

FOUR CHALLENGES TO RELIGION¹

I—Freud

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RELIGION is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.' Freud's famous utterance, torn from its context like that, had all the makings of a slogan. Whether we liked it, or found it thoroughly offensive, it was—like the one about the 'opium of the people'—difficult, impossible to forget. Whether or not it wins our rational assent, it 'rings a bell' of some sort, there is (we feel) 'something in it'. It will probably survive when the book in which it appeared is quite forgotten. It has already survived devastating criticism of its own premisses.

Freud's critique of religion, perhaps reflected indirectly, perhaps thoroughly misunderstood and distorted, is part of our modern heritage. Believers or unbelievers, we can hardly have escaped its impact. Comparatively few can have studied, tested, examined it for themselves, but it can be all the more impressive for that. This was no case of a specialist trespassing outside his own field to express opinions on subjects about which he is no authority. When Freud said religion was a neurosis, he was presumably talking about what he knew. He was a pioneer discoverer of causes and cures of neurosis.

An obsession of humanity or not, religion was certainly something like an obsession with Freud himself. The subject seems to have fascinated him; in his books he can never leave it alone for very long. Perhaps it is ungracious to subject Freud's writings to his own technique of psycho-analytic investigation, yet it is difficult to avoid doing so; and we begin to suspect that his anxious, sometimes tortuous, theorising about religion tells us more about Freud than religion. But that is hardly our business; we must consider what he says on its own merits, rather than his private motives for saying it. And it may be worth while to reset the slogan in its original context.

His first important utterance on the subject occurs in *Totem and*

¹ The first of a series of broadcasts given on the B.B.C. European Service on the Sundays of January, 1952.

Taboo in 1907. He then wrote, 'Psycho-analytic investigation of the individual teaches with especial emphasis that god is in every case modelled after the father, and that our personal relation to a god is dependent on our personal relation to our physical father. . . . If psycho-analysis deserves any consideration at all, then the share of the father in the idea of god must be very important, quite aside from all the other origins and meanings of god upon which psycho-analysis can throw no light.' Here there is at least a note of caution: a recognition that there is more to the matter than comes within the competence of psycho-analysis. Most ethnologists, I believe, as well as many psychologists, will disagree that 'God is in every case modelled after the father': they will insist that mother and daughter goddesses, and even divine sons, appear to be much older and more widespread in human religion, and that father-gods appear comparatively late. But, as Freud was to say later: 'I am not an ethnologist, but a psycho-analyst. . . . It is my good right to select from ethnological data what would serve me for my analytical work.' That is fair and frank enough. But will such arbitrary selection bear the weight to be built upon it?

How much was to be built appeared in 1926, in *The Future of an Illusion*. The illusion of course was religion; its future was that it had not much of a future, because, it was implied, psycho-analysis would eventually show it to be an illusion. When we ask Freud what he means by religion, his answer is as clear as it is surprising: 'I take my stand by this', he forewarns us, 'religion consists of certain dogmas, assertions about facts or conditions of . . . reality, which tell one something that one has not oneself discovered, and which claim that one should give them credence.' Now, on any hypothesis, this won't do for a definition of religion. It is far too broad: on Freud's own admission it would apply equally well to a geography book: but there is the difference that the assertions of the geography book are verifiable by methods which Freud will recognise as valid; assertions about God are not. But Freud's definition is also far too narrow. However important or otherwise may be creeds or dogmas for religion, nobody who has ever met religion of any sort, in themselves or others, could seriously suppose it *consists* of them—and (apparently) nothing else. But that is constantly the layman's trap in reading Freud; it isn't so much that he must learn a strange and difficult jargon, as that familiar words like 'religion', as well as 'sex' and 'incest', are

given an unfamiliar extent of meaning until little is left that means quite what it seems to say. But once religion has been confined to dogmas and assertions, the task of showing God to be an illusory rationalisation of unconscious wishes is greatly simplified.

But now we have to notice something that is vital if we are to weigh the value of Freud's views on religion at all accurately. Freud had his own private meaning for the word 'illusion' as well. We read with astonishment that 'an illusion is not necessarily an error . . . it need not be necessarily false . . . unrealisable or incompatible with reality'. In Freud's private vocabulary *any* belief, true or false, is an illusion, 'when wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation'. And if we ask him what wish-fulfilment is, we find it is the response to a basic psychological demand and need. Freed from Freud's novel and unconventional language, it all adds up (so far) to commonplace platitudes. Religious teachers themselves have always supposed that they were meeting inner needs and demands of the soul.

Undoubtedly Freud himself believed religious belief to be not only an illusion in his peculiar sense of the word, but also untrue. Chapter Five of *The Future of an Illusion* is wholly devoted to a sort of refutation of the truth-value of religious statements; but the arguments, such as they are, have nothing to do with the findings of psycho-analysis, or indeed with anything about which Freud could claim to speak with greater authority than anybody else. They seldom rise above the level of the cheaper tracts of Victorian rationalism. So far as psycho-analysis is concerned, the untruth of religion is assumed, not proved. The findings of psycho-analysis will claim no more than to show how the illusion was brought about.

What then were the findings of psycho-analysis about religion? Most of *The Future of an Illusion* is an elaboration of the theory already quoted from *Totem and Taboo*, eked out with some highly tendentious speculation about primaeval hordes and parricides. God, in short, is 'at the bottom an exalted father', a phantasy substitute for the actual, and never wholly satisfactory, parent: a projection to compensate for an infantile sense of helplessness. There is little to that (apart from the language) that is strikingly new. Jews and Christians for thousands of years have cheerfully sung the psalm-verse: 'When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord taketh me up'. 'Our Father who art in heaven' would be

meaningless to us had we no knowledge or experience of fathers who are on earth, nor of their children's relationships to them. It is neither new nor startling that religious relationships—or for that matter any human relationships—grow out of parental relationships, call them infantile sexuality if you must; nor is it to be wondered at that subsequent relationships are largely conditioned by these original ones. What is odd is the point of view, and the conclusion that it is therefore all abnormal and neurotic. Oaks grow from acorns, but we do not ordinarily think of an oak as a disease, a 'substitute' for an acorn which has been compelled to grow into something else because an unkindly environment has prevented its remaining an acorn. Yet that is about what Freud's argument amounts to; and it is easy to see how it happened. Psycho-analysis was born and nurtured in the climate of Victorian science, with its concentration on past, mechanistic causes, at the expense of consideration in terms of function, dynamism, finality. Almost inevitably judgments of genetic origins get confused with judgments of ontological value.

Freud's presentation of psycho-analysis assumes atheism, it does not even claim to prove it. Several of his followers, among whom Dalbiez and Pfister are prominent, have set out to disengage Freud's psychology from his metapsychological theories and prejudices. In England we have had the remarkable effort of Mr B. G. Sanders in his *Christianity after Freud*, to re-present Freud's psychology on the supposition that there is a God, instead of on the supposition that there is not. Mr Sanders is prepared to swallow Freud's psychology hook, line and sinker; but meanwhile, the sufficiency of Freud's theories and methods have been radically criticised by psychologists themselves on their own ground. Here, it seems to me, the work of Freud's former colleague, C. G. Jung, is outstanding. Once we question with him the sufficiency of the repression-theory to account for all unconscious contents, and are ready to detect function and purpose, as well as historic causation, in their manifestations, Freud's account of the genesis of religious belief is found to be at best partial and lop-sided.

And yet, I think, by no means valueless. If religion is found to be withering in Western man and society, is not this largely due to the fact that it has often become over-intellectualised, top-heavy, uprooted from its lowly origins in elemental, instinctive

human needs? If Freud's challenge brings us back to conscious awareness of that, it may in spite of itself, render religion a signal service.

Nor, I think, is Freud's conception of religion as a universal *neurosis* entirely without truth and value—once we have understood his terminology. We must remember that for him, not only religion, but dreams, unbidden phantasies, slips of the tongue and pen—everything short of an unrealisable ideal of complete consciousness—is somehow abnormal and pathological. But theology will also confirm that religion, in the sense of creeds and external cults, arises from man's relative unconsciousness, from his incomprehension of—and disharmony with—the creative mind behind the universe, from his own inner conflicts and divisions. Such religion, (the only religion that can come under empirical observation) is, in theological language, the result of man's fall from original innocence, his remoteness on this earth from divine vision. There is no such religion in the beginning of the Bible—in Paradise—and there is none in the heavenly City at the end: 'I saw no temple therein; for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it'. Freud was surely right in sensing that religion as we know it was somehow a sign of some radical abnormality and incompleteness in man, but unduly optimistic in supposing it could be psycho-analysed away. Theology has perhaps been more realistic in insisting that this irregularity must be accepted together with all its consequences.

Note: The May issue will include Fr Victor White's second 'Challenges to Religion' article: this will deal with C. G. Jung.