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God and Man in Freudian Psychoanalysis: A Critical Examination of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*

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In this article, we have attempted to scrutinize Freud's psychological analysis of man and God. Four different interpretations of this Freudian analysis have been examined hereunder. Freud believes that religion is the outcome of wishful thinking or fear. Freud's views on the origin of religion have been stated in a detailed fashion in his works on psychoanalysis. His *The Future of an Illusion* is the focus of our study of his views on God and man in this article. Freud held that the idea of God is simply a subjective illusion, since theism is only the product of father-complex. He suggested that every child is helpless, and for this reason depends upon his human father. As the child grows up, he finds that he cannot depend on his father for protection from a hostile and intolerable world. Therefore, he concocts an idea of a divine being and projects his image of his father unto a cosmic scale. He then turns to this figment of his imagination for security and comfort.

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Introduction

Sigmund Freud explicitly expresses his doubts about the veracity of religion by the following words:

> We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. And it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe. (Freud 1961)

In Freud's opinion, religion is merely an illusion,[1] a belief which is based on a wish fulfillment and which has no base in reality. In *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927 and first translated into English in 1928, Freud expounded upon this view and, in the end, advocated the complete abolition of religion.

Quite predictably, the religious response to this book was unfavorable and late. One may only speculate about the reasons for this delay. I believe, it must have been related, to some extent, to the fact that religious communities did not want to draw too much attention to this book. Yet, as the book and its author became more widely known, religious figures (both clerical and academic) ceased to remain silent. Nevertheless, a critical examination of *The Future of an Illusion* and the responses of several religious critics will show, perhaps surprisingly to some, that they did succeed in raising many logical and rational (as opposed to purely emotional) objections to Freud's book.

Let us begin with a detailed summary of Freud's arguments. He starts with a thorough explanation of the rise of civilization. According to Freud, "the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d'être*, is to defend us against nature" (1961, 15). Yet, in order to coexist peacefully with his fellow humans and to carry out successfully the

1. This is not to be confused with "delusion," which lies in direct contradiction to reality.

work upon which a society depends, man had to control his instinctual impulses. However, this created a problem: the instincts of the masses cannot be controlled by their intellects; that is, by logic and reason (1961, 7). Freud thus concludes that:

> There are two widespread human characteristics which are responsible for the fact that the regulations of civilization can only be maintained by a certain degree of coercion—namely, that men are not spontaneously fond of work and that arguments are of no avail against their passions. (1961, 8)

As a result of these two superior forces (i.e., nature and civilization), man was left with a feeling of helplessness. Seeking to rob nature of its terrors and to console himself for the sacrifices demanded by civilization, man projected his wishes for a Lord and protector onto the cosmos. He thus succeeded in creating a God, a sort of universal father, 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 (1961, 18). This God was invested with the powers to control both nature and society. Man, therefore, loved God and came to believe that nature is not cruel and callous, that his life does have a purpose, and that in the end, there is an after-life in which he will be compensated justly for the hardship he has endured. Yet, man also feared God, for he possesses the power to punish man with death or with other natural catastrophes. Freud believes that, as a result of man's ambivalent feelings towards God, religion grew out of the Oedipus complex—that is, out the child's need to establish a harmonious relationship with his father (1961, 43).

Freud concludes that God is the result solely of this wish for an omnipotent father and is thus an illusion. He argues that if the concept of God were rooted in reality, then the truth of God's existence could somehow definitely be confirmed. He provides an analogy with the town Constance, which, it is said, lies on the Bodensee. If we wanted to

confirm this geographical truth, we could visit Constance, and we would undoubtedly agree that it does lie on the Bodensee (1961, 25). Yet, when we ask for evidence of the truth of religion, says Freud, we are given the following three answers: "Firstly, these teachings … were already believed by our primal ancestors; secondly, we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those same primeval times; it is forbidden to raise the question of their authentication at all" (1961, 26). Freud then dismisses these arguments rather quickly. In answer to the first, he says that our ancestors believed many things which are found unacceptable today and that the possibility exists that religion also falls into this category. He maintains that the proofs mentioned in the second argument are untrustworthy and therefore useless. Also, the third argument merely proves the insecurity of religions' claim to reality (1961, 26-27). He concludes by saying:

> Thus we arrive at the singular conclusion that of all the information provided by our cultural assets it is precisely the elements which might be of the greatest importance to us and which have the tasks of solving the riddles of the universe and of reconciling us to the suffering of life—it is precisely those elements that are the least well authenticated of any. (1961, 27)

Freud than draws the analogy between religion and an obsessional neurosis. Childhood neuroses occur because children, their intellects not yet having fully developed, must be taught by effective means to control their instinctual impulses. Thus, because children cannot control their instincts rationally, they must control them by means of repression. As children grow, most of these neuroses are overcome spontaneously, but those that are not develop into neurosis, which can later be cured by psychoanalysis. This neurosis is recognized and identified by the obsessive actions which are their result. Similarly, in times when man's intelligence was much weaker than his instincts, instinctual renunciation could only be effected through purely effective forces. As a result, something like repression occurred in humanity as a

whole. Freud concludes that "[r]eligion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father" (1961, 43). Freud adds that this analogy is consistent with the fact that very few devout believers are stricken with neuroses, for "their acceptance of the universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one" (1961, 26-44).

Finally, by conceding that religion has in the past "performed great services for human civilization" (1961, 37), Freud argues that, in the same way that psychoanalysis replaces "the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect," so is it time for us to replace the (effective) precepts of civilization based on religion by those based on the rational workings of the intellects (1961, 44). In such a case,

> laws would lose their rigidity and unchangeableness as well. People could understand that they are made, not so much to rule them as, on the contrary, to serve their interests; and they would adopt a friendlier attitude to them, and instead of aiming at their abolition, would aim only at their improvement. This would be an important advance along the road which leads to becoming reconciled to the burden of civilization. (1961, 41)

In addition, at the end of the book, Freud states that because science is based on observation and material evidence, it is rooted in reality to a much greater extent than religion. Therefore, in addition to abandoning religion as a source of laws on which to run society, we ought also to abandon religion as a source of knowledge about the external world altogether. In its place, we should put science, for "Science has given us evidence—by its numerous and important successes—that it is no illusion … But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us can be found elsewhere" (1961, 55-56).

Such, then, are Freud's theories concerning the history and the future of religion. Freud was fully aware that this book would meet with much criticism: "The one person this publication may injure is I. I shall have to listen to the most disagreeable reproaches for my shallowness, narrow-mindedness, and lack of idealism or of understanding for the highest interest of mankind" (1961, 35-36). Yet, I believe Freud would be surprised at the high level of scholarship exhibited by those of the religious community who criticized this book. Indeed, the moralistic and idealistic arguments expected by Freud were the exception rather than the rule. A critical examination of the critiques of five religious figures, J. F. Mozley, J. E. Turner, Dale H. Moore, Atkinson Lee, and David Trueblood, will show that most, though certainly not all, of their arguments are logically sound, and many would leave Freud hard pressed for an answer. [1]

Let us begin with the argument of Lee and Turner against Freud's first assertion—namely, that man created civilization to protect himself from nature. Both ask rhetorically whether nature and man are really in opposition (Turner 1931, 215; Lee 1934, 510). Turner goes on to say that these two forces may only be in opposition if Freud chooses to define nature in a narrow and antiquated fashion. Freud would justifiably answer this objection with a tone of annoyance, saying that he had made it clear that he was not necessarily referring to all of nature, but only to those destructive aspects such as earthquakes, floods, diseases, and death (Freud 1961, 15-16). He used the term *nature* merely for convenience.

Next, Turner attacks Freud's contention that a certain amount of coercion is necessary for any civilization. Turner writes:

> We may agree that all human progress from the animal and savage level has been very largely due to certain small minorities. But to

1. The possible exception here is J. E. Turner, many of whose arguments seem unsound.

> call their influence "coercive" is to verge on the ridiculous; quite plainly, on the contrary, their methods have consisted uniformly in persuasion and example, argument and exhortation. (Turner 1931, 213)

To this, Freud again rightly responds, "Show me, anywhere in history, a civilization, which has been able to exist wholly without coercion; which has been able to give the masses free reign to control their own instinctual drives by following the example of the upper class. Indeed you cannot, for no such civilization has ever existed" (Turner 1931, 215).

Here, Turner accuses Freud of inconsistency. For, on one other hand, Freud asserts that coercion by a minority is necessary for civilization (Freud 1961, 7-8); while, on the other hand, he states, "We came together and created civilization … to defend us against nature" (1961, 15). Tuner maintains that "[i]t is patent that these two theories are hopelessly irreconcilable, since if mankind 'united together and created culture' there can never have existed the asserted minority externally coercing the larger mass" (Turner 1931, 215). Freud would reply that it is clear enough, even to the masses, that man must unite and guard himself against nature. Yet, such an undertaking could never succeed without the coercion of the minority, whose intellects were sufficiently well developed to control their passions.

The next point to come under attack is Freud's assertion that man invented religion as a result of his helplessness when faced with the overwhelming powers of nature and society. This is analogous to the Oedipus complex, when a helpless child looks to his father for protection. Turner argues this point by contending that Freud has failed to recognize the difference between the *fact* of helplessness and the *consciousness* of helplessness. He agrees with Freud that both primitive man and children are indeed helpless. However, he maintains that neither is aware of his helplessness, as shown by the fact that small

children are observed "climbing ladders and fraternizing with large and fierce dogs," while primitive man has been observed "habitually and unthinkingly facing perils and accepting risks to which civilized man would quickly succumb" (Turner 1931, 220). Therefore, since neither the child nor primitive man is aware of his state, neither need to seek protection from a father (1931, 220-21). Turner is thus simultaneously questioning the validity of the Oedipus complex as well as Freud's theory of the origin of religion. Freud would respond by saying that he does not need to prove that children and primitive men are intellectually aware of their helplessness, for their seeking protection from a father is the result of their unconscious feeling of helplessness.

J. F. Mozley also attacks this point, but in a different way. He does not question the validity of the Oedipus complex, but rather the validity of the analogy between the Oedipus complex and the helplessness of primitive man, for, in the case of the child, the terrors of the external world are unfamiliar to him, and he turns to his father, who is indisputably real, for protection. On the other hand, primitive man faces terrors which are very real to him, and he turns for protection to a father who does not exist. Mozley comments that, "this (as Freud has described it) is to act not like a child, but like a neurotic (Mozley 1930, 50-51). Clearly, Mozley could not be stating here that primitive man was neurotic when he invented religion; rather, he is exposing a flaw in Freud's analogy between the Oedipus complex and the origins of religion, with the purpose of showing that Freud's account must be incorrect. It is Mozley's implicit assumption that religion could not have resulted from a neurosis, because religion is a nearly universal belief, whereas neurosis implies abnormal psychical processes. Thus, by carrying through Freud's analogy and arriving at a contradiction (a "universal abnormality"), Mozley has dealt a serious blow to it. Freud, however, does not agree with Mozley's assumption, for Freud admits the possibility of a universal neurosis. Thus, we have here a

fundamental disagreement. Both men agree that Freud's analogy, as stated, leads to the conclusion that primitive men acted neurotically when they invented religion. Mozley takes this as proof that Freud's account of the origin of religion must be incorrect, for he believes that a universal neurosis is inherently impossible. Freud, on the other hand, sees this conclusion as proof that religion is an obsessional neurosis of which we ought to purge ourselves.

Mozley further attacks this analogy with two more valid points. First, he argues that, according to Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, the child feels nothing but love for his mother, while for his father, he feels both fear and love. Yet, man chose to create his god in the image of the father. Mozley thus poses the following question: "If we are inventing a god at all to guard us from the cruelties of life, why not invent one whom we can love without any admixture of fear?" (Mozley 1930, 50-51) I believe that Freud would be able to answer this question only with difficulty, though his answer would probably be that, in the eyes of the child, the mother signifies love, affection, and nourishment, while the father more deeply signifies the idea of protection, which is the primary goal of religion. It is only natural that man chose the father as the model for his god.

Secondly, Mozley points out that the analogy between God and the father is perfected only under monotheism. One would expect, then, that religion would be monotheistic from its inception. Yet this is known not to be the case, for "monotheism is a late and lofty stage of religious development" (Mozley 1930, 50-51). To this objection, I believe Freud would be hard pressed to formulate a logical and reasonable answer.

The next objection attacks Freud's contention that religion results solely from the projection of a wish-illusion onto the cosmos. Both Lee and Trueblood observe, however, that religion is often contrary to our wishes (Trueblood 1924, 458; Lee 1934, 511). Trueblood writes:

> The reference to wishes was the keystone…. of the Freudian analysis…. if it could be shown that the religion experience of men is frequently *at variance with their wishes*, the teeth of the difficulty would be pulled. Now, as a matter of fact, so far as we *ever* know fact, this is the case. (Trueblood 1924, 258)

Freud would probably respond to this by saying that it is not a feature of religion itself which is contrary to men's wishes; rather, it is certain aspects of the forms which religion has taken since its origin.

Mozley, Moore, and Turner all maintain that the reasons provided by Freud for the acceptance of religion are erroneous. Turner's argument is rendered less effective by the following inane statement: "The more enlightened of Christianity have welcomed inquiry even if they have condemned and … severely punished heresy" (Turner 1931, 218). To punish a person for reaching an unpopular conclusion is certainly not, logically speaking, to welcome inquiry. Moore, without actually revealing what is religions' claim to be believed, states, "To say that the only claims of religious truth to be believed lie in the traditional authority and the fear of open discussion is but to demonstrate an ignorance of religious conditions in the world today and a total misunderstanding of the motives of the religious individual in being religious" (Moore 1964, 170). It is Mozley who enlightens us about the true source of modern man's belief in God:

> The final word is said by our own spirits. We claim that, when we weigh candidly all the facts of the world and all the power of the human mind, a hard materialism becomes impossible; we are driven to believe in God and spiritual forces…. Religion … may well be one of those domains where insight and the hearing ear are more value than the mere tabulation of facts. (Mozley 1930, 55-56)

It is thus the religious experience of the individual on which religion lays its claim to be believed. Here, Freud would respond that religious experiences are merely examples of introspect and intuition, from which it is "merely an illusion to expect anything…It would be insolent

to let one's own arbitrary will step into the breach and, according to one's personal estimate, declare this or that part of the religious system to be less or more acceptable" (Freud 1961, 31-32). Freud would thus assert that a religious experience is caused by a (conscious or unconscious) belief in God, rather than the other way around.

Freud's second major analogy, comparing religion to an obsessional neurosis, is strongly attacked by Mozley. In his article, Mozley lists three similarities drawn by Freud between obsessional neurosis and the religiousness of persons. They are the following: first, both persons experience pangs of conscience if they omit the ritual; second, both isolate their rituals from all other activities; and third, both pay extremely close attention to detail (Mozley 1930, 48).[1] Mozley objects to this comparison on the following grounds:

> The three likenesses, which he draws between religion and a neurotic compulsion, can be found in almost any pursuit where the devotee is in dead earnest. The first-class musician, for example, never omits his practice, is extremely conscientious over his exercises … and he also isolates his music from the rest of his life. (Mozley 1930, 53)

To this criticism Freud would surely respond with disgust: "I suggest you turn the page, sir, and read about the fourth similarity which I draw between the religious man and the neurotic. There I state that obsessive acts, like religious rites, are, in all their details full of meaning… (That they are filled with) direct or… [Indirect] symbolic representation. This eliminates the first-class musician and any others you may have had in mind. Therefore, my analogy still holds" (Freud 1959, 2:28).

Yet Mozley attacks this analogy further, justifiably labeling ridiculous Freud's assertion that religious men are usually spared personal neuroses, because they have succumbed to the universal one. Mozley points out that when psychoanalysis cures or prevents a

1. These similarities may be found in Freud (1959).

neurosis, Freud regards this as a "feather in his cap," whereas when religion achieves this same goal, Freud takes this as evidence that religion is itself a neurosis (Mozley 1930, 54). Surely, Freud's reasoning is twisted. Freud would probably respond (rather feebly) that psychoanalysis is the only proven technique for curing a neurosis, and that of all the possible explanations why religious men do not usually have neuroses, his is certainly plausible. Mozley further argues that the neurotic is unhappy, because he is aware of his obsessional symptoms but can do nothing about them. The religious man, on the other hand, "glories in his state" (Mozley 1930, 53). Freud would counter that this is further evidence for his view that religion is like a powerful narcotic, for men have become so dependent on religion that they will find it very difficult to discard (Freud 1961, 49). Finally, Mozley recalls Freud's concession that religion has performed "great services" for mankind. He then asks, "But who was ever the better for a neurosis? How can goodness and contentment have been created by an utter fiction?" (Mozley 1930, 59) He then continues, agreeing that religion is not perfect, but stating that it ought to be perfected rather than abolished. He compares religion to the science of medicine, which, though once laughable by our standards, has "paved the way for the grander achievement of to-day" (Mozley 1930, 59). Here, Freud would probably respond by offering what he would consider a more appropriate analogy. He would compare religion to something like the Ptolemaic model of the universe, which for many centuries adequately predicated celestial events. Yet, as scientific knowledge grew, this model was replaced by the Copernican model, which was found to correspond more closely to reality. In the same way, Freud would argue, it is time to discard religion in favor of science and reason.

Mozley, Lee, Trueblood, ant Turner all attack Freud's basic view of science (Mozley 1930, 58; Lee 1934, 511-12; Trueblood 1924, 256-57; Turner 1931, 216). While comparing science and religion, Freud states, "We can now repeat that all [religious doctrines] are illusions and

insusceptible of proof …. Scientific work is the only road which can lead us to knowledge of reality outside ourselves" (Freud 1961, 31). At the end of his book, Freud states that "science has given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion" (1961, 55). Freud seems to be implying that science is a means for obtaining objective knowledge about external reality, liberated from the chains of human wishes and illusion. Yet, the four critics point out similarly that science is subject to the same wishes and illusions as religion. Trueblood writes:

> If religion is illusory because it is desirable to believe in God, everything else in which men believe is illusory too. By the same procedure we should be forced to hold that science and art are likewise "projections." Man wants terribly to find order in the world rather than chaos, so [by Freud's reasoning] the great laws of natural sciences are merely formulations which are created to satisfy this desire. (Trueblood 1924, 256-57)

Thus, say the critics, religion may well be colored by human desires, but it certainly cannot be said that science is free from these influences. Freud would respond by repeating his analogy concerning the town of Constance. He would argue that certain truths (including scientific truths) can be easily confirmed, and in such a way that they will be evident to many different people at once. Religious truths, however, are largely products of the individual mind, and are thus not conductive to universal confirmation. Though none of the five critics comments on this aspect of the conformability of scientific truths, I would answer Freud by arguing that much of our scientific "knowledge" is based on beliefs which, up to now, have not been confirmed trough experience. For example, the atomic theory is based on the belief that atoms exist, though no one has ever seen or isolated a single atom. I believe Freud would have difficulty arriving at a reasonable explanation of the qualitative difference between the belief in atoms and the belief in God.

Mozley attacks Freud's contention that man would benefit from the abolition of religion and the resulting primacy of the intellect. Mozley asks, "What ground is there for supposing that the basis of man's nature will ever be altered and that the emotions will cease to be the mainspring of our actions?" (Mozley 1930, 60). Here, Freud could only repeat his argument that as soon as the religious basis for the precepts of civilization is discarded, then men will become friendlier to society's laws. This will occur because men will understand that laws are meant to serve their interests rather that to control them. Yet, such reasoning is only speculative on Freud's part; he can provide no evidence that his prediction is a sound one.

And finally, in what may be the strongest argument of all, Moore and Trueblood point out that Freud has never actually proved that there is no God. Moore notes that "the observation of a parallel [whit the Oedipus complex] does not justify one in drawing the conclusion 'that is *all* there is to religion'" (Trueblood 1924, 171). Trueblood takes the argument one step further, proposing a theory in which Freud's ideas are consistent with the existence of God. He writes:

> [Freud's] explanation, it should be noted, is *consistent with* the notion that God is nonexistent, but it does not *prove* that God is nonexistent…. Even if his observations are correct, there is nothing in his argument to oppose the theory that it is this very emotional [childhood] disturbance which makes men sensitively aware of the objective presence of God. (Trueblood 1924, 254-55)

Therefore, Freud has not actually proved that God does not exist. He has shown only that such a view is consistent with his psychoanalytic theories.

Thus, we have seen the argument raised by five religious critics against Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*. Though Freud would probably have answered many of them much more skillfully and persuasively than I did, I believe that these critics succeeded in raising many valid objections, such as those involving the difficulties with the

Oedipus complex analogy, the obsessional neurosis analogy, and the role of wishes in science. On the whole, I believe that these six men displayed a remarkable amount of scholarship and intellectual honesty in discussing such an emotionally powerful issue as religion.

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