Sigmund Freud

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For the *Dictionary of Christian Apologists and Their Critics* (Wiley-Blackwell)

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) was born into a Jewish family in Frieberg, which was, at the time, a part of the Austrian Empire. He was the father of psychoanalysis, greatly influenced the development of psychology, and continues to serve as a landmark figure within many disciplines across the humanities (including literary theory, continental philosophy, and religious studies).

He rose to prominence during a period in European history which enjoyed enormous optimism regarding the ability of science to usher in broad social progress—leading to a broadening of what topics might fall within the purview of the natural sciences. Starting with the scientific revolution of the 16th century, the natural sciences had experienced unparalleled progress, which led to unprecedented advancements in medicine, astronomy, physics, biology, and much more. Religious debates, in contrast, had (by the 19th century) suffered from a stark *lack* of obvious progress; indeed, following some lines of thought that originated in the enlightenment, religion was often seen as the source of intellectual stagnation, dogmatism, brutal divisions, and violence. And it is within this context that we can see Freud's naturalistic understanding—and corresponding *critique*—of religious belief emerging.

While Freud's understanding of religion evolved over the course of his career—starting with *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and progressing through *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939)— his

central idea was that many religious beliefs and practices yield naturalistic explanations in terms of being the product of neuroses. In other words, Freud's critique of religion ultimately rests on an account of the cognitive genesis of religious beliefs. If the cognitive mechanisms that lead people to form the target religious beliefs are suspect, then perhaps that gives us a reason to doubt the *veracity* of the target belief. For example, if I know that my belief that "I am in mortal danger" is the product of an anxiety disorder and not the product of rational deliberation, then I have a reason to doubt the veracity of my belief that I am indeed in mortal danger, because beliefs formed as a direct result of an anxiety disorder are often radically distorted and notoriously unreliable. Perhaps something similar is happening with religious beliefs.

Freud's most enduring critique of religion comes from his understanding of religious belief as being the product of what he calls "wish-fulfillment." As Freud explained in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927):

> These [religious beliefs], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impressions of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly

> existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place. (Freud 1953-1974, vol. xxi, 30)

Importantly, describing religious beliefs in terms of wish-fulfillment does not entail that religious beliefs are, for that reason, *false*. (After all, perhaps God placed within us a sense of helplessness and a need for protection, as a way to draw us to himself.) Even if we can explain *why* a person believes some proposition, it does not follow that that person's belief is *false* (that'd be to commit the genetic fallacy). One may believe a proposition as the result of an illusion, even when the proposition happens to be true.

That said, Freud is far from sanguine on this score. Freud, being a proverbial "master of suspicion" and an ardent atheist, later went on to describe religious belief not as an *illusion* (which, for Freud, is not necessarily at odds with reality) but as a *delusion*. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud explains: "A special importance attaches to the case in which [the] attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering through a delusional remolding of reality is made by a considerable number of people in common. The religions of mankind must be classed among the mass-delusions of this kind" (Freud 1953-1974, vol. xxi, 81).

Regardless, Freud seeks to provide reasons for questioning whether relig ious beliefs are justified, warranted, or rational, given their cognitive genesis. Or, drawing from Alvin Plantinga's helpful description, Freud's critique of religion does not amount to a *de facto* critique of religion (that is, regarding its truth or falsity—though Freud clearly thinks that religious beliefs are indeed false)—but, instead, it amounts to a *de jure* critique of religion, that is, concerning its epistemic status, justification, warrant, rationality, etc. (2000, 136-40).

Freud's critique of religion, supposing it to be the product of an unreliable cognitive mechanism (like wish-fulfillment), has been enormously influential, and aspects of Freud's critique of religion are often used to frame (and dismiss) religious belief and practice within contemporary debates—especially at a "popular" level of scholarship. Consider, for example, the sentiment expressed by Sam Harris in his book, *The End of Faith* (2005):

> We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them "religious"; otherwise, they are likely to be called "mad," "psychotic," or "delusional.". . . To be ruled by ideas for which you have no evidence (and which therefore cannot be justified in conversation with other human beings) is generally a sign that something is seriously wrong with your mind. Clearly, there is sanity in numbers. And yet, it is merely an accident of history that it is considered normal in our society to believe that the Creator of the universe can hear your thoughts, while it is demonstrative of mental illness to believe that he is communicating with you by having the rain tap in Morse code on your bedroom window. (Harris 2005, 72)

Lines of thought that originate from Freud's critique can also be found, for example, in the common dismissal of religious belief as an "intellectual crutch."

Famously, Sir Karl Popper argued in his book *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963) that Freud's work in psychoanalysis should not be considered science, since it does not make claims that are *falsifiable*. According to Popper, Freud's psychoanalysis is pseudoscience. Popper's account of psychoanalysis proved to be deeply influential, and insofar as we have reason to doubt the scientific legitimacy of Freud's psychoanalytic theory we also have reason to doubt the scientific legitimacy of Freud's critique of

religion as a product of neuroses, understood from a psychoanalytic framework. As such, criticisms of Freud's critique of religious belief have centered chiefly on the lack of any empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that religious beliefs really are generally a product of wish-fulfilment or neuroses. To be sure, this is not to say that some people will not believe in God as a result of wish-fulfillment—that might sometimes be the case—however, empirical research has found that this is not the case for religious belief in general. As it happens, the emerging science of religious belief is not as grim as Freud suggested. Cognitive science of religion and related evolutionary approaches have begun to converge on the idea that humans are naturally disposed to believe in gods, among other religious ideas. This research has found that people do *not* need unusual abilities, experiences, or *pathology* to find themselves drawn to religious beliefs. Indeed, today it is the widespread view of cognitive science of religion scholars that the faculties that incline humans toward religious beliefs are part of the general conceptual toolkit for negotiating life as a human (see, for example, Barrett 2004).

One of the most enduring features of Freud's critique, however, is that it highlights that religious beliefs and practices can and should indeed be empirically studied. And if it *could* be shown that religious beliefs were indeed the product of a cognitive malfunction or a cognitive faculty that is notoriously unreliable, then that would theoretically provide a serious *de jure* critique of religion. In this way, then, scholars working within contemporary cognitive science of religion or the psychology of religious belief can point to Freud as one who powerfully highlighted the need for this kind of research at the intersections of religion, psychology, and cognitive science.

Cross References: Marx, Karl; Plantinga, Alvin

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