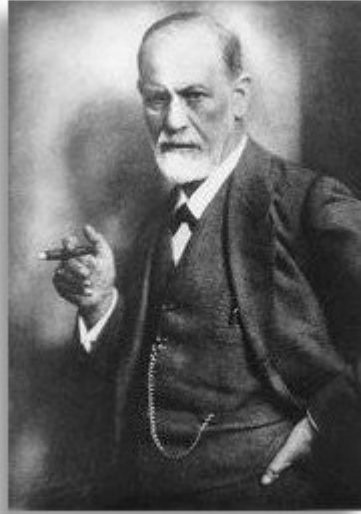


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Sigmund fraud?

Here we will look at one of the dogmatic atheists who had a profound effect on the thinking of millions of people during the major part of the twentieth century.

All in the mind

He was the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). After years of working with hysterical and neurotically disturbed patients, he developed a particular approach to the study of human personality, one which involved the vigorous probing of an individual's personal problems, motives, goals and attitudes to life in general. Freud coined the word 'psychoanalysis' to describe his method of 'treatment, which aimed at helping patients to identify repressed and unconscious traumas and bring them out into the open where they could be given attention. He even went so far as to say that 'The unconscious is the major motivating force behind all human behaviour.' Another major feature of his work was based on his claim that the interpretation of dreams was 'the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind'.

As Freud has been described as one whose influence in popular ideas about religion 'can hardly be exaggerated', it is important to put him under the microscope. When we do, the picture that emerges is very different from the one he presented at the time. The following questions and comments reveal some of the more obvious Freudian flaws.

Firstly Freud's reputation in his own field has taken a fearful battering in recent years. Writing in Modern Times, Paul Johnson says, 'We now know that many of the central ideas of psychoanalysis have no basis in biology. They were, indeed, formulated by Freud before the discovery of Mendel's laws, the chromosomal theory of inheritance, the recognition of inborn metabolic errors, the existence of hormones and the mechanism of the nervous impulse, which collectively invalidate them.' In 1955, Newsweek magazine spoke of many of Freud's tenets as having become obsolete, and reported science historian Frank Sulloway's conclusion: 'His model of the mind and notion of dreaming are in total conflict with modern science. His major edifice is built on quicksand.' This is borne out by many of today's psychiatrists, who suggest that there is little if any solid experimental data to prove that psychoanalysis is effective in treating or curing mental illness. Peter Moore picks out Freud's constant emphasis on sex: 'Freud may have been right that young men subconsciously want to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. But most post-Freudians think his need to explain everything (art, religion, ethics, society) by sex tells us more about his obsessional neuroses than ours.' Carl Gustav Jung brought this particular issue into balance when he wrote, 'Common sense will always return to the fact that sexuality is only one of the life-instincts - only one of the physiological functions.'

Secondly, and especially in his approach to religion, he committed what is known as the 'genetic fallacy' of deciding the truth or falsehood of a view on the basis of its origins. For example, the fact that many people believe in God in order to seek solutions to their psychological needs does not mean that God does not exist. As Peter Moore explains, 'Even if it could be shown quite conclusively why a person does or does not hold a particular conviction, nothing has been said about its truth or falsehood.' What is more, the psychological motive cuts both ways. It is one thing to say that men can invent a benevolent, comforting God to meet their needs, but would those burdened with guilt seek to invent a holy God to whom they are accountable and by whom they would expect to be punished for their wrong-doing? Man is certainly able to create a tailor-made 'God' to meet his own psychological need or desire, and many do so, but this provides no evidence that the true God does not exist. Man has proved prolific at conjuring up religious ideas, but even this prodigious output proves nothing about the existence or non-existence of God; nor does Freud's explanation of Religions and religious experience.

Thirdly, Freud assembled his religious data in a very selective way. To bolster his case, he caricatured all the major religions and singled out the worst individual examples of neurotic religious experience and behaviour. As Clark Pinnock points out, 'Many of the things he said about neurotic religion of course were true and perceptive, but nowhere in his writings is there the slightest indication that he recognized religion at its best and what it can mean to honest people every bit as intelligent as himself.' Freud simply refused to face up to the basic possibility that a universal sense of need for God might exist because man could never find fulfilment outside of the relationship with God for which he was created.

Fourthly, there is overwhelming evidence against Freud's claim that religion is a universal neurosis geared to repressed sexuality and producing psychotic hallucinations. Carl Gustav Jung came to exactly the opposite conclusion, and found that the vast majority of those who came to him for psychological treatment (and all who did so in middle age) lacked a religious dimension to their lives. Jung believed that everyone had an innate need for God and a capacity for having that need met. The prestigious Alister Hardy Research Centre at Manchester College, Oxford, has gathered a massive amount of data on religious experience, showing that those with a religious dimension to their lives are generally better balanced and behave more ethically. Even more impressively, Freud's conclusions are contradicted by millions of people who would claim that their faith in God has had a morally transforming effect on their lives and has given them a stability and balance that were previously missing.

Fifthly, Freud's idea of God as a self-projected father-figure proves to be a double-edged sword. Countless people with very negative, even traumatic, memories of their human father have become strong believers, claiming that they are committed to worshipping, loving and serving God. They may of course have invented the idea of a romanticized father-figure but, on Freud's theory, surely they would have become atheists, or at least God-haters?

Sixthly, Freud did not get into the detailed study of religion until after he had decided what its origins were. He had already accepted Ludwig Feuerbach's theory that religion was no more than a psychological projection, and in a letter to a friend he grumbled about having to study the subject at all: 'I am reading books without being really interested in them, since I know the results my instinct tells me that.' It has been said that Freud's pet hates were religion and America; as far as religion was concerned, Freud determined to find nothing in its favour. As he made his wife move out of their bedroom so that he could sleep with his own sister, he would hardly have wished to discover a holy God to whom he was morally accountable.

All of this means that Freud was not addressing the question, 'Does God exist?'; he had decided the answer to that question before examining it. Instead, he was addressing the question, 'Since God does not exist, why is there such a thing as religion?' This was the starting-point for the prejudiced speculation which he then attempted to present as truth. The fact that he convinced so many adds nothing to the value of his ideas, and it is difficult to disagree with Alister McGrath's bleak verdict: 'On the relatively few points at which Freud's hypothesis is capable of being tested experimentally, it is generally accepted that it is wrong... Freud's psychoanalytical atheism must now be regarded as a hypothesis that has not been, and indeed cannot be, proved.'