

Freudian theory of the origins of monotheistic religion



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This extended essay explores and evaluates the extent which Freud's theories can explain the origin of monotheistic religions. Freud's main religious theories were published within three texts: *The Future of an Illusion*, *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. One explanation of the origin of religion is as a coping strategy for an individual within the world or society which inhibits their desires somehow. Freud also suggests that religion is a product of the Oedipus Complex which is another of Freud's theories, and states that a child's view of their parents will affect their view of the world. The idea of an early parricide causing guilt in a group of people which was then passed down and later became religion is also common within Freud's theories.

These theories were evaluated by looking at how they were created, for example through techniques such as Psychoanalysis and Psychohistory. These methods of research are considered to be invalid due to their unscientific nature. The theories were also evaluated by comparing them with modern, scientific theories for the origin of religions such as evolutionary explanations, which explain religion as evolving due to its adaption for the individual or group, or as a by-product of other evolutionary behaviours.

The essay concludes that although aspects within Freud's theories are supported in other religious theories (for example the idea of God being a projected representation of parents), because of the flawed nature of the methods and also the other theories that they are based on, such as the Oedipus Complex and the idea of a shared memory, mean that they are unreliable and imprecise.

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Introduction

Freud is recognized for his theories on Psychoanalysis and parent-child relationships but it is perhaps his application of these theories that were his greatest achievements. He utilised theories such as the Oedipal Complex to explore broader issues such as religion and has been extremely important in the development of Psychology. Freud theorised extensively in the area of religion, producing a large number of essays. Totem and Taboo was the first book that Freud published on the topic of religion and in the final essay, “ the

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return of totemism in childhood”, Freud provided various theories from Nominalist, Sociological and Psychological perspectives before combining Darwin’s theory on the social state of primitive men and Robertson Smith’s theory on the origin of sacrifices to create a theory for the origin of totemism and, subsequently, the origin of religion.

Freud also looked at the origin of religion in his next text, *The Future Of An Illusion*, however this time he explores the idea more generally, putting a bigger emphasis on its impact on society and how it developed within this. He then used these interpretations of religion’s origin and its relationship with ancient civilisations to explain how they will affect the future of modern civilisation and modern religions.

Following a brief explanation of Judaeo-Christian religions in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud looked specifically at the truth behind the story of Moses in his final contribution to the field of religion, *Moses and Monotheism*. The story of Moses is fundamental to the formation of Judaism and is seminal in its impact. Freud used Psychological theories explored in his previous works to bring together and evaluate some of these anthropological theories on a more scientific level. By closely examining such beginnings of religion, Freud was able to explore the significance of religion in general, and whilst many of his theories are generally considered obsolete now, at the time they provided explanations for a subject that was only just beginning to be researched.

This paper will explore Freud's theories on the origin of religion within these texts and attempt to evaluate them in comparison with contemporary theories.

The Future of an Illusion

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud explained that, in order for a civilisation to thrive, the instinctual drives and impulses of the individual must be ignored, resulting in frustration. Privations are imposed by civilisation and the forces of nature and Freud believed that religion originated from the anthropomorphic forms of nature, made as a coping strategy to manage its unpredictability. For example, if nature is seen as a being, then it has a will that people can appease. This is much easier than attempting to accept the unknown.

Other thinkers of the time, such as Karl Marx, propounded similar theories to this. Marx believed that religion was created by humans within pre-class societies as a means of control over nature and developed by humans in societies dominated by class divisions as a means of control over their social situation. The idea of control being the beginning for religion is very similar to Freud's ideas on the origin of religion.

Freud believed that the religious stage of human development corresponded to the object stage of individual development, otherwise known as the phallic stage within the Oedipus Complex where children have ambivalent feelings towards the father of fear and affection. He explained that people apply their relationship with the father to the wider world and hence, when humanising nature, do not make it on equal status but with the character of the father

figure. This is the beginning of the formation of gods and, Freud explains, the origin of religion.

This idea was not uncommon at the time and the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach was one of the first to discuss the idea that the characteristics of gods are merely the elevated and exaggerated characteristics of humans. Similarly, Marx observed that Christians believe that God created humans in His own image but stated that it was perhaps the other way round.

Over time, Freud believed that the gods became more independent of nature, although still being in control of it, as apparent in the existence of “miracles”. The idea arose that they were subject to their own fates and Freud used the example of Greek mythology to support this, where the Moirae, or “the Fates” were feared by the gods. Because the gods were no longer so closely associated with nature, their new role became the upkeep of morality which Freud believed was the origin for religion as we know it. For example, through the idea that all sins are punished eventually, civilisation is given reason for its privations and Freud argued that without such religious beliefs, moral order would cease to function, but at the same time he felt that “civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up”[1](Freud, 1989: Chapter VII).

Many other theorists of the time believed that religion had no future, for example Tylor, Frazer and Marx. Marx believed that by abolishing religion, the social hierarchies that created it would also be abolished and vice versa.

The main difference between Freud’s and Marx’s approach to exploring the origin of religion is that although both looked at religion from a
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developmental perspective, Freud examined it through Psychology, specifically Psychoanalysis, and Marx looked at it from a more political perspective. Hence, Freud provides this explanation on the basis that religion is an illusion and in terms of the psychological process, “wish fulfilment”. He defines an illusion as any belief that is held purely because there is a strong need or desire to believe it. This will to believe is stronger than the reason against it and creates self-delusions that form the religion.

Criticism

Despite the many controversies related to Freud's theory, aspects of it certainly appear logical. For example, Christianity speaks directly of “God the father” and in most other monotheistic religions, God is portrayed as a paternal figure but also a stern disciplinarian which may be linked to Freud's theory that God is the image of peoples' fathers. There are problems with this idea, firstly empirical studies have shown that God correlates more with the mother than the father, as she is often the preferred parent and hence the most influential. As well as this, even Freud admitted that female deities do not fit with his theory at all. In monotheistic religions it is generally a male god, but this brings the problem of ethnocentricity into Freud's theory. It cannot cross religions at all well and seems to be based purely on Christianity; Freud even states at one point that: “(We are here concerned with European Christian civilization.)”[2]. This side-note that is used for one comment could be applied to the majority of the essay and this assumption that all religions are the same causes further issues. For example, in the Oedipus Complex he assumes that specific emotions such as tension and ambivalence arise in all humans in all societies but different civilisations are

structured very differently which affects the emotions within them. For example, Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who conducted a lot of ethnographic studies, found that in the case of the Trobriand Islanders (now the Kiriwana Islands) in New Guinea it is the mother's brother who is the important one, not the father and hence there are not the same feelings towards him as with the European children Freud based his theory on. Malinowski was able to prove that beliefs, motives and emotional responses differ greatly between cultures which disproves the universality of the Oedipus Complex and all theories based upon it.

Malinowski did agree that it is a universal trait for someone to believe what it suits them to believe and to that extent Freud has some intuitive points, but he reduces all beings down to their basic psychological processes, such as the Oedipus Complex, and hence the theory is reductionist.

Despite these flaws, it is possible that Freud's theories only need to be modified and the key assertion would be that domestic circumstances relate to religious beliefs as a symbiotic relationship. Studies have been done to test this altered hypothesis and although one noted that there is "an extraordinary analogy between the Oedipus structure and the structuring of the religious attitude" (Vergote et al., 1969, p. 877), most studies contradict even this modified hypothesis.

Some basic ideas from Freud's theories have influenced other, more accurate, theories. For example, the idea of religion forming from parent/child relationships has been used by many theorists to explain the persistence of religious ideas in a population, one example being

anthropologist Victor Turner, in his essay “ Symbols in Ndembu Ritual” (1964). However there are still flaws with this idea as the fact that gods often match parental characteristics does not mean that religious beliefs are solely due to family experiences.

Freud’s view of religion is rather pragmatic, as a mere illusion based upon false reasoning, which is typical of the 19th century, whereas nowadays religion is studied much more widely and deeply.

One problem due to the context of the work is that Freud does not fully explain certain aspects of his theory. For example, Freud states that the Oedipus Complex is a result of the privations caused by society rather than the privations of the natural world, yet it is not explained why religion takes the form of humanisation of nature. As well as this, the change from the god(s) being the figure for nature to upholding morality seems rather sudden and incoherent. These flaws in the explanation create problems with the theory itself which invalidate Freud’s ideas on the origin of religion explained in this text.

Totem and Taboo

Freud had also applied the Oedipus Complex to the earlier book Totem and Taboo in order to explain the origin of monotheistic religions. In this, Freud explained that in one primal horde the sons grew jealous of the dominant male because of his dominance over them and the females and so, in accordance with the Oedipus Complex, they murdered him, making the first act of cooperation within primeval societies an act of parricide. They ate the father to absorb his strength and power but afterwards they regretted their

actions because despite their negative emotion towards him they still loved and admired him. In order to deal with their collective guilt they repressed it and memorialized the father by creating a totem animal which was not to be killed. They also denied themselves the now liberated females, and hence created the two foundations of totemic society; the taboo against killing the totem and clan exogamy. By not killing the totem animal they were making a promise to the father that they would not repeat the parricide and in return he would watch over and protect them.

However, because their feelings towards the father remained ambivalent, they would annually re-enact their victory over him by eating the totem animal and re-absorbing his strength, ergo creating the totemic feast. These ambivalent feelings of guilt and defiance are shown through myths and legends such as those of Attis, Adonis and Tammuz who sexually possessed the mother in defiance of the father. They were often punished through castration or indirectly by the father in animal form.

The guilt was passed down through the generations who dealt with it by repeating the rituals in a socially acceptable manner thereby creating religion. Over time, the sacrifice of the totem animal becomes less like a re-enactment of the parricide and more like an offering of reconciliation. Freud argued that only a human sacrifice would be adequate to accurately re-enact or reconcile the murder, and he gives many examples of where this has been done, for example in early Latin tribes where the King was “solemnly executed at a particular...annual sacrifice”[3].

The most noted example of this is Christ. Freud believed that the son of God sacrificing himself to redeem his brothers from the original sin caused against the father points back to the original parricide in the tribal community because “ if this sacrifice of a life brought about atonement with God the Father, the crime...can only have been the murder of the father.”[4]. However, the “ psychological law of ambivalence”[5]means that the son himself becomes a god, beside or instead of the father and this is shown by the son-religion, Christianity, displacing the father-religion, Judaism. As a sign of this substitution, the old totem feast is revived in the form of communion by eating the flesh and blood of the son, not the father.

Criticism

In many respects, the theories within Totem and Taboo are more valid than those within The Future of an Illusion, because he looks more deeply at other theories from different aspects and attempts to give evidence for his statements. He looked mainly at his area of interest, Psychoanalysis, but he built an interdisciplinary case for his views by taking evidence from other sciences, namely Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology.

At the time, it was believed that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that is to say that the development of the individual mimics the evolution of the species. As a result, Freud was able to link the minds of primitive people, neurotic patients and normal children as being psychologically similar. This is integral to his theories, partly for the evidence he supports them with: in the first essay, The Horror of Incest, Freud illustrates his arguments using Australian aborigines, justifying it by saying that these “ savages or half-savages” can give a “ well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own
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development.” He shows these similarities by comparing their Psychology with the Psychology of neurotic patients.

The link between these people is also imperative to the theories themselves: Freud’s ideas on the origin of monotheistic religions within this text is based upon the idea that the collective guilt from the original parricide is passed down through the generations, which in turn is based upon the idea that the psychological processes of these people are genetically inherited. According to Freud, these are manifested in the lives of children, patients and primitive people due to their early psychological and social development.

The idea of an inherited racial memory continuing to influence future generations is not only discredited by the fact that ontogeny is now believed not to recapitulate phylogeny but also generally by modern biology due to the new findings within genetics. When Freud wrote the essays, Darwin’s theories on evolution were not fully developed and even when they were Freud decided not to edit his theories, despite taking direct references from them.

Moses and Monotheism

Freud used his theories in Totem and Taboo to explain the origin of Judaism and the Biblical story of Moses in his book Moses and Monotheism. The idea for this book came after Ernst Sellin, a distinguished Hebrew and Arabic scholar, found some evidence suggesting that Moses had been murdered in 1922. This linked in with Freud’s theories on the importance of parricide, explained in Totem and Taboo, but it was rejected by all Jewish scholars and

later withdrawn, however Freud still chose to write the book stating that “ it might be true all the same”[6].

The four main ideas explained in Moses and Monotheism are that: Moses was an Egyptian, Moses acquired a belief in monotheism in Egypt and converted the Jews to it, Moses was slain in tumult, and that the tradition of the murder of Moses led to a lasting unconscious sense of guilt among the Jewish people. The first three statements have been debated for centuries and many scholars and theorists have come to the same conclusions. The idea that Moses’ monotheism derived from Akhenaten’s is problematic, partly because the religion was not as purely monotheistic as Freud thought as Akhenaten regarded himself as a divine son of Aton, and also because the date of the Exodus from Egypt, although disputed, is unlikely to be close to Akhenaten’s reign by one or even two centuries. It is still possible that the religion is linked but only indirectly and Freud was aware of this, albeit reluctant to admit it. The final statement is highly hypothetical but is key to his theorising process of creating a theory – in this case the one stated in Totem and Taboo – and finding evidence for it, however hypothetical or flawed.

Conclusion

There is strong debate concerning the reliability and validity of Freud’s theories, particularly scientifically. Despite Freud’s strong belief in science, modern science, generally disregards his theories. This is partly due to greater and more advanced technology which has improved research immensely. For example, greater understanding of genetics has disproved Freud’s idea of repressed memories being passed down through the generations which was unsupported even at the time.

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Other fields are also critical of the validity of Freud's theories. In addition to modern science as previously discussed, history has also found opposing evidence to Freud's idea of the emotion of guilt being passed down, as feelings of ambivalence and guilt have never been present in every generation. As well as this, although Judeo-Christian religions often feature feelings of guilt, primitive societies are often found to have little guilt and certainly not such a persisting emotion as Freud suggested. One doesn't have to look too far back into history to see that, even if conducting worse acts than the parricide of a tyrant father, people have not struggled in ridding themselves of any guilt they felt. It is likely that this is one of the consequences of Freud's context, as Bourgeois Europe was quite strongly punishing.

Current research methodology has developed and is now considered more valid and more emphasis is placed on the external validity. Freud generally used case studies of his own patients to support his theories, for example the Oedipus complex is based upon his observations of "Little Hans" and yet he applies it to almost all his later theories. Scientific research has shown that although the personality traits of the Oedipal phase can be observed in children, they aren't necessarily phases in their development and are unlikely to be causes of adult personality traits. This undermines his theory of the origin of religion as it relies on the child's relationship with the father being applied to later life.

Scientific analysis is not enough to study religion though, and a number of methods are used including: personal revelations, observation through clinical means, participant observation, surveys and interviews, and <https://assignbuster.com/freudian-theory-of-the-origins-of-monotheistic-religion/>

examinations of religious documents. Not all these are very reliable, but when used together with scientific means they give a good oversight.

Psychoanalysis

Freud supported his theories with his findings using psychoanalysis. It was developed by Freud and it is a form of therapy in which the therapist analyses the patient's dreams and thoughts in order to interpret the underlying, unconscious problems. It was originally intended to explain therapeutic or psychological concepts but it has also been used to explain the nature of human development and behaviour and other areas, such as religion. Totem and Taboo was the first thorough work of psychoanalysis to be published under the topic of religion and Freud also used psychoanalysis as the main basis for his other studies of religion.

It is debatable whether psychoanalysis is verifiable, but it is universally agreed to be unscientific due to the lack of supporting evidence. Even at the time it was a controversial subject but it was still used extensively and had a number of followers. Freud used it to explore various topics, but he recognised that psychoanalysis could not be used to explain topics such as religion in its entirety: “ there are no grounds for fearing that psychoanalysis...will be tempted to trace the origin of anything so complicated as religion from a single source”[7]. However in the same chapter, he states that: “ the beginnings of religion, morals, society, and art converge in the Oedipus complex. This is in complete agreement with the psychoanalytic findings”[8]

Because psychoanalysis was applied to such a variety of subjects, a new term was used. Psychohistory is the application of psychoanalysis to individuals in history and is often used to study the motives of events. Freud used it to explore the origins of religion in both individuals, i. e. Moses, and groups, e. g. the primitive group. It's very effective in describing but psychoanalysing the past is unreliable as it requires in-depth knowledge about the individual's childhood which is often unknown. Therefore the psychohistorian is forced to assess the person's childhood situation from their behaviour as an adult and then assess whether that altered their behaviour which is not just unreliable but somewhat ridiculous. It has been proved to be inaccurate and hence both psychohistory and Freud's theories have generally been rejected by post-1960s historians due to their theoretical nature. Nowadays, some psychoanalyse the historians or historical records, but as psychoanalysis has been generally dismissed as a reliable means, modern methods are used to explore events in history such as the development of religion, a popular form being evolutionary Psychology.

Modern Psychology

Evolutionary Psychology of religion is based around the idea that religious feelings are a function of the brain and hence can be explained through the evolutionary development of the brain. Because religion is still around today, it must have had some advantage in terms of survival or reproduction according to the process of natural selection.

There are many different possible explanations for religion as an evolved process. The three main ones are that: it aids the survival and reproduction
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of the individual; it makes a group or the individuals within that group better compared to others or; it bears no direct benefit to humans and is either a by-product of other advantageous behaviours or is like a virus. The idea that religion has been developed so as to enhance society bears direct resemblance to Freud's ideas which suggests that, although his methods for this theory were unreliable, the theory itself was not as flawed. Research has been done to support the evolutionary theories for group co-operation as a result of religion, for example Shariff and Norenzayan conducted a study in 2007 where the appearance of religious words – such as God, divine, spirit – actively increased participants' levels of co-operation and altruism. This shows that there is definitely a link between religion and feelings of social responsibility.

However, evolutionary Psychology also looks at non-adaptive explanations for religion which Freud does not. For example, some psychologists believe that religion may have been adaptive in smaller groups but not in modern societies. Others believe that it is a by-product of other evolved traits and it is also suggested that it may have just drifted into the population and hence have no adaptive benefit at all. The explanations stated are ultimate, and require proximate explanations to be considered a possibility, such as the explanations for each of the behaviours that religion provokes.

Modern psychologists of all subgenres tend to look at the origins of individual religions rather than the general origin, and they look for the psychological processes that drive one to that religion. According to this, the individual's religion changes as they age and as their emotional and mental

development progresses. One example of a recent psychologist who has <https://assignbuster.com/freudian-theory-of-the-origins-of-monotheistic-religion/>

looked at the latter two effects is Reiss who found that there are 16 basic psychological needs that promote religious feelings. He stated that " People who have a strong need for order should enjoy ritualized religious experiences, whereas those with a weak need for order may prefer more spontaneous expression of faith"[9]. This theory can be used to explain the differences between, for instance, Western and Eastern religions and in turn that can help indicate where the religions originated.

As Reiss himself says: " Because this theory can be tested scientifically, we can learn its strengths and weaknesses, and gradually improve it."[10]This is why Freud's theories cannot be applied nowadays, because they lack validity and reliability, and are based upon a " pseudo-science" which is against the modern study of Psychology.