome of neurosis, they are a disease of the human mind, and Freud genuinely hoped that religions could be cured by the spread of psychoanalysis some day in the future.