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Freud on God and Religion as the Sublimation of Unconscious Mind

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Abstract: This article explores the ideas as well as convictions of Freud on God and religion. Freud propounded that God and religion originated as a result of the sublimation of unconscious mind. In Freud's view, religion originated as a result of the sublimation of unconscious mind filled with guilt and remorse, and the notion of God has its source in the sublimation of the father figure who is the source of protection in the face of danger. He related religious practices to obsessional neurosis. Refutation of Freud's views from the filed of psychology points to the relevance of belief in God and practice of religion for a healthy society.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, Religion, Sublimation of Unconscious Mind, God as Father-figure

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GOD AND RELIGION have been the talk of almost all the disciplines in philosophy for centuries. Psychology is one of the disciplines which explains God and religion in its own way using its methods. In their understanding of God and religion, the psychologists differ from one another. Their explanations of God and religion mostly depend on their background, experience, experimentations and observations. The ideas of God and religion, as seen in psychology, are both subjective and objective. This article explores the understanding of God and religion as the sublimation of the unconscious mind, based on the works of Sigmund Freud. Freud has been well known for his innovative concepts that are most controversial and unaccepted, especially by the religions. His explanation of religion as neurosis and reduction of the human beings merely to an instinctual being has drawn very many criticisms from all disciplines of philosophy, especially from psychology itself.

Introducing Freud

Freud was born in Frieberg, Moravia in 1856, and later along with his family, he moved to Vienna, where he spent almost all of his life except his last two years which he spent in London till his death in 1939. Freud was a physiologist, medical doctor, psychologist and psychoanalyst, and is considered the Father of Psychoanalysis.

Freud is regarded as the most influential and authoritative thinkers of the twentieth century. His explanation of ideas involving the human psyche attracted all walks of disciplines, especially psychology. He is best known for the elaboration of the theory that the mind is a complex energy system. He articulated and refined concepts like infantile sexuality, unconscious, repression, and proposed a three-tier account of the mind's structure – Id, Ego, and Superego.

These tools he used to understand human psychological development and the treatment of abnormal mental conditions (Kaipan, 2014).

Defining Sublimation

The word ‘sublimation’ means “to change forms” or “to improve and raise to a higher status” (Thomas, 2020). In psychology, sublimation is defined as the ‘drastic transformation of unwanted and harmful impulses into something less harmful and acceptable.’ It is the method of transforming destructive energies into constructive energies that are more productive, creative and socially acceptable (Changing Minds, n.d.).

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According to Freudian understanding, sublimation is the diversion of instinctual drives, usually sexual ones, into non-instinctual channels, in pursuit of more acceptable and socially valuable achievements. For Freud, this impulsive energy is the result of the unconscious desires of the id, particularly sexual impulses (Encyclopedia Britanica, 2020). Freud termed and defined sublimation as one of the mature defence mechanisms. This defence mechanism protects the ego from the id’s unconscious impulses and transforms them into socially acceptable behaviours.

Sublimation of Unconscious Mind

When we explore Freud’s idea of religion and God, we cannot ignore the philosophical backgrounds of religion and God, from where Freud draws his ideas and inspirations. Generally speaking, Freud was influenced by many philosophers,

especially by Feuerbach who said that religious belief is a product of anthropomorphic projectionism and the concept of God is an anthropomorphic projection of the human mind. According to Feuerbach, man is the beginning the centre and the end of religion. And God is the unconscious creation of man in his own image and likeness (Alan, 2010).

Freud, in a similar way, chose the path of anti-religion/God, rejecting them as unscientific and irrational. He pointed out that “religion is the projection of the father with his prohibitions and commands into cosmic dimensions” (Kaipan, 2014). And he was convinced that religion was a neurotic symptom, an illusion far removed from a healthy, mature understanding of reality. For him, religion is one of the means to avoid individual neurosis, where the person finds security of childhood in adulthood (Heije, 1976).

According to Freud, the primitive, egoistic, destructive energies are part of human beings. For we human beings naturally covet for things, want to harm others, to give way to despair or to have sex in every taboo and damaging ways; we want to enjoy life without doing any work etc. To overcome these urges human beings used the defence mechanism called ‘Sublimation’. According to Freud the sublimations “emerge at the cost of the infantile sexual impulses” (Freud, 2011).

Origin of Religion

Freud considered God and religion as the sublimation of the unconscious mind. In his book *Totem and Taboo*, he explains that religion arose from the consciousness of guilt and remorse, initially in the form of totemism. Totemism is therefore perceived by Freud as a kind of way to calm the conflicting emotions of man and to make amends for the committed criminal offence to later obedience to his chosen deputy of his father - totem. Freud claims that totemism

exists only to prevent incestuous relations (Baitenova & Demeuova, 2015).

Freud asserted that in a similar way the modern monotheistic religions came into existence. For instance, for Freud, the origin of religions, Judaism and Christianity, was the consequence of the unconscious sense of guilt and remorse for murdering Moses and Jesus respectively (Jones, 1957). God and religion, therefore, came into existence as the sublimation of the unconscious mind which is filled with guilt and remorse. Freud says that since modern societies are now much advanced, where science has the upper hand in the best explanation of reality, we do not need such a system. For Freud, there is no proof of God's existence. Therefore, God is the fairy tales of religion and religion is a mere illusion, (Coles, 2013) "derived from human wishes" (Freud, 2011), that impels people to hold a religious belief. Therefore, there is no good reason at all to accept religion.

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Another account of the origin of religion given by Freud in his work "*The Future of an Illusion*", states that "Religion has its origin in man's helplessness in confronting the forces of nature outside and the instinctive forces within himself. Religion arises at an early stage of human development when man cannot yet use his reason to deal with these outer and inner forces and must repress them or manage them with the help of other affective forces" (Fromm, 1950). Being confronted with danger arising from uncontrollable and non-understandable forces from outside world, from within and fellow human beings, humans

seek protection from unknown reality that is superior in power and can protect them. Hence comes the object of worship, the need of the father, i.e., God (Baitenova & Demeuova, 2015).

God as Father Figure

Freud considers the idea of religion as springing from infantile complexes and expounds on the idea that the individual psychological image of God in monotheistic religions is formed based on the image of one's power, a benevolent father figure that provides protection against the threat of destruction. He says, "Psycho-analysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father.....Thus, we recognize that the roots of the need for religion are in the parental complex" (Freud, 2011). For Freud, God is an exalted father on whom we see the almighty, just and kindly nature, which is nothing but grand sublimations of father and mother (Freud, 2011). Further, the religious ideas are neither reasonable nor based on experience but ancestral need to overcome the fear of an ever-threatening nature. They are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of humankind, and obstruction of the individual's development toward full and responsible maturity, a maturity which could be arrived at only by means of science, which as Freud says, is the only way of arriving at the true knowledge of reality (Heije, 1976).

Obsessive Actions in Religious Practices

In his work, *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*, Freud states that the essence and origin of religion are related to the obsessional neurosis, which is the unconscious impulse of the man. Performing rites and rituals, following the strict dogmas, worshipping etc. are obsessional and this is the sublimation of obsessive-compulsive disorder in the form of religion. Freud describes neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis (Freud, 2011). Thus, in the psychological interpretation of Freud, religion acts as a protective measure of a person against his/her unconscious drives. Religious beliefs provide an allegorical form of satisfaction so that the individual intrapsychic conflicts between conscious and unconscious lose their sharpness (Baitenova & Demeuova, 2015).

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Concluding Remarks

Freud outrightly rejected the metaphysical understanding of reality by providing the methodology of self-understanding for people living in the rationalized world. He made reason as the sole instrument for the development of the human psyche, rejecting the mystical and spiritual aspect of the human psyche,

which is very much part of human life. And this rejection meant the rejection of an important dimension of human existence.

The worldview of Freud on God and religion is criticized by many. Carl Jung, who was the student of Freud himself, was one of the earlier critics of Freud's explanation of religion as infantile complex and illusion. Jung recognizes the value of religion as a spiritual fact (Gemelli, 1955). Jung refused to consider religion as a simple product of sublimation. He, through his psychological interpretation, affirmed that Freud in his theory of sublimation had misunderstood the psychological value of religion (Gemelli, 1955).

Jung believed that religion was in fact very beneficial to society and should stay forever; he saw religion as the natural expression of the collective unconscious that leads to the realization of who we are (DK, 2018). For Freud, religion may be an illusion and danger to the human being, but Jung values the contribution of religion to the formation of

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Western culture with respect to intellectual values as well as moral values (Gemelli, 1955), which are the very foundation of human existence in this world.

Regarding the relationship between God and man, Jung asserts that it is not instinctual or infantile complex. Moreover, he affirms that the doctrine of the existence of God and that of the God-Man contains a core of psychological truth, and this truth is nothing else but the tendency of humankind to go beyond the instinctual stage

of the unconscious. The religious symbols and mythologies are psychologically true because they serve as the bridge which has carried humankind to its conquests (Gemelli, 1955).

Freud considered religious rituals and practices as obsessional. Refuting this point, Erick Fromm in his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion* states that religious rituals are by no means always irrational, they are the meaningful and rational expression of inner cleansing without any obsessional or irrational component, as a symbolic expression for inner purity (Fromm, 1950). The rituals and practices are symbolic expressions of our thoughts and feelings through actions. So, in no way Freud's view of religion as an obsessional neurosis institution could be approved.

Today, if we look at the reality of the world around us it is not religion and God that cause destruction to the society, but the deification of the state and power in authoritarian countries and the deification of the machine and of success in our own culture which threatens the most precious spiritual possessions of humanity (Fromm, 1950). Today, human existence is not so much threatened by religions, but it is the deification of the state power and technology, which overrides the reality of ethics, aesthetics, religion, and God on which the foundation of human existence lies.

Though Freud's idea of God and religion as the sublimation of the unconscious mind has been criticised by many, it has challenged the human mind to move beyond simplistic notions of God and religion. It has changed our thinking pattern and made us rethink the relevance of some of the religious beliefs and progress towards a more profound understanding of God and religion.

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