

## Câteva reflecții despre teoria freudiană a originii individuale a religiei

**Title:** Some reflections on the S. Freud's theory of the individual origin of religion

**Abstract:** Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) the founder of psychoanalysis is very well known for his new theories of the human mind and sexual desire. Freud proposed that the psyche could be divided into three parts: Id, Ego and SuperEgo. Freud discussed this model in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" which was published in 1920 and fully elaborated upon it in "The Ego and the Id" three years later. He started to spread his theories upon other domains like art, literature and religion. He gave explanations of the genesis of religion and he applied the idea of the Oedipus complex and postulated its emergence in the primordial stage of human development. In the "Future of an Illusion" Freud spoke of religion as an illusion, he maintained that it is a fantasy structure from which a man must be set free if he is to grow to maturity. In this paper I discuss the Freud theory of religion which underline that the idea of God is a version of the father image and religious belief is a neurotic belief. Should we accept?

**Keywords:** Freud, religion, neurosis, illusion, Oedip.

Father of the psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1938) did not, however, restrain his theories to the boundaries of the clinic alone, but extended them to other fields as well, among which anthropology and religion. His application of the psychoanalytical theories in these fields was met with great criticism, and from this enterprise he derived no genuine success. Freud wrote at a time when anthropology did not rely on field work, but rather on void theories. In its turn, research in psychology had not yet been entirely severed from philosophy, and lacked palpable empirical evidence.

The works in which Sigmund Freud elaborates upon the phenomenon of religion are: *Totem und Tabu* (1913), *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927), *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930) și *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939). Apart from these, Freud often makes mention of and brings forward as examples his patients suffering from illnesses of a religious nature. He also writes an article entitled: *Compulsive exercises and religious practices*. Wishing to provide an explanation of the origins of religion, he develops two theories: a theory centred on the cultural roots of religion (the primordial group) and the second theory, the individual origin of religion (the Oedipus complex).

In this essay I shall tackle only the second theory on the origin of religion: the theory of the individual origin.

Like any human manifestation, religious behaviour also relies on motivation. The grounding structure from which derives the general human motivational nucleus is, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex.

Religiousness would therefore originate in the cult of a father and as a result of a paternal complex. The broad pattern of the Oedipus complex may be briefly outlined as follows: it appears around the age of 3 and has a dynamic character; the father of the child, whom the child loves, begins to be regarded as an upsetting factor; the libido being entirely focused on the mother, the child sees in the person of the father an obstacle; the father is strong, and the child feels the need of effectively possessing his mother; to this end he has to kill his father so as to impose himself upon the mother; thus is born in the child an unconscious sense of guilt which leads to his ambivalent attitude towards the father: hate, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, admiration.

There is a tight connection between the cultural origin and the individual origin of religion. Freud claims that the god (in the case of a tribe) acquires for each individual the image of their father after the flesh, vacillating in consistency and transforming at the same pace as him, and that "ultimately this god is nothing more than a father at an upper level."<sup>1</sup> Although psychoanalysis is as yet unable to shed light upon the other origins and meanings of the concept of God, this paternal element in the idea of god still deserves a great deal of attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Opere I*, trad. Leonard Gavriliu, Ed. Stiintifica, Bucuresti, 1991, p. 149.

It follows then that the emergence and the development of religion is accompanied and succeeded by a sense of culpability, fostered and bred in the sphere of the Super-Ego, and born out of the repression and the rejection of the sexual libido which becomes dislocated in the shape of a significant figure. In the case of the Oedipus complex, the primordial situation repeats itself under circumstances which from the very beginning ensure the lasting triumph of the father, but also the life of the son and his future potentiality of taking his father's place.

The countless somatic, psychic and social processes that had for a consequence this realization virtually describe the contents of the Freudian psychology. The function of the father is gradually transferred, from his individual position, to his social position, then to his projection in his son (the conscience), to God, to various institutions and agents that train the son to become a mature and moderate member of his society<sup>2</sup>.

In the development and maturation of the individual, foremost is not the actual killing of the father, but rather the process of maturation of the Oedipus complex, which applies in every human group where there is a father, a mother and a son or a daughter<sup>3</sup>. The psychoanalytical observation suggests the existence of some connections between the phallic organization, the Oedipus complex, the threat of castration, the formation of the Superego and the period of latency. These validate the thesis that this complex perishes because of the threat of castration<sup>4</sup>.

Under the impetus of evolutionism, Freud traced back the stages of evolution of civilization according to the model of psychosexual development of the Ego. It thus appears that, both in the history of the individual and in the history of civilization, there can be identified an experience of radical dependence on a self-power. Development resides in how we relate to this self-power and in how we manage to achieve a status of relative autonomy in relation to it. This evolution is done in three successive stages which Dr. Ion Mânzat briefly outlines as follows<sup>5</sup>:

*The individual level*

1. The undifferentiated *narcissis* of the pre-Oedipian stage:

- prevalence of the principle of pleasure;
- undifferentiated and full participation in the maternal power;
- the almighty Ego participates in the almighty world.

2. The *Oedipian stage* – differentiation of the Ego and identification with the father:

- the ideal of the Ego (almightiness) is impersonated by the father, whence the active identification with the paternal figure;
- the formation of the Superego and the heteronomous ethics.

3. The *post-Oedipian stage*:

- prevalence of the principle of reality;
- fulfilment of the Ego through socialization;
- internalization of the rules and access to an autonomous moral responsibility (adolescence).

Freud's harshest criticism of Christianity is voiced in "The Future of an Illusion" (1927). In it he declared that the final contribution to the criticism of the religious perspective on the world comes from psychoanalysis<sup>6</sup>. Freud bases his critique on Christianity as practiced in the West and claims that religion is grounded in the need for illusions that dominates the human being in its attempt to defend itself against the perils of existence. He restates that *religion is humanity's universal obsessive neurosis* and that it is one the verge of being abandoned just as the child abandons his early neurosis as he pursues the course of his development.

<sup>2</sup> Marcuse, H., *Eros si civilizatie. O cercetare filosofica asupra lui Freud.*, trad Catalina si Louis Ulrich, Ed. Trei, Bucuresti, 1996, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Moldovan, I., *Introducere in psihologia vietii religioase.* Ed Logos, Cluj, 2001, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> Mânzat, Ion, *Psihologia credinței religioase. Transconștiința umană*, foreword by Acad. Alex. Surdu, (Bucharest: Ed. Știință & Tehnică, 1997), p.135.

<sup>6</sup> S. Freud. *Über Weltanschauung*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, p.180, in Gay, Peter, *Un ebreo senza Dio*, p.43.

Freud's solution aims to facilitate humanity's evolution towards maturity; to this purpose he suggests a shift of perspectives towards science and its progress.

In this work Freud converses with an imaginary interlocutor - whom we may safely identify with the Protestant pastor Oskar Pfister, to whom he declares his unshakeable faith in science: *No, our science is not an illusion.*

Oskar Pfister (1873-1956), a pastor and pedagogue from Zürich, was "a faithful friend of Freud's"<sup>7</sup> with whom he maintained a regular correspondence for more than 30 years. He defended in particular the idea that a cure of the soul could be enriched through Freud's ideas and that the role of the pastor enlightened by psychoanalysis was to guide his patient towards an eradication of his neurosis, following which he would be able to recognize the value of the Christian faith. About this deep friendship, the biographer Jones says:

"Freud had a genuine passion for him, he admired his profoundly moral habits, his generous altruism and his optimism towards the human nature. The idea of having for a friend a Protestant pastor to whom he could write letters beginning with "Dear great man of God" must certainly have amused the "pertinent heretic" who could always count on a pastor's tolerance."<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning Pfister felt his pastoral ministry as both frustrating and depressing. His father was a liberal pastor who, following the death of somebody in his congregation, started studying medicine so as to be able to help both the soul and the body of his believers. Pfister follows in his footsteps and is shocked to find that, in front of human suffering, theology is, as compared with psychology, powerless. In 1908 he declines an invitation to occupy a seat of systematic theology so as to be able to focus on his missionary activity. Psychoanalysis provides the pastor with what he needed the most in the realization of his pastoral vocation. He stated:

"Owing to Freud, the supreme functions of life underwent scrutiny with the microscope of the soul and yielded signs indicative of their origin, of their interconnections and laws of development, of the profound significance of the totality of the psychic events."<sup>9</sup>

He becomes an analyst-pastor and a friend of Freud through the intermediary of Jung.

In a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> November 1928, with reference to "The Future of An Illusion" and "The Problems of the layman's analysis", Freud writes to Pfister:

"... I don't know whether you have guessed the connection between the Layman's Analysis and the Illusion. In the first I attempt to defend psychoanalysis against the practitioner, in the other, against the clergymen. I would like to entrust it to a corporation that does not yet exist, a lay corporation of ministers of the soul who do not need to be doctors and do not have the right to be priests."<sup>10</sup>

When Freud wrote this study, he must have undoubtedly been driven by an internal necessity and by a wish to respond to the religious interrogations voiced by the French writer Romain Rolland. The latter had written in 1919 a play entitled "Liluli" (an onomatopoeia derived from the French "l'illusion") which he dedicated to Freud in the following terms: "to the destroyer of illusions, Prof. Dr. Freud."

To this Freud answered through a book the title of which echoed the "Liluli." On the other hand, Rolland had also manifested interest in the religious sentiment, which he saw in connection with the "oceanic sentiment", notion that Freud will resume in his "Discomfort in civilization."

The publication of this work was to have an instantaneous echo and to trigger heated debates. The pastor from Zürich, his friend, Pfister, published an energetic response entitled *The Illusion of A Future* (1928) in which he was drawing Freud's attention to the fact that he had made confusion between religion and faith.

<sup>7</sup> Quinoz, Jean-Michael, *Citindu-l pe Freud: descoperirea cronologică a operei freudiene*, traducere Sorina Pătrașcu, Editura Fundației Generația, București, 2005., p. 371.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>9</sup> O. Pfister, *Die Pädagogik der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, p.168 in Gay, Peter, *Un ebreo senza Dio*, Muglino, Bologna, 1998., p.88.

<sup>10</sup> Quinoz, Jean-Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 371m, p. 372.

Freud disagrees. He states that man is endowed with widely diverse instinctive predispositions, upon which the experiences lived in early childhood impress the final orientation. Hence, the extent to which a person is educable determines the extent to which a change of society is feasible<sup>11</sup>.

In order to protect civilization against revolt and the destructive tendencies of the individuals, an equitable distribution of the resources and the employment of coercion are insufficient; what is needed instead is the employment of those means which may allow people to become reconciled with civilization and find an indemnification for their sacrifices. By these means the psychic progress of humanity has come to a progressive internalization of constraint owing to the edification of the Super-Ego.

The religious ideas - in the broadest sense of the word - constitute, however according to Freud, the chief moral value for the maintenance of civilization. Before proceeding to a more specific explanation of what the value of the religious representations actually consist of, he talks about the humble nature which does not demand from us any containment of our instincts and in no way impedes their gratification. Faced with the perpetual threat posed by nature, people came together and created civilization which, among other things, has the role of making life in common possible. The main task of civilization is to protect us against nature.

Freud maintains that religion is rooted in the Oedipus complex and that its obvious compulsive-obsessive character is primarily accounted for by the need for repression, and then by the need for expiation of the sense of guilt generated by the complex. With regard to this, clinical evidence abounds which proves the existence of repression as a defence mechanism, as function activated to keep something out of the boundaries of conscience<sup>12</sup>.

These implications mentioned in the Freudian theory are all the more questionable as they require a uniformity of experience between the past and the present, fact that is entirely incompatible with the Oedipus complex<sup>13</sup>. The psychoanalyst's audacity in issuing theories across a number of fields earned him criticism from more than one direction. A scientific research carried out by a young German Benedictine Kasimir Birk in the '70s led to the identification of a number of fourteen accusations brought against the Freudian doctrine. This was accordingly accused of being materialistic, naturalistic, scepticist, mechanical, evolutionist, rationalistic, empiricist, positivistic, relativistic, physiologicistic, biologicistic, psychologicistic, historicist and atheistic<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 369.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Gay, Peter, *op. cit.* p. 61.