

CHALLENGING FREUD: IS RELIGION AN ILLUSION?

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ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud is one of the most significant psychologists of the twentieth century. His discoveries in neurosis, dream interpretation, and personality led him to develop psychoanalysis, a form of psychotherapy that shaped modern day psychological thinking. Freud viewed all of society through a psychoanalytic lens, including religion. He believed that religion was an illusion created by man to fulfill his ultimate wishes. In coming to this conclusion though, Freud neglected to engage with counterarguments from theologians, used poor methodology, refused to blend religion and science, and relied too heavily on cultural assumptions. Through referencing thinkers, such as Dr. Volney Gay of Vanderbilt University, I challenge Freud's conclusion that religion is an illusion. Ultimately, since psychoanalysis, as a whole, is on the steady decline and has little new research, Freud's psychoanalytic way of understanding religion is no longer viable today.

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Introduction

Sigmund Freud is a resounding historical figure, psychologist, and scientist. His discoveries about the unconscious, dreams, and neurosis changed the study of psychology forever. Today, students cannot take an introductory psychology class without learning about Freud. His contributions to the field of psychology altered not only the methods psychologists use when assessing a patient, but also the ways scientists view the culture and society surrounding them. Freud's arguments on cultural matters, such as religion, led to a new way of viewing the world through a psychoanalytic lens.

Freud was born in Austria in 1856 and lived there most of his life. He received his medical degree in 1881 and then started a family of his own, with six children.¹ Freud was initially drawn to investigating brain disorders, until he observed Jean-Martin Charcot's work on hysteria and neurosis in Paris. Charcot found that under hypnosis, symptoms of hysteria disappeared and healthy people could even be persuaded to show symptoms of hysteria. So, in observing Charcot's work, Freud sensed that patients' problems were not physical. Freud learned from Charcot that there is always an intimate secret underlying hysteria.²

Inspired by his colleague, Josef Breuer, who had begun discovering that his patients were recovering from their neuroses by speaking uninhibitedly about their pasts, Freud believed that unconscious feelings or desires may be being suppressed, which in turn, caused neurosis. The famous case of Anna-O, where Breuer developed his talking cure, played a fundamental role in Freud's thought.³ In 1895, Breuer and Freud worked together to publish their first work

¹ "Sigmund Freud, Biography," Biography.com, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.biography.com/people/sigmund-freud-9302400>.

² "Jean-Martin Charcot," Freud File, accessed February 24, 2016, <http://freudfile.org/charcot.html>.

³ "Freud, Charcot, and Hysteria: Lost in the Labyrinth," Richard Webster, accessed February 24, 2016, <http://www.richardwebster.net/freudandcharcot.html>.

regarding psychoanalysis, *Studies in Hysteria*. Over time, Breuer left the relationship as he felt as though Freud was placing too much emphasis on the sexual origins of the neuroses.⁴ Freud then branched out on his own and wrote his first works on psychoanalysis and dream interpretation in the early 1900s. Psychoanalysis would never have come to be if it had not married the two ideas from Breuer's talking cure with Charcot's views on traumatic hysteria.⁵ Freud's theories on the Oedipus Complex, the id, ego, and superego, and dream interpretation are just a few of his ideas that strongly influenced many academic concepts in the twentieth century.

Although Freud is mostly known for his work in psychoanalysis, he did an extensive amount of work on religion. He wrote five books on the matter, ranging from theories of religion as an illusion, to a rewritten account of the life of Moses. Freud strongly believed that religion was a form of neurosis, and that science was the only way to the truth. Freud did not engage other points of view in his work on religion and lacked empirical evidence, thus rendering it biased and easily countered. Even though Freud refused to acknowledge that religion could be worthwhile, there are ways his psychoanalytic perspective on religion can be used to sharpen our understanding of religion today.

Freud's Psychoanalysis

In order to best understand Freud's views on religion, one must first understand his theory of psychoanalysis and all that it entails. Psychoanalysis is a complicated and time-consuming process when used in therapy, for it requires an in-depth understanding of the patient's unconscious, which usually cannot be understood immediately. Freud's initial method with psychoanalysis was free association, where the patient simply talked and the therapist

⁴ "Sigmund Freud, Biography."

⁵ "Freud, Charcot, and Hysteria."

associated what they had said with underlying traumas or desires that were causing the neurosis. For example, Freud found that patients often forgot the emotional shocks of childhood, but the shock did not completely disappear. The shock's results surfaced, albeit unconsciously, in obsessive habits or other bodily symptoms. Psychoanalysis finds these traumas, brings them to the surface and, over time, helps the patient to become free of them.

Dreams were a window to the unconscious for Freud. He believed that dreams were codes that involved concealed fulfillments of suppressed wishes. If one learned to crack the code, the problem became easier to locate and cure. Freud considered *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which appeared in 1900, as one of his most important books. In it, he outlines his understanding of dreams as wish fulfillment and how one can use dreams as a means to understand unconscious desires. Work on dreams led Freud to emphasize the human mind's tripartite structure: the id, ego, and superego.

The Id, Ego, and Superego

In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud outlines the three parts to a person's personality – the id, ego, and superego. The id contains the biological needs of a person and their innate instincts.⁶ Essentially the id is the core of our being. The id expresses the true purpose of the individual's life. Instincts are the forces that exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id.⁷ The two instincts that are most prominent are Eros and destructiveness. *Eros* is the love instinct and *Libido* is the energy of Eros. There are different kinds of libido, but all have to do with a love or sexual instinct. The ego then emerges out of the id.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

The ego is the intermediary between the external and internal worlds, the demand for instinct and action.⁸ It acts as our conscious self, our everyday personality. The ego finds itself caught betwixt and between. It controls voluntary movement due to its pre-established connection between sense perception and muscular action. The ego also has the task of self-preservation, which is why it has the difficult duty of balancing the external and internal worlds. For example, the ego must gain control over the instincts in the id and then decide whether they will be allowed satisfaction or not. The ego determines this through the tensions produced by the external stimuli, with the goal to seek pleasure and avoid displeasure.⁹ The ego plays a significant role in one's personality, as it determines what instincts will be acted upon.

The superego contains the ethical and social standards by which man lives, which is imposed upon him by the external world. It emerges from childhood, as it reflects the dependence on one's parents. This dependence can then be translated in a reliance on societal structure and norms in adulthood. The superego also leads to *transference*, where the client transfers to the analyst how they felt toward their parent. This allows the client to uncover any unfinished business with past relationships. At first, the client may have a positive attitude toward the analyst through transference, but then it could become negative quickly. There is some *resistance* that comes with this treatment though, such as the need to feel guilty or that they have to suffer, and overcoming this resistance is a crucial part of psychoanalysis.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud distinguishes the difference between the conscious, unconscious, and preconscious. The unconscious remains unknown until it is brought to consciousness, and the preconscious is represented through words and perceptions.¹⁰ Since the

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1962), 7.

ego is connected to the preconscious, the ego therefore has a system of perceptions and ideas. The ego rests upon the surface of the id and merges into it, but does not completely envelop it. Freud provides a diagram to describe how the ego and the id fit together. The ego is the part of the id which has been modified by the external world. The id contains the passions, while the ego represents reason and common sense.¹¹ Therefore, the ego must control the id, but at times it conforms to the passionate desires of the id.

The superego involves the act of idealizing an object that may have been lost, for example, a sexual desire. Freud then details this idea of pursuing an idealization in relation to the Oedipus Complex. The Oedipus Complex developed from Freud's belief that male children are often drawn to their mothers and come to treat their fathers as rivals or competitors for their mother's love. The child then grows to fear the father and jealousy and resentment set in. The name, Oedipus Complex, comes from the Greek myth of Sophocles' tragedy. Oedipus is a character who, unknowingly, kills his father and marries his mother. The feelings of guilt the child has due to the sexual desires he has for his mother are buried until he hits puberty, when they surface again. The point of the Oedipus Complex is that forgotten, unfortunate experiences shape personality development, and, that sexuality lies at the heart of how we are and what we have the capacity to become.

From the Oedipus Complex, two different identifications emerge and the superego urges the ego to both be like the father and also not be like the father at the same time.¹² The love and death instincts also play a large role in the desires of the ego and the id. The two instincts can freely transform into one another because of the presence of a neutral energy that can be directed

¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹² Ibid., 15.

at either instinct.¹³ This energy is thought to come from sexual desires that, when not able to be actualized in a sexual manner, are instead geared toward love or death. Ultimately, all impulses come from Eros and the pleasure principle drives the id.

As the superego develops throughout one's life, it begins to dominate the ego and the ego becomes dependent upon the superego and the id. Freud outlines how the sense of guilt is exaggerated when the ego ideal is not met and this can lead to obsessional neurosis or melancholia, because the sense of guilt gains extraordinary strength.¹⁴ Freud then poses a final question, "How is it that the super-ego manifests itself essentially as a sense of guilt and moreover develops such extraordinary harshness and severity towards the ego?"¹⁵ In relation to the id, the ego finds itself trying to both appease and mediate its desires. This proves difficult though because it is hard to allow one's passions to develop while also trying to conform to norms.

The purpose of psychoanalysis is to enable the ego to achieve a gradual conquest of the id, yet this is difficult to attain. The ego has a large role to play in trying to shape the id, but also has hindrances to consistently overcome in being enslaved to the desires of the id and the super-ego. It is essential to understand these three parts of man's personality when learning about Freud's psychoanalysis and then its influence on religion.

Neurosis and Psychosis

Another crucial aspect to Freud's psychoanalysis was his diagnosis of neurosis. When Freud was working with patients, he often dealt with repressed material from their unconscious

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

that manifested itself in unhealthy ways. Freud defined neurosis as “being manifestations of anxiety producing unconscious material that is too difficult to think about consciously, but must still find a means of expression. Hence, repressed events, disappointments, or traumas manifest later in life as neuroses.”¹⁶ Psychoanalytic therapy was a treatment to cure neurosis, for in such treatment, the therapist could determine what unconscious material was causing the anxiety or distress in the patient. Neuroses have physical effects on the individual, such as emotional distress, or, the most common and definitive symptom of neurosis, anxiety.¹⁷ What begins as unconscious desires or worries manifests into outward disorders and serious issues. Some examples of neurosis are anxiety disorders, clinical depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.¹⁸ Psychoanalysis can prevent these disorders from growing by addressing the root of the problems-the unconscious motivators.

Another abnormal condition associated with psychoanalysis is psychosis. Psychosis is when an individual loses contact with reality and when they may be experiencing delusions or hallucinations. It is easy to confuse neurosis with psychosis, for both manifest unconscious desires into physical conditions. Freud distinguished between the two as, “in neurosis, the ego suppresses part of the id out of allegiance to reality, whereas in psychosis it lets itself be carried away by the id and detached from a part of reality.”¹⁹ In other words, when an individual suffers from neurosis, their internal desires are suppressed in order to come to terms with the reality of their situation, which results in anxiety because they cannot act on their desires. Whereas in psychosis, the individual’s desires are let loose. Therefore, since the unconscious desires are not

¹⁶ “Neurosis,” <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Neurosis>, accessed March 21, 2016.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Modules on Freud: On Neuroses,” <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/freud4.html>, accessed March 21, 2016.

in line with reality, a psychotic patient will distort reality through delusions. For Freud, psychoanalysis helps a patient overcome neurosis as opposed to psychosis, for only in neurosis are their unconscious desires being suppressed. Religious beliefs satisfied those unconscious needs for an individual, which is why Freud defined it as an illusion.

Freud on Religion

Religion is wish fulfillment according to Freud. It is projection of the wishes of man in an empty, hostile universe. Children are all educated in religion, and the lessons they learn easily satisfy their neurotic needs. Yet, as one grows up, childhood needs are no longer met as they used to be. Therefore, man created religion to fulfill these childhood desires that man never outgrew.²⁰ Emerging from the Oedipus Complex, the idea of God as a father fills the need of the desire for a father figure who will protect, love, and provide for man. The notion of benevolent providence gives us comfort when we cannot control or explain the powers of nature.²¹ Religion helps make tolerable the helplessness of man and it is built from the same helplessness we experience in childhood. Freud argued that much of religion developed out of childhood needs that we still desire as an adult.

Religion has multiple functions for man. It protects him from the dangers of nature, fate, and the evils of society itself. By comforting him with reassuring notions of providence, immortality, and a heavenly father, he can feel safe with religion. It also provides a moral code for how to behave. For example, with religion, man does not murder because God forbids it. Without religion, man would not murder due to the fear of the threat of being murdered himself. With a moral code, man does not need to think twice before behaving a certain way, because as

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Liveright Publishing Co, 1955), 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

long as he is obeying God, he is in the right. Freud would argue that this way of thinking robs man of his own ability to think for himself, therefore leading to another reason why religion is neurotic. Religion allows man to remain a child, but Freud does not believe this is acceptable. He urges us to outgrow our childhood and stop believing the illusory doctrines of religion.

It is important to recognize that Freud understood religion to be illusory on an individual and societal level. Freud believed that religion is the “universal obsessional neurosis in humanity.”²² The origins of such a collective neurosis lie in the various taboos of primitive times. Taboo means “set apart” or “marked off,” as does the word “holy.” Therefore, Freud associated something described as holy with something that was taboo. Religious rituals, where people set themselves apart from other things and persons, are like obsessive, neurotic behaviors to Freud. Collective rituals displayed the need to act upon one’s unconscious, neurotic desires with a group of people in order to feel included and apart of society. One observation Freud held in regard to ritual was that the ancestral slaying and eating of the totem animal fulfilled the Oedipal wish to kill and devour the father. A ritual such as this was clearly wish fulfillment, as Freud believed all of religion was, and in a collective manner, rituals could satisfy the wishes of many people at once. Freud detailed his understanding of religion as an illusion in multiple works, the most well-known being *The Future of an Illusion*.

The Future of an Illusion

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud lays out his detailed arguments as to why religion is the ultimate wish fulfillment. He begins with outlining the problems with civilization and how man’s instincts are naturally destructive and anti-social.²³ Since man’s innate wishes are so

²² Ibid., 43.

²³ Ibid., 7.

disparaging, man had to create a system of beliefs to be followed in order to fulfill those wishes in a way that prevented man from acting on them. Thus Freud comes to religion. Religion is an illusion that is “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.”²⁴ It is a crutch for man to lean on when suffering is unexplainable and death is imminent. The gods control nature, death, and suffering to provide comfort when man cannot explain the source of such pain. Religion fulfills the wishes of man for everything from a father-figure to compensation for suffering.

Yet science is progressing rapidly, and, as opposed to religion, science is the true, more reliable source for comfort in this world. Freud argues that as we gain more scientific knowledge, we will outgrow our need for religion and our belief in it. Only science can prove and answer the questions religion seeks to answer. Seeking anywhere else but science is an illusion. There is concrete evidence for scientific explanations that have been studied and researched with proof to come of it. On the other hand, religion is a man-made attempt to comfort us in the midst of an imperfect, suffering world. According to Freud, religion causes more harm than good due to the illusion it creates and promotes.

Civilization and Its Discontents

Freud argues in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the biggest problem facing the development of civilization is the sense of guilt. This sense of guilt stems from the fear of authority and the fear of the superego. These fears lead to suppression of man’s happiness because he no longer can seek out his happiness through bad behavior. Bad behavior, or a bad

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

conscience, is defined as whatever causes one to be threatened by the loss of love.²⁵ To avoid losing what he loves, man engages in bad behavior to seal his happiness and this leads to feelings of guilt for the bad behavior. Religion tries to redeem mankind from this sense of guilt by using figures such as Jesus Christ who took upon himself everyone else's guilt and sin. By placing one's guilt at the foot of the cross, man can absolve himself of any guilt or shame he may be experiencing due to his bad behavior. According to Christian tradition, Jesus indeed was alive, but Freud believed his main purpose was to make man feel better about this behavior. Again, science cannot prove that Jesus died and rose from the dead, yet the Christian religion tells man this is true, so they are able to not feel guilty for their actions.

The greatest pursuit of mankind is the pursuit of happiness. People want to avoid pain and seek pleasure, and religion is one way to seek happiness, yet it greatly restricts the ways people can go about it. Freud argues that in religion, we construct a dream world and delude ourselves into thinking the world is false reality, so we can protect ourselves from pain. People want to avoid injustice and sorrow as much as possible, so Freud suggests that a world with religion is one where people do not experience such pain. Suffering comes from the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies, and the disappointment in human relationships.²⁶ With a belief in religion, these sources of suffering still occur, yet believing that God is in control and will use suffering for good is where Freud finds the illusion. Religion seeks to give man a way out of suffering.

Freud strongly dislikes one particular command in all of religion. He deems that, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," is an unrealistic, unwarranted command.²⁷ Freud believes that the

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

person should deserve your love for you to love them. If we are loving all men simply because we were told to do so, then the value of love decreases and it is an injustice to those we would consider close friends. Those who are closest to us would be as equally loved as the destitute, random, homeless person down the block, which could prove offensive to some.

If people are loving all others, then where will they seek a release of anger? If we are only loving those around us, then the natural aggressiveness that lies within us will not be able to be released. The command to love all is the greatest obstacle to aggressiveness that needs to be released, for when it is not, greater frustration occurs. Civilization is largely responsible for the misery of man. With suppressive commands such as to love all equally, the pursuit of happiness becomes more difficult to attain. Religion is one way man copes with the heaping sense of guilt always within us as we struggle to suppress bad behavior in our pursuit of happiness.

There are many problems facing man that religion attempts to solve. Religion is a way for man to reduce suffering, have a steady moral code, experience love, have a father even as an adult, and not internalize any guilt or shame. Freud argues that a religious way of life though is not reality, as the real world does not allow man to experience these things. In fact, religion suppresses man's ability to think for himself and act for himself. For Freud, religion had much to do with one's unconscious desires, so he connected it with his theory of psychoanalysis.

Moses and Monotheism

Moses and Monotheism may have been Freud's most controversial work. He proposes some abnormal views on the traditional story of Moses by applying his psychoanalytic ideas to the story. The book is compiled of three essays. In the first, "Moses as an Egyptian," he proposes that Moses was probably not a Jew, but instead an Egyptian. His psychoanalytic

concept of family balance leads him to conclude that Moses' adoptive family must have been his real family because of the childhood fantasy we share of having been born to royal parents. This new idea already changes the course of the rest of the traditional story.

In the second essay, "If Moses was an Egyptian," he then describes the development of the religion that an Egyptian Moses would have given to the Jewish people. Instead of the traditional God of Moses, this God would have been an adaptation of the sun god Aton, because there are some similarities between Judaism and the religion of Aton. They were both strictly monotheistic, had a lack of concern with the idea of life after death, and they both practiced circumcision. Therefore, arguing that Moses put forth the religion of Aton instead of Judaism would still appeal to the Jewish people. Yet, according to Freud, after accepting Moses and his religion, the Jewish people rebelled and murdered Moses. Many years later, his descendants came together and started worshipping the volcano-god Yahweh, who demanded similar sacrifices and rituals that Moses' God did not sanction. Most began to follow Yahweh, but a small group remained loyal to Moses and his commitment to justice. Eventually, as the story has been retold and retold, the God of Moses was entirely identified with Yahweh and that is how the story came to be.

The final section summarizes and evaluates much of the story Freud proposes as an alternative to the Biblical narrative. The idea of a murderous people after a father figure is very similar to his work in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud is consistent in his emphasis on the father figure as a god in the role of religion in people's lives. Moses as God served his followers as a source of comfort and security when they did not want to experience actual reality, yet they murdered him. Freud goes on to explain the implications his narrative has for the truth of religion and the

importance historical truth plays in developing religion. Religion is ultimately a result of culture and the human mind.

Psychoanalysis and Religion

Freud viewed all of society and culture through a psychoanalytic lens, and religion was no exception. He thought that psychoanalysis could uncover what underlying desires religion sought to fulfill. They were intertwined and Freud believed that psychoanalysis revealed the illusory nature of religion, which could then be rejected for science.

In her book, *Freud on Religion*, Marsha Aileen Hewitt outlines Freud's view on religion through the lens of psychoanalysis by working through his multiple works on the subject. For Freud, the real issue to address with religion is the how and why behind human belief in a supernatural being.²⁸ He is interested in seeing how psychoanalysis can explain the unconscious motivations that lead to religion.

Freud was most similar to Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx in their common goal to show that the basis of religion is anthropology. All three thinkers had both an ethical and emancipatory interest in religion in that they wanted to free the human mind from its enslaving rules and dogmas.²⁹ Also similar to Feuerbach, Freud was an atheist before he began theorizing religion. Psychoanalysis, which Freud developed and applied to religion, need not lead to atheism, however.

One of Freud's first connections was between religion and obsessional neurosis. In sharing ritual processes, an individual is able to express that which is unconscious and forbidden by the conscious. Freud discussed in *The Future of an Illusion* how religion offers socially

²⁸ Marsha Aileen Hewitt, *Freud on Religion* (Connecticut: Acumen, 2014), 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

acceptable ways of expressing neurotic compulsion. Religion regulates social action and fills one's emotional need for safety, security, and protection from nature and other human relationships. The attachment theory also plays a role in Freud's theory on religion in that through a relationship with God, God acts as the parent for adult attachment when one is stressed or afraid.³⁰ Freud also asserts that religion is the antithesis of evidence based on critical thought and that those who adhere to it have given up their authenticity and autonomy. Science is the key to reality and understanding, and Freud is passionate about educating children through science so they can understand the actual nature of reality through critical research and evidence.

Hewitt goes on to evaluate other works of Freud such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. She looks at Freud's understanding of the oceanic feeling with religion and how Freud recognizes that it is there, but he does not believe it is a religious feeling, for religion is a product of the human mind.³¹ Instead, this feeling is an enactment of the narcissistic self-love that one experiences as an infant, but is preserved in one's mind from the past. Hewitt continues to elaborate on Freud's views of gods as promulgations of the father figure. Freud elaborates on the dynamic between the ego and superego, as well, in forming religion. Hewitt also reviews *Totem and Taboo* and how religion sprouted from the "deed" where sons murdered their fathers in a primal horde and remembered their fathers through totems.³² This trauma leading to guilt, whether this event was real or not, then leads to the need to create gods to remove suffering or the confusion about the cause of such suffering.

Psychoanalysis and religion go together in the ways Freud examined religion through a lens of underlying wishes. In order to determine the unconscious desires religion satisfies, Freud

³⁰ Ibid., 20.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Ibid., 28.

thought the best method to use was psychoanalytic therapy and research. Freud believed that science was our true source of comfort in this world, not religion, so he argued that the science of psychoanalysis used to study religion would prove most accurate in understanding our creation and desire for religion.

Challenging Freud

Given the controversial nature of Freud's theory of religion's nature and function, and in light of lived religion's continued evolution in our scientifically-based world, it is hardly surprising that Freud has his critics. While Freud has intricate, considered explanations as to why religion is an illusion, he neglects to counter his own arguments with thoughts of other theologians or philosophers who may have a differing opinion on the matter. Vanderbilt University's Volney Gay, who holds professional appointments in psychiatry and religious studies, has, in recent years, mounted a serious, robust challenge to Freud. He has won various awards in his time studying psychoanalysis, and his detailed work on Freud's religious thought is an example of someone who is challenging Freud's thinking about religion today.

In 1983, Gay published a book titled *Reading Freud: Psychology, Neurosis, and Religion*, where he summarizes Freud's basic arguments about religion. This book is filled with questions that urge the reader to think critically about Freud's thought on religion. Gay challenges the reader to evaluate Freud's ideas based on critical reasoning, outside sources, and what others believe to be true of religion. From Gay's work, I seek to incorporate and answer some of his questions regarding Freud's work on religion.

Religion was an illusion that Freud thought man would outgrow one day. He believed that "if the individual could grow up and free himself of dependency on his father, so perhaps the

human race might grow up and free itself of dependence on a father-surrogate, or God.”³³

Religion does not have to be viewed as a crutch man leans on when he is trying to endure the struggles of life though. Freud shapes religion to appear as a distraction and a hindrance to maturing into independent adulthood.

In all of his arguments though, Freud neglects to engage theologians who have differing thoughts than he holds on religion. In order to examine this lack of counter-evidence further, I will answer the first of Gay’s questions: “Freud summarizes three possible lines of defense for religion. Why does he not refer to the numerous theologians who had also addressed themselves to these issues and who had advanced subtle and, some say, sophisticated counter-arguments?”³⁴

Defending Religion

Freud makes three possible arguments for defending religion in *The Future of an Illusion*. The first is that religious teachings “deserve to be believed because they were already believed by our primal ancestors.”³⁵ Simply because something was believed by our primal ancestors does not follow that it, by necessity, should be believed today. Yet, Freud continues in that his second argument is that “we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those same primaeval times.”³⁶ Finally, his third argument is that the authenticity of these beliefs and proofs cannot be questioned.

He counters these three defenses immediately after defining them by asserting that our ancestors were far more ignorant than we are today. Therefore, why should we believe what they

³³ David Riesman, “Freud, Religion and Science,” *The American Scholar* 20 (1951): 268, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41205411>.

³⁴ Volney Gay, *Reading Freud: Psychology, Neurosis, and Religion* (California: Scholars Press, 1983), 49.

³⁵ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

wrote? Their beliefs are “full of contradictions, revision and falsifications, and where they speak of factual confirmations they are themselves unconfirmed.”³⁷ Yet by what measure is Freud comparing our ancestors to present-day civilization? The biggest issue with this argument, that we should not believe as our ancestors did because they were more ignorant than we are, is that it is based in culture and assumptions.

Much of Freud’s arguments for religion as an illusion rest upon culture. He explains how religion was developed in primitive times, where ancient people had a “primitive cognitive deficit,” that led them to falsely believe in religion.³⁸ He assumes that those of ancient times created religion to fill their needs, but now that culture has progressed, men no longer should logically believe in religion. When claiming that those of primitive times were not educated and therefore created religion as an illusion, it is important to think of the ancient Egyptians who built the Sphinx and the Pyramids.³⁹ Would Freud have considered them uneducated and delusional as well? Nonetheless, although culture has indeed progressed immensely since ancient times, there is no ultimate, imaginary ideal of where culture should be. Varying cultures over times and locations cannot be compared, for they are all too different to measure against one another. Freud explains that religion should have less influence on people now than it did in the past because “people find the premises less credible,” but this claim lacks scientific evidence and is simply speculation.⁴⁰ On the contrary, Freud’s claims are less credible, for his proof of how people view primitive times is assumed and brief.

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

³⁸ David Kronemyer, “Freud’s Illusion: New Approaches to Intractable Issues,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 21 (2011): 252, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=11e14d4e-660c-4f90-be60-d0e5f6e68166%40sessionmgr114&hid=119&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCx1aWQmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=2011-23824-003&db=psyh>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 254.

To Freud's second argument, that we believe today simply because our ancestors did, he adds that "many of them probably nourished the same doubts as ours, but the pressure imposed on them was too strong for them to have dared to utter them."⁴¹ They saw it as their duty to suppress their doubts, for the prominent beliefs were to be believed with no questions asked. Over time though, many theologians have indeed expressed their doubts regarding religious claims, and in doing so, have made their arguments stronger. For example, in 2008, Timothy Keller, a scholar and founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, published *The Reason for God*, where he addressed various doubts regarding believing in God. Only by acknowledging and validating those doubts was he able to lead many to the truth of Christianity. Keller writes, "Whether you consider yourself a believer or a skeptic, I invite you to seek the same kind of honesty and to grow in an understanding of the nature of your own doubts. The result will exceed anything you can imagine."⁴² In understanding our doubts, we can find the root of our disbelief and, in the example of this book, by working through these doubts we can then be confident in our beliefs.

To answer Gay's question of why Freud did not engage with these theologians who held counter arguments, perhaps Freud assumed that such theologians' beliefs rested in the same primitive foundations as all of the other arguments for God. Even though such arguments for God would challenge Freud, he would have stubbornly argued that they were still based on the same, unauthenticated foundations and were therefore not valid. Since he would not have believed that their beliefs were authenticated, then Freud would not have given them the time to argue with him. Another possible reason why Freud did not engage with those who held

⁴¹ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 27.

⁴² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (USA: Dutton Penguin, 2008), 32.

opposing views was because he knew he had no clinical evidence to back up his argument for religion as an illusion. For example, in response to a theologian who would argue that blind belief due to ancestral belief is not the reason why one chooses to believe in religion, Freud would have no proof otherwise to say that ancestral belief is why people resort to religion. There is no data collected to prove that people believe in religion simply because their ancestors did. Freud's cultural assumptions are not the only faulty aspect of his argument for religion as an illusion, though.

Weaknesses in Freud's Arguments

Although Freud thought of himself as certain about religion as an illusion, the way he came about his conclusions were biased and inaccurate. Freud was unaware of his flaws in his methodology, but what is more probable is that he chose to neglect the normal population and only focus on his psychoanalytic patients who were suffering from neurosis. There are multiple weakness in the way Freud came about his views on religion. One friend of Freud's did not sit idly as Freud made such unreasonable claims on religion though, but instead addressed them to Freud head on using psychoanalysis.

Oskar Pfister

Oskar Pfister was a Swiss Protestant theologian friend of Freud's who corresponded with him, through letters, most of his life. Although they had disagreements, Pfister used psychoanalysis in his pastoral counseling. Freud and Pfister were able to discuss their disagreements in a civil, respectful, and friendly fashion. Thus, it is important to recognize that Freud was not necessarily angry or discourteous to those who used psychoanalysis for different purposes than he would have intended, but instead, he could maintain friendships with those who

disagreed with him. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, Pfister came to see and validate the obsessive, perverted, and even illusory nature of Christianity in some respects.⁴³ This nature of Christianity produced much fear in him, so he needed to address how Christianity also combats some of the same fears it produces. Therefore, Pfister clung fast to Jesus and his love that casts out all fear.⁴⁴ Since Pfister had his unwavering faith in Jesus' love, his hope was secure and his fears did not diminish the power of religion in his life.

Freud recognized that psychoanalysis was a neutral tool, but he did not like how Pfister used it for pastoral purposes. He did not believe that psychoanalysis could be used to cure people of their neurosis through religion. Freud was very pessimistic, and he had many bad assumptions about religion based on his poor experiences from his past. Pfister once clearly explained, "Our difference drives chiefly from the fact that you grew up in proximity to pathological forms of religion and regard these as 'religion,' while I had the good fortune of being able to turn to a free form of religion which to you seems to be an emptying of Christianity of its content, while I regard it as the core and substance of evangelism."⁴⁵ He recognizes how the culture and environment one is raised in affects their views on religion, morality, and the meaning of life. One's views are dependent on these factors, and Freud neglected to consider how perhaps his own unconscious motivators from his past poor experience with religion led him to this pessimistic view of it.

⁴³ Stephen Brown, "A look at Oskar Pfister and his relationship to Sigmund Freud," *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35 (1981): 223.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 231.

Pfister also criticized Freud for drawing his conclusions on the basis of observations of primitive religions and emotionally unhealthy individuals.⁴⁶ Freud did not refer to the most normal populations when evaluating the validity of religion, but instead inferred from a minority population of his already-sick patients. There are groups in the United States who are either reactivating old religious rituals or clinging very much to old religious rituals. For example, there are traditional rituals in Judaism that followers have been told that they do not need to perform any longer, but they are still being reactivated. Black people in the South are also still participating in rituals that they performed in church dating back to the Civil War times.⁴⁷ These groups show that religious rituals still have significance today despite the scientific advances we have made in society. Science is not the ultimate answer to all questions, and no matter how far we come in our scientific understanding of the world, it can never replace religion, for it seeks to answer a completely different set of questions.

In conjunction with stressing the continued importance of rituals, Pfister emphasized that religious dogmas are based upon reason. He criticized Freud for not recognizing the extent to which beliefs are due to man's continual search for meaning.⁴⁸ Science will not be able to answer all of man's questions regarding the existential meaning of life. Freud's psychological mechanisms themselves cannot serve as a measure of religious truth nor of any truth for that matter.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Freud allowed his obsession with describing religion as an illusion to cloud him from performing his own psychoanalytic inquiry on himself to discover how his

⁴⁶ Floyd Westendorp, "Value of Freud's Illusion," *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 3 (1975): 84, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=3930037a-659f-42c384735d1d30b46675%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4108&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCx1aWQmc210ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=1975-31528-001&db=psych>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

unconscious desires to overemphasize science unfairly distorted his analysis of the purpose of religion. He failed to examine his own biases toward science that led him to skew his study of religion because he had such a passion for science. Freud neglected to recognize that science, as well as religion, is insufficient when it comes to certain questions.

Poor Methodology

The methods that Freud used in order to arrive at the conclusion he makes about religion are weak, unreliable, and biased. Although he admired science for having much proof and that is why it is the ultimate truth, Freud did not seek to engage both sides of the argument on religion at all in his work on religion as an illusion. He had weak methodology for this research and inadequate evidence. Freud made a mistake by using correlations and case studies to explain philosophy and religion, and his projections went beyond his evidence.⁵⁰

One example of Freud's lack of adequate evidence for his claims can be found in *The Future of an Illusion*. Gay asks, "How does Freud know that the number of people dissatisfied with our civilization is 'appallingly large?' What kinds of clinical evidence might he draw upon here in order to support his claim?"⁵¹ Large claims like this are not uncommon in Freud's work, as he exaggerates to get the reader's attention, yet he has no empirical evidence to support such a claim.

Freud could have formed a survey for the population to discover how many of them were dissatisfied. He would have needed to define "dissatisfied" though first in order to ensure that all

⁵⁰ Bill Flatt, "Freud and Religion: Enemies or Allies?" *Restoration Quarterly*, 19 (1976): 198, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=503a2a46-4ce742a8806f9906671c85e7%40sessionmgr113&hid=119&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxl aWQmc2l 0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=ATLA0001588085&db=rfh>.

⁵¹ Gay, *Reading Freud*, 49.

of the respondents understood what they were responding to. This way, Freud could have a “normal” population sample to draw from. He could also have collected evidence from his clients, yet, just as with the rest of Freud’s work, this is an issue because the population would only be neurotic, psychoanalysis clients who are not the norm. It would be no surprise if they were all dissatisfied, for they all would be suffering from neurosis. Freud needed to study the general population more closely and should have gathered quantitative data on the attitudes of the population toward civilization before making such an assumption. Instead, he just correlated his information from, most likely, his clients with his own negative feelings toward society.

Correlations are simply relationships that are not of the causal nature. Therefore, Freud cannot also assume that since we have a need for a father-figure in our lives, then this has caused mankind to create a fictitious God to fulfill this need. Also, Freud only studied sick people, so his case studies were on a marginal population in society. As opposed to studying healthy individuals, he only relied on those suffering from neurosis already to associate religion with neurosis. Pfister once stated, “True religion, rather than being a neurosis, assists in the overcoming of neurosis and that Jesus’ concept of the Father was completely purified from the dross of the Oedipus-complex.”⁵² Christianity strives to eliminate neurosis and create freedom through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross that leaves individuals with hope.

God, the Father, abandons Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before he dies on the cross. In which case, this is not the father-figure fulfillment that the Oedipus Complex describes. Freud argues that God, the Father, is a fulfillment of the need to feel loved and protected, yet God abandons his only son Jesus and is also described in the Bible as wrathful, angry, and

⁵² Flatt, “Freud and Religion,” 198.

demanding. Therefore, Jesus' concept of God as the Father does not fulfill the Oedipus Complex desires that Freud believes it does. Freud had a select population he inferred correlations from in regards to religion, which was not a dependable source or proof for his arguments for religion as an obsessional neurosis.

Religious thought needs to be evaluated as opinion and not scientific thought. In fact, "science can form correlations but cannot adequately explain such questions as the meaning of life and ultimate reality."⁵³ As much as Freud distanced science and religion, there are actually some correlations between Freud's psychoanalysis and religion. Freud and religion could possibly be seen as allies since "both value the practical place of religion as a restraint upon sexual tendencies and both recognize that feelings of guilt point to a perceived need for atonement and forgiveness."⁵⁴ Both see the underlying, unconscious desires of mankind and find ways to address and solve them. Reason and religion are not natural enemies.

Freud never took the time to honor critical theology and sincerely attempt to immerse himself in a religion in order to research what it is like. He took a neurotic man as the norm, as opposed to visiting religious services to observe how the majority of the population behaved. Pfister suggests, "If obsessional fears were as widely present as Freud assumed and if religious rituals cured them, religious ceremonies would be much better attended than they are."⁵⁵ Indeed, if religion served to cure neurotic men and women of their problems, then perhaps more people would be religious in the world. Freud never references any statistical data in his work on

⁵³ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 199.

religion as an illusion, for he never conducted any research of his own on a general population, but instead, only made correlations based on his neurotic patients.

In *Psychoanalysis and Religion* by Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, he addresses some serious weaknesses in Freud's methodology, one of which is that Freud's efforts to destroy religion could be motivated by his meaningless and negative early religious experiences, such as being uprooted from his home at the age of three.⁵⁶ Freud, of all people, should have been able to recognize his unconscious desires to potentially destroy religion in order to get revenge or pay back on a traumatic religious experience he had in his childhood. This is not only plausible, but likely according to Freud's own psychoanalysis. Freud also never scientifically demonstrates that religion is an illusion with empirical evidence or studies. If Freud indeed thought science was the way to truth, we should expect that Freud may have attempted to engage in more scientific methods when studying religion.

Zilboorg also explains that Freud rejects religion because he confuses faith with superstition, ritual with magic, and theology with illusion.⁵⁷ Freud only looked at primitive religions that had some elements of magic or superstition with their rituals, but he neglected to observe the practices of his day and acknowledge the vast differences. Also, Zilboorg proposes that Freud attacks religion to rationalize the guilt which resulted from his fulfilled wish for his brother's death.⁵⁸ If other men have many problems that distort reality, then so may Freud. It is clear, as well, that Freud suffered from elitism. He saw religion as proof of intellectual inferiority. Therefore, before even engaging with someone who was religious, Freud saw them as inferior and discredited what they thought. There is also some correlation between Freud's aloof

⁵⁶ Flatt, "Freud and Religion," 200.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

relationship with his father and his disbelief in the Heavenly Father.⁵⁹ Ultimately, Freud would not have spent most of his life preoccupied with religion if he truly was convinced that it is an illusion.⁶⁰

Science and Religion

Freud believes that science is the only true source of comfort in this world. As opposed to religion, which is unrealistic, abstract, and illusionary, science has concrete proof, evidence, and logic. The more scientific knowledge one has the less one needs religion and needs to believe in God the Father. One can outgrow their Oedipus Complex desires for a father-figure and instead of wishfully fulfilling it with God, they can turn to science to answer their questions about existential meaning.

Freud is certain in his belief that science is the only way to discover the answers to the questions religion seeks to answer, such as the meaning of life. He is too fixated on science though to acknowledge the potential flaws science presents when trying to answer existential questions. Freud “erects the messiahship of science without observing that scientism is, itself, a faith of illusion.”⁶¹ All thought is an illusion to some extent, and Freud blinds himself to the potential downside of relying solely on science. He fails to try to engage both religion and science, but instead worships science instinctively.

Is it possible that religion and science can indeed work together to answer these existential questions? According to his writings, Freud never allowed himself to consider the possibility, but instead, shut religion out as an illogical illusion and put science on the pedestal of

⁵⁹ Flatt, “Freud and Religion,” 202.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 199.

having ultimate knowledge. Science has been disproved many times before though, so it is not an irrefutable source of information. Religion and science can indeed work in harmony.

Authentication

Gay poses another question that proves helpful in examining Freud's critique of religion, specifically when it comes to the arguments surrounding the blending of science and religion. In reference to *The Future of an Illusion*, Gay evaluates the three answers Freud says are typically given in rebuttal of challenges to religious truths. He then asks, "Why is the third an obvious target for psychoanalytic investigations? Have many brilliant intellects broken down over the conflict between the claims of religion and those of science? Are there similar breakdowns over other debates in the natural or social sciences?"⁶² Once again, I will address the three arguments mentioned earlier regarding the lack of authentication in the beliefs blindly believed because they are passed down from our ancestors. Specifically, the third argument, that it is forbidden to question the authentication of these beliefs, poses an interesting challenge to religion and science.

Freud outlines two attempts that have been made to evade the problem of the authentication of such ancestral beliefs. These are excuses that are used when one seeks to understand why these primitive beliefs, such as a belief in God, need not be authorized or validated. The first is the "credo quia absurdum" doctrine that maintains that religious doctrines are outside the jurisdiction of reason. Instead, the truth must be felt inwardly and therefore, these truths need not be comprehended.⁶³ The problem arises when not all experience the same inward feeling, so how can those individuals be expected to believe the same when they do not share this

⁶² Gay, *Reading Freud*, 52.

⁶³ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 28.

feeling. The second argument is the “as if” philosophy. This states that we must behave as if we believe in the fictional beliefs of our ancestors, because for a variety of practical reasons, we must behave as if we believed in them.⁶⁴ Such practical reasons involve the maintenance of human society. These two attempts to avoid the question of authentication bring up serious concerns regarding the authority of religious beliefs and scriptures. Even still, Freud admits, “religious ideas, in spite of their incontrovertible lack of authentication, have exercised the strongest possible influence on mankind.”⁶⁵

These arguments against the need for authentication indeed make this third argument a target for psychoanalytic investigations. What unconscious needs would motivate an individual to blindly believe in religious truths that are not backed up with evidence or proof? Is there this need to be included in something bigger than oneself? Is there the desire to conform to society’s beliefs in order to fit in or get ahead in life? Even if one may not feel this inward experience that is necessary for belief, one may choose to believe anyway simply because choosing to do differently would lead to conflict. Where does the inner force of these doctrines lie?⁶⁶ It all goes back to the strength of the wishes we want fulfilled throughout our lives. Whether that is a wish for protection or for prosperity, how strong of a wish will determine how strongly one believes in religious truths that need not be authenticated in order to be considered valid.

Thus comes the question of scientific authentication. Is it necessary that religious beliefs need be supported with scientific evidence in order to be validated? Or is an internal feeling enough? How can we balance the two? Although Freud strongly believed that science was the only way to the truth, he never tried to examine religion through a non-scientific lens. He failed

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

to attempt to combine a belief in religion and science. Many brilliant intellects have indeed broken down over the conflict between religion and science, yet one of the most superb scientists of all time, Isaac Newton, succeeded in combining the two.

Isaac Newton

Isaac Newton is one of the most significant scientists that ever lived. He discovered the laws of motion and universal gravitation that have changed the way we view the world each day. Newton changed the face of science with his discoveries, while still holding a belief in God. Freud believed that science and religion were natural enemies and they could not work in coherence together. To believe in God was to be unintelligent in Freud's eyes.

Newton saw God in all of the science he studied. He regarded both the starry universe and the Bible as fields in which marks of God's Providence could be traced.⁶⁷ To Newton, there was phenomena in the universe that he thought could not be explained by mere natural causes. Instead, this mystery of causation inevitably pointed to the counsel and contrivance of a Supreme Mind.⁶⁸ Although today there is more technology than in Newton's time, there is still much unknown in the world of science. It was inconceivable that mere mechanical causes could give birth to the regular motions of the planets around the sun. For Newton, there had to be a force behind it to make this happen, not mere laws of nature.⁶⁹ Inevitably, Newton's understanding of God shaped the metaphysical perspective with which he placed his science.

⁶⁷ G L Marriott, "Isaac Newton: Scientist and Theologian," *Modern Churchman*, 32 (1942): 215, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=4839f5623f6f-413d84998729509934a0%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4111&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCx1aWQmc210ZT11aG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=ATLA0001647348&db=rft>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Edward Davis, "Newton's rejection of the 'Newtonian World View': The Role of Divine Will in Newton's Natural Philosophy," *Fides et Historia*, 22 (1990): 11, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=5eb66089->

Christianity was the truth for Newton. He had great reverence for the Bible, and believed it could be proven true because it fulfilled all Biblical prophecies.⁷⁰ Although he made significant discoveries in science regarding the motion of the world and gravity, he was still able to attribute much of what happened in nature to divine will. For Newton, “God was known to exist not by the necessity of his being or the force of innate ideas, but by the clear evidence of his willful actions in nature.”⁷¹ Newton saw God in all of the world, in all of the science he discovered. It is beyond the power of science to pronounce a theistic faith invalid.⁷² Therefore, science would not be able to disprove Newton’s belief in God. Yet there still is space for religion and science to work in cohesion with one another, as was the case for Newton.

Blending Science and Religion

It is clear that Freud did not thoroughly attempt to combine science and religion, if at all. He held a strong belief that the two were vastly different in that one led to the truth, and the other led to an illusory way of life. Gay poses another question, “Would Freud respect the efforts of theologians to blend religion and science?”⁷³ I would take it a step further and ask if Freud would respect the efforts of scientists, as well, for their efforts to blend science with a belief in God. Theologians have tried to blend religion and science, and not just by squeezing God into the gaps of scientific theories. It is important to recognize that one’s scheme of the world must shift as

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c2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=ATLA0000829059&db=rh.

⁷⁰ Marriott, “Isaac Newton,” 217.

⁷¹ Davis, “Newton’s Rejection,” 10.

⁷² Marriott, “Isaac Newton,” 216.

⁷³ Gay, *Reading Freud*, 52.

one tries to consider how God fits in the picture with scientific discoveries. God's interaction with and sustaining of all creation must operate at a different level than the forces of nature.⁷⁴

One way theologians blend religion with science is by considering God's relationship to creation as more of a personal agent than a force of nature.⁷⁵ Instead of applying God's power universally, where science is continually making more discoveries and therefore God continues to get pushed out of the picture, theologians can apply his power personally and speak of God as acting in a personal way in one's life. People of faith cannot imagine a more reliable conclusion than that scientific discovery pushes them even more certainly to an awe-filled awareness of the Divine.⁷⁶ This awareness needs to be more individual, though, in order to maintain a consistent view of God, as opposed to one that changes as our knowledge of science grows.

The psalmist and the scientist have more in common than it may appear. In a similar way, both observe and report on what they witness in nature, and they both gather data.⁷⁷ Both engage in a form of poetry to describe what they observe to a greater audience. Clayton Schmit, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, explains, "The psalmist uses the best scientific instruments available to him, his eyes and ears, his smell and touch. They are the same instruments Newton used when he timed the period of a pendulum according to his own heartbeat."⁷⁸ With the same means, scientists and theologians can arrive at different conclusions

⁷⁴ James Stump, "Cosmic Question," *The Christian Century*, 129 (2012): 22.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁶ Clayton Schmit, "Tracing the Fingerprint of God," *Word & World*, 32 (2012): 192, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=081e84d5-6bc040f7b90ca6a676ec4aa8%40sessionmgr4003&hid=4208&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCx1aWQmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=ATLA0001890621&db=rfh>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

about the world. While theologians are willing to work with the scientific discoveries made in the world, perhaps scientists, like Freud, should be more open about the work of God as well.

Current Times

Religion has been researched and considered more seriously in recent times. Reisman writes, “The seriousness with which religion is now taken has made an interest in it respectable among many scientists who would earlier have considered an irreligious attitude an essential mark of emancipation.”⁷⁹ In the past, scientists were only respectable if they did not believe in religion, for it made them appear weak or unintelligent. In Freud’s time, it makes sense that he looked on religion with such disdain if indeed scientists had a lesser reputation for believing in God. Yet, as time has gone on, “metaphors of interaction have begun to replace the language of the battlefield.”⁸⁰ There is an increase in the desire to combine religion and science instead of putting the two at odds with each other.

Kyle Longest and Christian Smith, researchers for the *Sociological Forum*, conducted a survey to discover how emerging adults view the conflict between science and religion. Using the National Study of Youth and Religion, they interviewed thousands of teenagers over the course of three waves of surveys. Their results showed that thirty-one percent of respondents believed that religion and science are entirely compatible with each other. Another interesting find was that forty-one percent of the respondents claimed that their views on religion were strengthened by the findings of science. Therefore, today, rising adults do not view religion and science in total conflict, but are learning more and more how to blend the two.

⁷⁹ Reisman, “Freud, Religion, and Science,” 272.

⁸⁰ Davis, “Newton’s Rejection,” 7.

Would Freud be able to recognize and appreciate the blend between religion and science that is emerging? He may indeed have remained adamant that those with religious beliefs were delusional for thinking science could point to God. Yet Freud may also have humbled himself and considered the arguments of notable thinkers who have logically combined their ideas of religion and science throughout their lives. Nonetheless, this study shows us that ways of thought are changing and many believe that science and religion can work together today. For “it would appear that the advancement of science does something to man that makes him all the more aware of the fact that he has a need of a God and seeks to have a relationship with that god that transcends science.”⁸¹

Psychoanalysis Today

Freud’s psychoanalysis and view of the world was prominent in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, “around the end of the 1960s, after a successful first half of the century, psychoanalysis reached the crest of its wave and then took a remarkably abrupt downward turn.”⁸² What was the source of this downward turn? Psychoanalysis is not as prominent or well-respected today as it was back then. Richard Chessick, a professor at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, explains, “In only one generation, psychoanalysts disappeared from exalted university department chairmanships. In the medical field, as a result of this loss of confidence, psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy have almost entirely disappeared from psychiatry.”⁸³ This alarming decline of psychoanalysis leads one to wonder

⁸¹ Westendrop, “Value of Freud’s Illusion,” 87.

⁸² Richard Chessick, “What hath Freud Wrought?,” *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, 42 (2014): 555, DOI: 10.1521/pdps.2014.42.4.553.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 572.

what caused such a downward turn. In order to discover this source, it is important to recognize where the study of psychoanalysis began.

Beginnings of Psychoanalysis

Organized study of psychoanalysis began with its founder, Sigmund Freud, and his desire to maintain such study long after he was gone. With the help of fourteen fellow scientists, Freud and his colleagues established the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) in 1910 in order to preserve his legacy and discuss the advances in psychoanalysis of the times.⁸⁴ IPA involves multiple associations and organizations in order to connect those who study psychoanalysis and help further its awareness across the globe. Its mission is to advance psychoanalysis through activities involving professionalism, promotion, and participation.⁸⁵ As a result of IPA, another association, specifically for the United States, was founded.

The American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) was founded in 1911 and is the oldest national psychoanalytic organization in the United States. APsaA focuses on education, research, and membership development of psychoanalysts across the nation with its thirty-two approved training institutes and forty affiliate societies. There are more than 3,500 trained psychoanalysts involved with APsaA today.⁸⁶ APsaA is an example of how psychoanalysis is maintaining its presence in the United States today, although there has been confusion surrounding psychoanalysis in recent years.

⁸⁴ "History of the IPA," IPA, accessed February 17, 2016, http://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/About/About_Us/History_IPA/en/IPA1/ipa_history/history_of_the_ipa.aspx?hkey=db c7a5e8-a901-4712-a608-83019c849566.

⁸⁵ "Mission Statement," IPA, accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/About/About_Us/Mission_Statement/en/Mission_Statement.aspx?hkey=06e20dbe-373a-45ae-8c02-933c6777df8d.

⁸⁶ "APsaA Mission & Vision," APsaA, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.apsa.org/content/apsaa-mission-vision>.

Confusion Surrounding Psychoanalysis

In the early 1900s, when Freud and his techniques were at their peak, science looked quite different than it does in the twenty-first century. Science, like any other discipline, is shaped by the time and place in which investigators make new discoveries. A scientist may choose to do a certain experiment or interpret an observation for many reasons.⁸⁷ Therefore, it is important to consider motives when looking into scientific discoveries to ensure that no biases have gone into an interpretation of a result. Since the 1900s, “even biology, which was Freud’s original area of investigation, has undergone enormous changes in terms of its fundamental concepts.”⁸⁸ There is a deep tension that runs throughout all science, as varying results lead to differing conclusions. New discoveries in research and experimentation also lead to difficult discourse regarding the nature of how to conduct science. Scientific work may be driven less by data and more by the scientists’ attachment to their theories than was traditionally thought.⁸⁹ This attachment has led to much discussion and disagreement specifically within psychoanalysis.

The effectiveness of psychoanalysis “all hinges on the question of whether reliable data can be collected over the years by many well-trained analysts working with a variety of patients.”⁹⁰ From there, reliable theories and techniques can be created and evaluated. It is unstable, though, to base the success of such a science on the patient population and quality of analyst, as opposed to objective, concrete data or evidence that is apparent in other sciences. Mistakes can easily be made.

⁸⁷ Chessick, “What hath Freud wrought?,” 559.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 562.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 570.

It is also important to remember that psychoanalysis is based heavily on heuristic principles. Heuristic principles allow scientists to make assertions from which common knowledge could then be deduced. The value in these principles is their usefulness in explaining familiar facts.⁹¹ So, a scientist could deduce from an experiment something that is of daily, common knowledge for the general population to benefit from, as opposed to just empirical, scientific results that do not apply. Since Freud, as a natural scientist, has gradually diminished in his influence on analytic technique, we must consider different techniques used to evaluate the usefulness of psychoanalysis, such as the heuristic principles that could be drawn from it.⁹² Therefore, it is essential that we look at psychoanalysis as a source from which familiar facts, such as one's attachment to one's father, can be explained. Scientists can then discover the source of these common facts and feelings by using psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis and Religion Debate

Another level of confusion surrounding psychoanalysis is the continued debate concerning its relationship to religion. Although Freud spoke poorly of religion in arguing for it as an illusion, psychoanalysis has more similar qualities to religion than one may think. Examining psychoanalysis from a perspective counter to Freud's is not only eye-opening, but essential in understanding the depth of this science.

Some thinkers have even viewed Freud's psychoanalysis through a Biblical lens. For example, at one point, Freud claimed in a letter to Jung that psychoanalysis was the result of love. This type of love Freud was referring to was agape, love God has for humanity, not Eros,

⁹¹ Frank Summers, "Freud's Relevance for Contemporary Psychoanalytic Technique," *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 23 (2006): 334, DOI: 10.1037/0736-9735.23.2.327.

⁹² Ibid.

the physical desire for another person.⁹³ This agape love allows an anxious patient to speak their words from the heart, the truth, in an environment of love. Having an analyst create a space for agape love to abound “is like being granted unconditional forgiveness, if you will, in the Christian context.”⁹⁴ To be able to speak your mind, release your inner demons, and reveal unconscious, perhaps even sinful, desires in an environment of acceptance and love is similar to a Christian repenting of sin and running back to the grace and abounding love of God. Both psychoanalysis and religion see love as their essence of life. There are more similarities between psychoanalysis and religion than Freud would ever admit to.

On the other hand, Freud insisted that neither philosophy nor religion had a place in the science of psychoanalysis.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, Freud was stubborn in his belief that science was the ultimate way to truth despite his frequent correspondence with friend and disciple, Oskar Pfister. Pfister “stressed that Freud’s psychoanalysis could lead to the creation of a more fulfilled and reflective life, governed not only by the principles of theology, but also by an understanding of the human psyche and the role of the unconscious.”⁹⁶ He argued that there was a way to combine the two disciplines and that believing in one did not necessitate disbelief in the other.

Psychoanalysis could be used as a neutral instrument, not only as the antithesis of religion.⁹⁷ For example, Pfister used it in pastoral counseling where he had the same goal, to help his patients overcome anxiety due to their unconscious desires, yet he accomplished it in a theological setting. Freud was strongly against this, but if psychoanalysis was still accomplishing

⁹³ Eugene Koprowski, “Freud, Psychoanalysis, and the Therapeutic Effect of Agapic Love,” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 35 (2014): 314, DOI: 10.3109/01612840.2013.842621.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Roger Frie, “Psychoanalysis, Religion, Philosophy and the Possibility for Dialogue: Freud, Binswanger and Pfister,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 21 (2012): 106, DOI: 10.1080/0803706X.2011.610817.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 114.

its goal, why should the setting matter? He was adamant that religion was an illusion and all belief in it was faulty. Unfortunately, “Freud’s arguments against religious belief did not encompass the full range of religious experience because they dealt only with a limited and pathological aspect.”⁹⁸ The abnormal population that Freud worked with in regards to religion gave him a skewed understanding of its effects on an individual. Therefore, there is still room for debate as to how valid Freud’s psychoanalytic understanding of religion is. An important aspect to consider is that psychoanalysis as a whole is currently in a decline.

Decline of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis was at its prime between 1910 and the late 1960s, but what happened to allow it to decline so quickly? In today’s time, “there are fewer analytic candidates and fewer patients, less insurance coverage, less presence in departments of psychiatry, and less prestige among the traditional academic disciplines” than ever before in psychoanalysis.⁹⁹ In some respects, psychoanalysis is seen today as more of an ideology than a science, which may be causing such disagreement over how it should be researched and practiced, thus putting a halt to any movement or growth. Unfortunately, psychoanalysts argue frequently about the function of psychoanalysis, and “with its own turf wars and schisms, it sometimes seems more like a religion than anything else, a definition that its founder would have rejected with horror.”¹⁰⁰

It is important to recognize that psychoanalysis is a different kind of science, for it cannot be compared or measured the same as a natural science would. One of the most important aspects of psychoanalysis is the seeking and searching that comes with it, and when it is

⁹⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁹ Arnold Richards, “Psychoanalysis in Crisis: The Danger of Ideology,” *Psychoanalytic Review*, 102 (2015): 389, DOI:10.1521/prev.2015.102.3.389.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 390.

suppressed, no new discoveries will be made. New APsaA applicants are being trained in an “unyielding and inflexible atmosphere that can only diminish creativity and inculcate rigidity” because of new policies and credentials for analytical correctness.¹⁰¹ The exploratory aspect to psychoanalysis is essential if it is to grow, yet new psychoanalysts are not being encouraged to investigate, hence the decline in the validity of the practice. Psychoanalysis is a unique science in that it does not meet the standards the other sciences are held to.¹⁰² For example, one cannot replicate or reproduce a session between an analyst and their patient. The specificity of psychoanalysis results in a lack of scientific credentials, and the lack of new research results in a drastic decline of the study.

Psychoanalysis can also be differentiated in that it can be seen as a science and an art at times. Arnold Richards, a writer for *Psychoanalytic Review*, explains, “The science of psychoanalysis aims to increase knowledge about how the mind works; the art of psychoanalysis, which is psychoanalytic treatment, aims to improve the patient’s psychic health.”¹⁰³ Since psychoanalysis is unlike any other science, it is difficult to encourage all to consider it a science, when it really is an art form and dependent upon each individual session. Psychoanalysis is declining because there has been a suppression to exploration, testing, and challenging thought. As research is being repressed, psychoanalysis becomes more like an ideology, or even religion, than it does a science.

Freud’s Validity

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 400.

¹⁰² Ibid., 393.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 395.

Freud's views on religion are one-sided, as he does not dialogue or engage with thinkers who hold other points of view. His methodology and evidence are also lacking, which leads his claims about religion to be assumed, not proven. The study of psychoanalysis is currently suffering, thus rendering Freud's psychoanalytic ideas less relevant than they may have been in the past. Freud's psychoanalytic arguments regarding religion lack legitimacy for multiple reasons.

First, psychoanalysis as a whole is declining steadily today due to the lack of research and development in the study. Despite the institutions around the world, its presence in the academic settings of universities and the medical settings of hospitals has waned. Therefore, when considering religion through a psychoanalytic lens, one must first consider the current validity of such a lens. For example, scientists must agree upon the relevancy of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, such as the Oedipus Complex. Do scientists still believe in the Oedipus Complex, or is this theory outdated? If so, then it is difficult to infer that man created God to fulfill our longing for a father-figure, if indeed, belief in that longing is no longer relevant. Theories such as the Oedipus Complex must be re-evaluated in light of recent findings and scientific methods. Only then could one view religion accurately through a psychoanalytic lens. As it stands now, psychoanalysis is too deficient in research in order to be applied validly.

In addition to the strength of psychoanalysis, Freud's weak methodology in developing his psychoanalytic views on religion places the power of his arguments in question. He never conducted any empirical research regarding religion, such as polling a population to discover their views on the matter. Therefore, his credibility in discussing how the population views religion is skewed and biased, for it is all from his own opinion and beliefs. Also, Freud never attempted to blend religion and science, like some of his contemporaries did, so it is difficult to

agree with him when he claims that they cannot work together, for he never tried to do so. Freud rarely engaged with theologians on the matter, and when he did, in the case of his friend Oskar Pfister, he did not take Pfister's input seriously enough to consider altering his opinions of religion. For example, when Pfister used psychoanalysis in the context of pastoral counseling, Freud refused to recognize how it was curing Pfister's patients, because it was being used in a religious context. Freud was close-minded in considering the use of psychoanalysis with religion.

Freud could have strengthened his arguments by studying the point of view of a thinker who did believe in the truth and reality of religion. From there, he could have taken the perspective of the counter to his point of view of religion as an illusion, and recognized that while it is detrimental to the growth of some, religion is also true and helpful for many. Perhaps because of a poor experience with religion in his childhood, Freud never attempted to empathize or take the role of someone who did believe in religion. Freud only focused on the negative outcomes of religion, never the helpful ones, so he lacked a balanced representation of the subject matter.

It is important to recognize that other scientists, such as Isaac Newton, successfully made significant scientific discoveries, such as the laws of motion, while also maintaining a belief in God. Although Freud never would have succumbed to such a belief, he did not address such scientists throughout his work. Separating science and religion was a pre-requisite for Freud in order to maintain academic integrity in his work. It appeared as though Freud would belittle those scientists who did hold a belief in God, for to hold a belief in religion was delusional.

In *Future of an Illusion*, Freud makes many claims about how wishing and wish fulfillment are characteristic of religion. Kronemyer clarifies, "To wish is to feel or express a strong desire or hope for something not readily obtainable, or to want something that cannot or

probably will not happen.”¹⁰⁴ Wishful thinking is actually not representative of religion, but there are many critical ways to approach religious study. If Freud, instead, simply assumed that religious claims were true, then he would have to critically consider what state the world would be in for them to be revealed as such.¹⁰⁵ If Freud had gone a bit further to define such descriptors he used for religion, then perhaps his arguments could be more valid. For example, indeed an illusion or hallucination can be characteristic of some extreme religious experiences, yet the normal believer does not experience such trance-like states frequently. Freud may have been on the right track in defining religion as an illusion, but he did not clearly distinguish or define such psychological processes.¹⁰⁶

Freud’s arguments for religion as an illusion are not credible because of his poor methodology, lack of scientific evidence, misuse of psychological terms, and failure to engage in a theological point of view. Ultimately, “by suggesting a scientific critique of religious belief is appropriate, Freud implies a religious critique of science also might be appropriate, when fundamentally they are two different realms of discourse.”¹⁰⁷ Religion and science can work together, yet they function too differently to be used as a lens to see the other through. Freud properly used psychoanalysis to examine religion, yet psychoanalysis is not a valid method to draw conclusions about religion.

Conclusion

Sigmund Freud argued that religion was an illusion, a cause of neurosis, and a way of fulfilling our unconscious desires to elongate our childhood. His lack of scientific evidence in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 264.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 271.

making such conclusions leads one to question the validity of his assumptions. Today, psychoanalysis is suffering a decline in both use and significance, as few new discoveries are being made. Therefore, there is no longer much relevancy for his psychoanalytic arguments for religion as an illusion, since psychoanalysis is no longer prominent and his research methods are outdated.

Freud is a staggering figure throughout history and should be respected as one of the most noteworthy scientists throughout the study of psychology. His discoveries in psychoanalysis shaped the academic climate of the twentieth century, and his lasting impact will always have a role in psychology. Although his views on religion lack credibility, his psychoanalytic understanding of society and culture encourages thoughts and questions regarding unconscious desires that may have never been explored before.

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