

Critical Reflections on Freudian Theory of Religion

Etim E. Okon Ph.D
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar,
Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: dretimokon55@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is an attempt to examine critically the views of Sigmund Freud on religion, and the socio-cultural milieu in which his thoughts germinated. What is the relevance of Freudian psychology of religion to contemporary scholarship? The study discovered that while the views of Freud on religion may not be altogether correct, his ideas on human nature are relevant to conservative religious thought. Freud was neither an adherent nor a student of religion, but his view on religion has been a subject of debate for many years. The study supports any effort(s) to edit and modify Freudian views on religion to make it more relevant for theistic purposes. We shall compare and contrast contemporary research findings in the social-scientific study of religion with the hypothetical formulation of Freud.

Key words: Freudian theory of religion; Sigmund Freud and religion;

Introduction

Although Sigmund Freud was not an expert in academic Religious Studies, his views on religion has continued to generate serious attention even after his demise. Freud was educated at the Medical School of the University of Vienna. Freud's biography shows that he has never read religion in any academic setting. Sigmund Freud was born to a middle class merchant Jewish family on May 6, 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia in Germany. His father Jacob who was forty years old traded in cloth. His mother Amalie was twenty years, and the third wife of Jacob. At the age of nine, Freud passed the entrance examination into the Gymnasium, where his exceptional intellectual ability was first noticed. He was the best student from the first year, and graduated *summa cum laude* at the age of seventeen, with a determination to pursue a career in science and with the challenge to unravel the secrets of nature.

At the age of seventeen he enrolled at the Medical School of the University of Vienna in 1873. While in the medical school, Freud took more electives in biology, studied comparative anatomy in the laboratory of the Darwinian, Carl Claus. Freud did not limit his scope to science courses, but in addition offered several courses in logic, Greek, philosophy, psychology and Darwinism. The University of Vienna in the late nineteenth century had a reputation as an academic centre of excellence. Freud was taught and trained by world-renowned physicians and scholars like Theodor Meynert, Ernst Brucks et al.

Brucks gave the leadership in the decision to change from a philosophical to a physiological view of nature with the conviction "that ultimately psychological phenomena could be explained in terms of physiological processes in turn by physical and chemical laws" (Winson 1986: 63). The University of Vienna was very suitable for the training of Freud. There was a long tradition of culture. Medical students were allowed to take electives in the humanities. Freud graduated on March 31, 1881 at the age of twenty five.

Critical Evaluation of Freudian Theory of Religion

Freud's ambivalence to religion has been a subject of discussion for many years. Freud prided himself as a "godless Jew", a product of the age of Enlightenment, a conquistador and a man of science. And that it is only someone like him that could have discovered the hidden world of psychoanalysis (Freud 1964:232). As an avowed atheist and agnostic, Freud admired Baruch Spinoza who was of the view that the Bible should be read critically like any other book (Freud 1964: 232).

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1961b) traces the origin of religion to the Oedipus complex of primeval man. He utilized ethnological materials to explore social psychological and anthropological issues (98). In the Oedipus complex Freud depicted the hostility that young men have against their fathers which led them to conspire and kill their fathers so that they can take his wife. Freud posited that the totem feast in primordial societies was a commemoration of the fearful deed which has led to man's sense of guilt or original sin.

The theory of Oedipus complex as postulated by Freud is best understood in the primordial stage of human development, where small groups each were dominated by a father – figure. The father is probably eliminated violently by a son; attempt to displace the new leader leads to an agreement which culminates in the incest taboo (prohibition of sexual relationship within the family). Freud posited that slaying of an animal, which symbolized the deposed and dead father establish the relationship between totemism and taboo.

It was in this theory that Freud shared his views on the origins of primal religions which showed qualities of patriarchal totemism. Freud wrote: "psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with special emphasis that god is in every case modeled after the father, and that our personal relation to our physical father.... If psychoanalysis deserves any consideration at all, then the share of the father in the idea of a god must be very important, quite aside from all the other origins and meanings of god upon which psychoanalysis can throw no light" (Freud 1961 b: 196).

White (1960) has rightly observed that Freud has at least admitted the limitations psychoanalysis in unveiling the inner content of readily in his theory. White (1960) avers that most ethnologist and psychologist will probably 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" (p.64-65).

When Freud (1961b) wrote *Totem and Taboo*, anthropological studies of religion, culture and society was minute. Scholars are in agreement that the 'fact' which guided Freudian views were incorrect, hence his theory was unscientific. It was a clear violation of scientific methodology for Freud to comment authoritatively on religion which is completely outside scientific preview. Freudian view that religion is nothing other than the projection of individual hang-ups and immaturities into the other world and is unacceptable. For Freud (1961b) to assert that "God is nothing other than an exalted father", and that "what constitutes the root of every form of religion is a longing for the father" (*Totem and Taboo* 147-148), shows that Freud was misguided in his thought. Religion to the insiders is more than the quest for the father-figure. Religious experience has shown that man is instinctively religious and that there are many people who cannot do without religion. The theory of the Oedipus complex is not only unscientific, but illogical.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud attempted without success to reconstruct biblical history in accordance with the general theory of psychoanalysis. William Meissner has pointed out that Freud's first mention of Moses was in a letter to Carl Jung in 1908, in which Jung was referred to as Joshua who will lead the chosen people into the Promised Land, while Freud like Moses,

would view it from a distance (234). Freudian (1964b) hypothesis in *Moses and Monotheism* was rejected by theologians and historians, since it was in opposition to the criteria of historical evidence. The work was flawed by faulty data selection and lack of appropriate methodology and verification.

The figure of Moses as a great prophet who led his people to the Promised Land was a metaphor for Freud himself, who led a western civilization to the unknown realm of the unconscious. When Freud saw for the first time Michelangelo's imposing statue of Moses in 1901, he was captivated and absorbed in it. Freud spent weeks to study, sketch and analyze the statue and concluded with a thoughtful essay that "transformed the traditional view of Moses into Freud's own vision of restraint power- a concrete expression of Freud's own ideal of the intellectual restraint of passion" (Meissner 234).

Freud was fascinated on his achievement in creating a positive and thought-provoking image out of Michelangelo's artistic genius and he wrote: "Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses. He had modified the theme of the broken tablets; he does not let Moses break them in his wrath, but makes him be influenced by the anger that they will be broken and makes him calm that wrath or at any rate prevent it from becoming an act. In this way he has added something new and more than human to the figure of Moses; so that the giant frame with its tremendous physical power becomes only a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself" (qtd. in Meissner 234).

Freud painted the image of the prophet who without honour among his people, yet was resilient and focused, who finally prevailed with a universal acclamation *Moses and Monotheism* shows Freud's depth of knowledge in the Pentateuch and the critical biblical scholarship of his time. He quoted Julius Wellhausen and William Robertson Smith profusely. Freud lamented the historic frustration which occurred when Moses became an Egyptian and the Jews were deprived the leadership of one of their great cultural heroes.

Freud endorsed the historic rebellion of Amenhotep IV (Akhnaton), who ignored the polytheistic tradition of his people and courageously established the monotheistic cult of Aten. Freudian origins of monotheism were countered and rejected by many biblical scholars. Freud accepted the unsubstantiated thesis of Ernst Sellin, who claimed to have discovered evidence of the murder of Moses. Freud embellished the hypothesis that Moses was prevented from entering the Promised Land and eventually killed because of Jewish opposition to his imposition of monotheistic religion.

Moses according to Freud did not enter the Promised Land because his son murdered him. This idea can be linked to Freud's fantasy in the murder of the father of the primal horde as the origin of religion in his *Totem and Taboo*. Freud (1961b) maintains that it was later in the reunification at Kadesh under a new leadership by a second Moses that Israel adopted a new religion- the worship of the volcano god, Yahweh. Freud was convinced the elements of Egyptian monotheism were present in the worship of Yahweh.

Some psychoanalysts are of the opinion that Freud's argument in *Moses and Monotheism* actually portrays his inner guilt for his hostile wishes against his father. It is also speculated that Freud was bent on overcoming the guilt and also transform himself into a new messiah who would lead his people out of psychological bondage through the apparatus of psychoanalysis. But this cannot be without the destruction of the father's religion. Freud wrote: "There was no place in the framework of the religion of Moses for a direct expression of the murderous hatred of the father. All that could come to light was a mighty reaction against it- a sense of guilt on account of

that hostility, a bad conscience for having sinned against God and for not ceasing to sin. This sense of guilt.... Had yet another superficial motivation, which nearly disguised its true origin. Things were going badly for the people; the hope resting on the favour of God failed in fulfilment (qtd. in Meissner 235).

In *The Future of Illusion*, Freud (1964b) presented his case against religion. 'Illusion' in Freudian psychology represents any belief system that is based on human wishes. Freud insisted that it does not imply that the system is false: "An illusion is not the same as an error; it is indeed not necessarily an error" (*The Future of an Illusion* 54-55). But for Christianity, Freud was convinced that it is false. Religious doctrines according to Freud "are all illusions, they do not admit of proof, and no one can be compelled to consider them as true or to believe them... of the reality value most of them we cannot judge; just as they cannot be proved, neither can they be refuted" (*Future of an Illusion* qtd. in Needleman, Bierman and Gould 67-68). It was also in *The Future of an Illusion* that Freud defined: "Religion consist 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" (1964b:43).

White (1960) has criticized Freudian definition of religion as unsatisfactory, far too broad and at the same time too narrow (65). It is surprising that an empiricist like Freud should confine the religious experience of mankind to dogmas and assertions. Freudian view that man's quest for God is an illusory rationalisation of unconscious wishes does not have any historical or anthropological support. Kelsey (1982) in his *Christo-Psychology* faulted Freudian psychology of religion as a theoretical construct that sounds plausible but is supported by the facts we have already (24).

It is not possible, or even reasonable to discard the views of Sigmund Freud and confine his legacies to the archive. Freud is a colossus in intellectual history. He labored for many years and studied science and liberal arts and came out with new ideas. Freud was convinced that much of human feeling and action is guided by the unconscious and childhood experiences (Lawrie 302). Freud held that "man's behavior was not always consciously directed and that it was influenced by the unconscious wishes stored in the Id" (Lawrie 304).

Drever (1968) in his *Dictionary of Psychology* has defined the unconscious as "the aggregate of the dynamic elements constituting the personality of some of which the individual may be aware as part of his make-up, of other entirely unaware, all being structural, rather than process" (306). The definition of the 'unconscious' in J.P. Chaplin's *Dictionary of Psychology* is more lucid: "(1) characterising an activity for which the individual does not know the reason or motive for the act, (2) Pertaining to the state of an individual who has suffered a loss of consciousness, such as a person in a faint or coma, (3) Pertaining to all psychic process that cannot be brought to awareness by ordinary means (481).

In 1913, Freud (1949) claimed that his metapsychology was not limited to abnormal phenomena such as 'conversion', hysteria, compulsions and obsessions, but that it covers normal psychological phenomena like dreams, slip of tongue, jokes and unintentional actions which are equally purposive. Freud described the vast deposit of unconscious instinctual impulses as the Id (Latin for "it"). The rational part of the mind he called the Ego (the conscious and the preconscious). Freud also mentioned the super-ego, which is the psychoanalytic equivalent of "conscience", which is formed by the internalization of parental standards (Lawrie 304). The Ego according to Freud, developed in the earliest years of life, while the Id, is present from the time of birth. The super-ego works against Id and controls the Ego to check the impulse from Id from having satisfaction.

During the child's "libidinal" development (*libido* is Latin for "desire"), his interest can be found on different parts of the body with erotic sensitivity, which resides first in the mouth, later in the arms, and at the age of four, around the genitals. If a growing child passes through excessive frustration or gratification during any of these periods, the emotional development shall be arrested or "fixated". Emotional difficulty in adult is likely to regress to attitudes that the person had at the time of fixation in childhood.

Freudian Oedipus complex (Greek myth) that described incestuous love for the mother and jealous hatred for the father develops during the genital period. In the Oedipus complex, Freud accepted the Darwinian hypothesis of a primal horde of women and young males who were governed by the brute strength of the father. The father-figure is an absolute despot, who is not controlled by any law, but his own will, if any of the males tries to check his privileges and take over the females, the attacks and kills them, or reduces them to submission. Those who were chased away tried to possess the females from the horde, or set up their own groups. Those who decide to remain must conditionally repress their desires towards their father's wives.

CONCLUSION

Criticism of Freudian theory of religion has come from many quarters, academic psychologists have accused Freud's hypothesis of being unscientific, theistic and humanistic psychologists have also accused Freudian theory of being reductionistic (Hurding 70). Freud presents a picture of a frustrated humanity where human beings in adulthood faces a universe that is in a state of confusion and ambiguity that culminates into a scenario of annihilation, isolation and meaninglessness (Jones and Butman 77). Freud observes that the tension of human existence creates unbearable anxiety, man therefore creates for himself a self-protecting mechanism and a comforting illusion as a shield against invasive discomfort and danger.

Freud sees nature as anti-human: "There are the elements which seem to mock at all human control: the earth, which quakes, is rent asunder, and buries man and all his works, the water, which in tumult, floods and submerges all things; the storm, which drives all before it; there are the diseases, which we have only lately recognized as the attacks of other living creatures; and finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all.... With these forces nature rises up before us, sublime, pitiless, inexorable; thus she brings again to mind our weakness and helplessness" (The Future of an Illusion 21-32). Freud argued persuasively that nature is against mankind and that life on earth is hard to endure. Man is battling on daily basis with internal difficulties, animosities and elemental catastrophe which leaves him in a permanent condition of anxious suspense and severe injury to his innate narcissism.

Religious ideas according to Freud do not have any spiritual or supernatural origin. Religion is man's effort to defend himself against the supremacy of nature and fate that threatens him on earth. Man with a menaced self-esteem craves for consolation and desires sincerely that life and the universe must be rid of terror and anomie. Through culture, man pursues the plan for humanization of nature. Man in a state of helplessness and psychic paralysis creates religion with a god. Freud pointed out the threefold task of the gods: "they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile one to the cruelty of fate, particularly as shown in death, and they must make amends for the sufferings and privations that the communal life of culture has imposed on man" (qtd. in Storr 1989: 89).

Religious ideas according to Freud do not have divine origin but psychical. The dogmas of religion are neither the residue of experience nor the result of reflection, "they are illusions, fulfilment of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind; the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes. We know already that the terrifying effect of infantile

helplessness aroused the need for protection” (*The Future of an Illusion* 25-28). Man is vulnerable and he needs a loving father, “Thus the benevolent rule of divine providence allays our anxiety in face of life’s dangers, the establishment of a moral world order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which within human culture have so often remained unfulfilled, and the prolongation of earthly existence by a future life provides in addition the local and temporal setting for these wish-fulfilments” (*The Future of an Illusion* 21-22).

Religion in Freudian theory is a kind of universal neurosis and symbolic means to meet unfulfilled childhood desires which humanity substitutes for a more authentic personal reality which science offers. Vitz has suggested that Freud’s rejection of religion can be attributed to life experiences and important events in his own life, and that his antipathy against the profound ambivalence about Christianity is likely to be a function of his own projective tendencies. Vitz has also suggested that the trauma of the early loss of a nanny who probably was a committed Catholic may have had negative psychic repercussion on Freud. Vitz went further to document Freud’s involvement with the occult. Hurding posits that there is more to Freud’s rejection of religion than his fascinations for the scientific method (73).

Jones and Butman have identified epistemological problems in Freudian theory of religion. “In view of the fact that the theory can be applied to explain everything, and human experience is ‘shaped’ and determined by irrational, unconscious forces, it follows that we are ultimately locked in a closed system where everything that human think or believe can be rendered as a function of early childhood factors. If atheism can be explained in as facile and convincing a fashion as religion, then there is no ultimate hope of ever knowing anything truly” (78).

Freudian theory of religion is not only mechanistic, but also naturalistic. It assumes that all mental activities are biological and instinctual in origin. Freud has given the world a reductionistic explanation about religious matters. Freud was convinced that biological and physical laws determine every aspect of human experience. There is no room for the supernatural in this theory. Jones and Butman writes: “Freud’s system is a closed system of cause and effect with no room for a transcendent reality” (79).

Paul Ricoeur echoes the same criticism, that Freud did not give religion a chance in his theory: “He allows no distinction between the underlying intention of religion and its often regressive forms; he treats it as though it remains permanently archaic, without a history locked into endless repetitions of the Oedipus theme; and he avoids any serious exegesis of texts, presenting instead a psychology of the believer based on the neurotic model” (231-232). Yinger (1970) after a balanced assessment of Freudian theory of religion observed that “the serious weakness of Freud’s interpretation derive from the narrowness of his general theory and the selective nature of his evidence. His description of the consequences of religion-that it sustained inadequate institutions, prohibited critical thinking, prevented the continuing development of an adequate morality, and fostered an infantile fixation- is based primarily on the religious expressions of neurotic people (185).

Collins (1977) in his criticism of Freud observed that it was a questionable generalization for Freud to have reached the conclusion that the beliefs of emotionally disturbed people are typical of religious beliefs in general (101). Orville Walters in his article “Religion and Psychopathology” condemned Freudian reductionistic interpretation of religion, and insisted that the inclusion of persons with defective reality testing is bound to give a distorted view of religious experience. The schizophrenic’s impaired perception and (thinking) does not deprive him from participating in religious ceremonies, but to integrate his experience into a normative psychology of religion is comparable to treating the response of the schizophrenic to question

about bodily functions as illuminating human physiology (24). Freud ignored the limitations of science and scientific methodology.

It is a rule that science must rely on sense data and on measurement to arrive at the truth. Religious facts cannot easily yield to empirical analysis. It is not possible for science to study the supernatural. We rest our case with objective counsel of Collins (1977) “Scientific knowledge in itself can neither disprove nor prove the existence and influence of God. Individual scientists must be careful, therefore, not to go beyond their data and declare categorically that something does not exist just because they cannot observe it with their methods” (100).

References

- Chaplin, J. P.(1985) *Dictionary of Psychology*. New York: Dell
- Collins, G. R.(1977). *The Rebuilding of Psychology*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale
- Drever, J. (1968). *A Dictionary of Psychology*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin
- Freud, S. (1949). *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. (trans.) James Strachey, New York: Norton
- Freud, S. (1962). *Civilization and its Discontents*. (trans.) James Strachey, New York: Norton
- Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond Pleasure Principle*. (trans.) New York: Norton
- Freud, S. (1964). *The Future of an Illusion*. (trans.) W.D. Rodson-Scott, New York: Anchor
- Freud, S. (1964). *Moses and Monotheism*. London: Hogarth
- Freud, S. (1961). *Totem and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Hurding, R. (1985). *Roots and Shoots*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Lee, R. S. (1967) *Freud and Christianity*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin
- Jone, S. L. and Butman, R. E. (1991). *Modern Psychotherapies*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity
- Kelsey, M. T. (1982) *Christo-Psychology*. New York: Crossroad
- Ricour, P. (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. (trans.) Denis Savage, New Haven: Yale UP
- Storr, A. (1989). *Freud*. New York: Oxford UP
- Winson, J. (1986). *Brains and Psyche, the Biology of Consciousness*. New York: Vintage
- White V. (1960). *God and the Unconscious*. London: Fontana
- Yinger, J. M. (1970). *The Scientific Study of Religion*. London: Coker Macmillan .