

# Religion as Illusion

## Sigmund Freud

*Besides being the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was also one of the great 20th century most notable atheists. For Freud, religious beliefs are entirely human constructs and, therefore, nothing more than illusions we create to help us endure the harsh realities of our human condition and the inevitability of death. The rejection of religion, which Freud regarded as a kind of infantile neurosis, is the first step in attaining psychological maturity.*

**W**hat is the special value of religious ideas? We have spoken of the hostility to culture, produced by the pressure [religion] exercises and the instinctual renunciations that it demands. If one imagines these prohibitions lifted, then one may choose as a sexual object any woman one pleases, kill without hesitation one's rival or anyone else who stands in one's way, or carry off another man's goods without asking his permission—how beautiful, what a succession of delights would life be! But you would soon discover the next difficulty in this: Everyone else has exactly the same wishes as me and will treat me with no more consideration than I treat him. So basically, only one person can be absolutely happy by such a lifting of the cultural restrictions—a tyrant, a dictator who has seized all power, and also has every reason to wish that the others keep at least one cultural commandment: “You shall not kill.”

### Civilization as Defense Against Nature

But how ungrateful, how short-sighted after all, to strive for the abolition of culture! What would remain then is a state of nature, and that is much harder to bear. It is true that nature does not demand that we restrain our instincts; she lets us do as we would like. But she has her own most effective way of restraining us: she kills us, coldly, cruelly, ruthlessly, as it seems to us, and possibly through the very things which occasioned our satisfaction.

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Precisely because of these dangers with which nature threatens us, we have joined forces and created the culture, which among other things should make our communal life together possible. Indeed, it is the main task of culture, its very reason for its existence, to defend us against nature.

It is evident that in many ways culture does this quite well, and clearly, as time goes on, it will do this even better. But no one is under the delusion that nature is already conquered; few dare to hope that she will be completely under man's control. There are the elements that seem to mock all human control: the earth that quakes and is torn apart and buries everything human, the water that floods and drowns everything in turmoil, the storm that blows everything away; there are the diseases, which we have recently recognized as the attacks of other living things; finally there is the painful mystery of death, against which no herb has been found and probably none will be found. With these powers, nature rises up against us—overwhelming, cruel, and inexorable. And thus she brings to our attention again our weakness and helplessness, which we thought we had escaped through the works of culture. One of the few gratifying and uplifting spectacles that humanity can offer is when, in the face of an elemental catastrophe, it forgets its cultural conflicts, all its internal difficulties and hostilities, and remembers the great common task of preserving mankind against the overwhelming power of nature.

For the individual, as for humanity as a whole, life is hard to bear. The culture in which he participates imposes upon him a measure of privation and other men bring him a measure of suffering, either in spite of the rules of this culture or because of its imperfections. In addition to this are the evils that unconquered nature—he calls it Fate—inflicts on him. One assumes that a constant anxious state of anxiety and a serious injury to his natural narcissism should be the consequence of this condition. We know how the individual reacts to the injuries that culture and other men inflict upon him: he develops a corresponding degree of resistance to the institutions of this culture and hostility towards it. But how does he defend himself against the superpowers of nature, of Fate, which threaten him, as it threatens all of mankind?

### **Humanizing the Forces of Nature**

Culture relieves him of this task; it performs it in the same way for everyone. It is also noteworthy that pretty much all cultures do the same thing here. It does not stop at fulfilling its task of defending man against nature; it only continues it by other means. The task here is complex: man's seriously threatened self-esteem calls for comfort; life and the universe must be relieved of their terrors; and man's curiosity, which is of course driven

by the strongest practical interest, must have an answer.

A lot has already been gained with the first step. And this is to humanize nature. Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached: they remain eternally alien. But if those elements have passions that rage like those in one's own soul, if death is not spontaneous, but the act of violence of an evil will, if all around in nature there are beings similar to those we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely; we can feel at home in the face of the supernatural and can psychically deal with our extreme anxiety. We may still be defenseless, but we are no longer helplessly paralyzed; we can at least react. Perhaps we are not even defenseless. We can use the same methods against these violent supermen out there that we use in our own society: we can try summoning, placating, bribing them, and through such influence rob them of some of their power. Such a substitution of psychology for science not only offers immediate relief; it also shows the way to further mastery of the situation.

There is nothing new in this situation. It has an infantile prototype, and is actually only the continuation of this. Once before one has been in such a state of helplessness: as a small child in relationship to one's parents. One had reason to fear them—especially the father. But his protection was also a safeguard against the dangers that were known back then. Thus it was natural to assimilate these two situations . . . And so man [gives] the forces of nature . . . the character of a father, makes them gods . . .

Over time, the first observations of regularity and order in natural phenomena are made and the forces of nature thus lose their human traits. But man's helplessness remains, and with it his fatherly longing and the gods. The gods retain their threefold task of warding off the horrors of nature, of reconciling with the cruelty of fate, especially as it is shown in death, and of compensating for the sufferings and hardships that cultural coexistence has imposed upon man . . .

### **Creating a Religious Mythology**

Thus, a rich store of ideas is created, born from man's need to make human helplessness bearable and built from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race. It is clear that the possession of these ideas protects man in two directions—against the dangers of nature and fate, and against the dangers that threaten him from human society itself. Here is the upshot of all this. Life in this world serves a higher purpose. This purpose may not be easy to guess, but certainly a means of perfecting the human nature is implied. Probably the spiritual part of man, the soul, which has so slowly and reluctantly separated itself from the body in the course of time, is supposed to be the object

of this elevation and exaltation. Everything that happens in this world is the execution of the intentions of a superior intelligence, which, in the end, through its mysterious ways . . . orders everything for the best—that is, to make life beneficial for us. Above each of us is a kind, and only seemingly severe, providence, which does not allow us to become the plaything of the powerful and ruthless forces of nature. Death itself is not an annihilation, not a return to the inorganic lifeless, but the beginning of a new kind of existence that lies on the path of higher development. And looking at the other side of the question, this view holds that the same moral laws established by our civilizations govern the affairs of the entire universe, only they are guarded by a highest judicial authority with far more power and consequence. In the end all good is rewarded and all evil punished, if not actually in this form of life, then in the later existences that begin after death. Thus all the horrors, sufferings, and hardships of life are destined for extinction. The life after death, which continues our earthly life, as the invisible piece of the spectrum is attached to the visible, brings all the perfection we may have missed here. And the superior wisdom that guides this process, the infinite expressed in it, the righteousness that permeates it, are the attributes of the divine beings that have created us and the world as a whole, or rather, of the one divine being into which, in our culture, all the gods of the ancients have condensed. The people who first achieved such concentration of divine qualities were not a little proud of this progress. It had revealed the father, which had always been hidden behind every divine being as its core. Fundamentally, it was a return to the historical beginnings of the idea of God . . .

### **Religion as Wish Fulfillment**

To resume the thread of inquiry: So, what is the psychological meaning of religious beliefs, and how can we classify them? The question is not easy to answer. After rejecting various formulations, I will stop at this one: religious beliefs are doctrines, assertions about facts and conditions of external (or inner) reality, that communicate something that one has not discovered oneself, and which lay claim to one's belief. Since they provide information about what is most important to us and what is most interesting in life, they are particularly valued. Whoever knows nothing about them is very ignorant indeed; anyone who has added them into their knowledge can be considered very enriched . . .

One must ask, what is the inner power of these doctrines, to what circumstance do they owe their effectiveness, independent, as it is, on recognition by reason.

I think we have prepared the answer to both questions well enough. It

is discovered when we consider the psychic genesis of religious beliefs. These [beliefs] are not the by-products of experience or the results of thinking. They are illusions, fulfilling the oldest, strongest, most urgent wishes of humanity. The secret of their strength is the strength of those wishes. As we already know, that the appalling impression helplessness in childhood has aroused the need for protection—protection through love—which the father has helped to remedy. The recognition of the continued existence of this helplessness lasting throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father—but this time a more powerful one. The benevolence of divine providence calms our fear of the dangers of life, the establishment of a moral world order assures the fulfillment of the demand for justice so often unfulfilled within human culture, and the prolongation of earthly existence by a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish fulfillments should take place. Answers to puzzles that tempt human curiosity, such as the origin of the world and the relationship between body and soul, are developed according to the underlying presuppositions of this system. It is a great relief to the individual psyche to relieve the conflicts of childhood arising from the father-complex—which are never quite overcome—and bring them to a universally accepted solution.

### Religious Beliefs as Illusions

When I say that these are all illusions, I have to define the meaning of the word. An illusion is not the same as an error, nor is it necessarily an error. Aristotle's belief that pests develop from filth to which the ignorant people still cling today was an error, as was that of a previous generation of physicians that the *tabes dorsalis* was the result of sexual excess. It would be abusive to call these errors illusions.

On the other hand, it was an illusion of Columbus that he discovered a new sea route to India. The part played by his wish in this error is very clear. One may describe as an illusion the assertion of certain nationalists that the Indo-Europeans are the only race of men capable of culture, or the belief, which has only been destroyed by psychoanalysis, that the child is a being without sexuality.

What is characteristic of an illusion is that it is derived from human wishes. In this respect, it comes close to the psychiatric delusion, but they differ from this too, quite apart from the more complicated structure of the latter. With respect to delusions, we emphasize their being in contradiction with reality. The illusion does not necessarily have to be false—that is, unrealizable or contradictory with reality. A middle-class girl can, for example, have the illusion that a prince will come to take her home. It is possible that some cases of this kind have occurred. That the Messiah will come and

establish a golden age is much less likely; depending on one's personal attitude, one will classify this belief as an illusion or analogous to a delusion. Examples of illusions that have come true are not easy to find elsewhere. But the alchemists' illusion of being able to turn all metals into gold could be one . . . We therefore call an illusion an illusion when wish fulfillment is the prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so disregard its relation to reality, just as the illusion itself does.

After this overview, we can now turn back to religious beliefs. We can now reiterate that they are all illusions, unprovable. No one can be forced to think them true, to believe in them. Some of them are so improbable, so much in contradiction to everything we have laboriously learned about the reality of the world, that they can be compared—with due respect to psychological differences—to delusions. One cannot judge the reality value of most of them. As they are unprovable, they are also irrefutable. We do not know enough to approach them critically. The mysteries of the world reveal themselves only slowly to our investigations, and there are many questions that science cannot answer today. But scientific work is the only way that knowledge of reality outside of us can be attained. Again, it is only illusion to expect anything from intuition and introspection; they can give us nothing but information, difficult to interpret, about our own mental life. They can never provide information about the questions which religious doctrines find so easy to answer . . .

### Religion as Universal Obsessive Neurosis

We note now that the treasure of religious beliefs contains not only wish-fulfillments but also significant historical memories. What incomparable power this interaction of past and future must give to religion! But it is only with the help of an analogy that another insight may begin to dawn upon us. Although it is not good to put concepts far away from the ground where they are grown, here is a resemblance that we cannot help but point out.

We know that the human child cannot complete its development towards culture well without passing through a more or less distinct phase of neurosis. This is because the child cannot suppress by reason so many of its instinctual urges, but must tame them by acts of repression, behind which usually stands a motive of anxiety. Most of these childhood neuroses are overcome spontaneously during growth, especially the obsessive-compulsive disorder of childhood. The remainder can be cleaned up later on by psychoanalytic treatment.

In a similar way, humanity as a whole in its development through the ages experiences something analogous to neuroses, and for the same reasons—because, in times of ignorance and intellectual weakness, the renun-

ciation of instincts, brought about through affective means, is indispensable to human coexistence. And the residue of repression that occurred in the past has clung to human culture. Thus, religion would be the universal obsessive-neurosis of humanity. Like that of the child, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, the relation to the father. According to this view, it is to be supposed that the abandonment of religion would take place during the fateful relentless process of growth, and that we are now in the middle of this phase of development . . .

So I disagree with you, if you further conclude, that man cannot dispense the comfort of religious illusion, that without it he would not bear the weight of life, the cruel reality. That may be true of the men whom you infused the sweet—or bittersweet—poison from childhood on. But what of the other who was raised more soberly? Perhaps he who does not suffer from the neurosis will not need intoxicants to numb IT.

Certainly man will then find himself in a difficult situation. He will have to admit to himself all his helplessness, his insignificance in the working of the world. He will have to recognize that he is no longer the center of creation, no longer the object of tender care of a benevolent providence. He will be in the same situation as the child who left the father's house, where he was so warm and comfortable. But is not it true that infantilism is destined to be overcome? Man cannot remain a child forever; he must finally go out into "hostile life." We can call this "*education to reality*." Do I have to tell you that the only purpose of my work is to draw attention to the necessity of this progress?

You fear, perhaps, that he will not pass the difficult test? Well, let's at least hope he will. It's at least something to know that one is thrown upon his own resources. One can then learn to use them properly. And man is not completely without aids: his science has taught him much since [antiquity] and will increase his power even further. And as for the great necessities of fate, against which there is no remedy, he will just learn to bear with them with resignation. What use is the illusion of landholdings on the moon, of whose harvest no one has ever seen? As an honest peasant on this earth, he will know how to cultivate his plot so that it can support him. By withdrawing his expectations from the hereafter and concentrating all his liberated energies on earthly life, he will probably be able to make life bearable for all, and culture will no longer be oppressive to anyone. Then he will be able to say to his fellow unbelievers without regret:

Let us leave the heavens  
To the angels and the sparrows.