

Did Freud Accept or Reject Jewish Mysticism? published by Ezine Articles

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In "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis", Freud discusses his views on mysticism and psychoanalysis. The concept of mysticism has changed throughout the ages. In ancient times, a mystic was one who communed with God. In Freud's world, the word mysticism became an all-inclusive word describing paranormal phenomenon occurring outside the laws of nature and science. Science tended to dismiss or ignore mystical ideas because they were viewed as superstitious, irrational and nonsensical. Freud associated the word mysticism with séances, voices from other worlds, noises, apparitions, levitation, trances and prophecies (Coward, 1977, p. 1). Freud also had a reputation of being hostile to mysticism and was opposed to integrating mystical ideas into psychoanalysis. His friendship with Carl Jung ended due to Jung's beliefs in spiritual and mystical concepts (Wagner, 2008).

At the beginning of the lecture, Freud offers an unflattering view of mysticism and speaks condescendingly toward the subject by refusing to offer any specific definition for the word itself. He says, "You must not expect me to make any attempt at embracing this ill-circumscribed region with definitions". Freud says "we all know about this other world" of mysticism which exists beyond the proven laws of science. Subsequently, he discusses mysticism as if the audience is skeptical toward the subject.

From a psychological perspective, Freud is arguing that mankind tends to believe in miracles and the paranormal. He says people become bored with reality, and 'reason' is not exciting enough for them to find pleasure in. He claims that people embrace the intriguing nature of mysticism because it adds excitement to their mundane lives. Freud acknowledges mankind's fascination with the unseen and the miraculous, but claims that 'reason and science' are mankind's greatest strengths.

Historically, Freud says mysticism offers nothing new for mankind. He argues that mysticism helps religions ward off the advancement of science, and says religious reports of prophecies, apparitions and miracles are imaginative fables filled with nonsense, fraud and ignorance. However, Freud admits there is no way to prove or disprove these assertions, and whatever occurred in ancient times cannot be tested or validated today. He claims that those who follow mystical teachings are charlatans, quacks, mind-readers and liars.

However, despite denouncing mysticism at the beginning of the lecture, Freud decides to discuss mysticism as if it were scientific material. During the lecture, he informs the audience that he

will elevate the subject of mysticism to the level of scientific inquiry. He is fully aware that he is going against the tide of intellectual, psychological and historical factors. He changes his tone, and argues that any scientific theory must be reasonable in accordance with the laws of nature. He cites an example of the Earth's center being filled with heavy metals instead of jam as a reasonable assumption. He says a mystical hypothesis might claim there is 'jam at the center of the Earth', thus lending itself to immediate rejection. However, Freud points out that the immediate rejection of any theory can be "erroneous and detrimental". He remembers the negative reaction he received from the medical community when he wrote about the existence of 'the unconscious'. Freud says he encountered the same type of condemnation that mystics have experienced throughout the ages. Consequently, he cautions his audience not to reject a hypothesis based solely on intellectual considerations.

Surprisingly, at the end of the lecture, Freud questions his own skepticism toward mysticism, "If one regards oneself as a skeptic, it is a good plan to have occasional doubts about one's skepticism too. It may be that I too have a secret inclination towards the miraculous which thus goes halfway to meet the creation of occult facts." (Freud, 1965, p. 53) Going "halfway" toward accepting occult "facts" represents a major shift in Freud's thinking. He is no longer rejecting the concept of mysticism, and is admitting being intuitively drawn to its unscientific explanations. However, he does not embrace mysticism by any means, but is fascinated by the possibilities of the unknown and the unseen. Therefore, Freud is not viewing mysticism with utter skepticism, and is expressing his curiosity about 'other worldly' mysteries that science may never be able to explain.

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