

“The Future of an Illusion” Forty Years Later

Arvind SHARMA

The future of an illusion was first published in 1927.¹ It constitutes Freud's major statement on religion in general.² It is now over forty years since the book first appeared and created a sensation.³ How would a student of religion appraise it today?

In an earlier book, *Totem and taboo*, Freud had used psychological concepts oriented to the father to explain the origin of primitive religion. *The future of an illusion* extended this approach to “civilized” religion and thus helped to forge a link between psychology and religion. Even though the exact nature of the relationship as developed by Freud has since come under heavy fire, the pioneering work done by Freud in envisaging such a relationship was a lasting contribution to religious studies. From *The future of an illusion* stems yet another aspect of modern studies in religion. Already in this book we find psychological factors being used to explain the origins not only

1. The edition cited in this paper is Sigmund Freud, *The future of an illusion*, translated by W. B. Rholeson-Scott, revised and edited by James Strachey (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963).
2. This general quality of *The future of an illusion* distinguishes it from Freud's other works on religion. Thus *Totem and taboo* (1913), which predates the book under review, deals primarily with primitive religion, and *Moses and monotheism* (1939), a later publication, tries to unravel the Mosaic motif. Both are thus topically circumscribed. In *Civilization and its discontents* (1930), a successor to the work under review, Freud tackled the question of the meaning and purpose of life, a question also asked by religion. This question, however, is not raised in *The future of an illusion*, which is more concerned with the sources of religious feeling in the common man [see Gregory Zilboorg, *Freud and religion* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1959), p. 49].
3. Ernest Jones, *The life and work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3 (New York: Basic Books, 1957), p. 138.

of primitive religion but also of Christianity. Subsequently they were used to explain Judaism as well. Hence we see here the beginnings of a movement which led to the rise of psychological reductionism as one school of comparative religion⁴.

Thus the work under review was seminal for several subsequent developments in the study of religion. Difficulties appear, however, when one moves from these general contributions of the book to its specific thesis: that religion is an illusion which has no future. These difficulties arise irrespective of whether we review the book from the viewpoint of a futurist, a psychologist, a theologian, or a comparative religionist.

Freud called his book the future of an illusion. Has he not in it himself presented an illusion of the future? He visualized the future as consisting of the progress of science which represented man's maturity just as religion represented his childhood.⁵ But man, it seems, lives no more by science alone than by bread. He says that science's success proves it is no illusion.⁶ But if science's success proves it is no illusion, what of religion's success? Moreover, Freud understood religion or faith as relating to one's past. He did not realize that faith—especially faith in things unseen—relates also to the future. As he did not see this he saw no future for faith.⁷

To a psychologist it would appear that at some points Freud can be subjected to some of his own criticisms. In a sense science is Freud's religion. Moreover, his religion has gnostic elements inasmuch as he thought that the ills of humanity could be removed by the kind of esoteric gnostic knowledge contained in psychoanalysis. Again, Freud's own wish fulfillment is re-

4. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of primitive religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), chapter 2.

5. *The future of an illusion*, p. 81.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

7. See P. Rieff, *The mind of the moralist* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), p. 203.

lated to science and its role in the future. Indeed, he at times looked on himself as Moses, leading the people fallen (in religion) to the promised land (of science). His criticisms of the religious position can thus be turned against him.⁸

For a theologian Freud's work raises several difficulties.⁹ For one thing he takes a rather narrow view of religion from the point of view of a theologian.¹⁰ For another, working basically within a frame of thought that seems to subscribe to the *odium theologicum*, Freud seems to overlook the need for “faith” in man, a need into which the theologian delves even more systematically than the psychologist.¹¹ “The strange thing is that man will not learn that God is his father. That is what Freud would never learn and what all those who share his outlook forbid themselves to learn. At least, they never find the key to this knowledge.”¹² This faith relates to an individual's subjective life, and even if faith is an illusion, “it is only an illusion objectively, subjectively it is not so, for it is not the product of hallucination—the father is real.”¹³

It is, however, from the perspective of a comparative religionist that one finds the book most vulnerable. The basic datum used by Freud for his generalization is the Judaic-Christian tradition. Yet he does not seem to have done full justice to it. Religion for Freud is a search for security in a hostile world in which God plays the role played by a father in childhood. Yet

-
8. H. L. Philp, *Freud and religious belief* (London: Rockliff, 1956), p. 37 passim.
 9. See Peter Homans, *Theology after Freud* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970), pp. ix–xvii and frequently.
 10. Paul Tillich, *Theology of culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 8.
 11. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The nature and destiny of man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 43, n. 4.
 12. C. G. Jung, *Modern man in search of a soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.), p. 122.
 13. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of primitive religion*, p. 43; this reality being an actual fact for the primitive man and a subjective fact for the believer.

the prophetic side of this tradition—a key element in the Judaic-Christian constellation—makes the members of the tradition insecure and uncomfortable. Freud also overlooks the fact that the Judaic-Christian tradition also testifies to the mystery and hiddenness of God who is not completely manifested in revelation. Hence not only do the prophets of the tradition not reassure, the God of the tradition is not fully reassuring because of his hiddenness.

One must assert, moreover, that if Freud failed to do full justice to the sample used, he also selected an extremely limited sample. God as father is only one way of looking at God.¹⁴ Freud is not theocentric, merely patricentric. Thus Freud is dealing with a father-oriented notion of religion—a notion which does not have the same importance for the Indic religious tradition as for the Semitic. So from the point of view of the Indic tradition, Dr. Freud barked up the wrong tree.

When, from the point of view of comparative religion, one considers the methodology of the book, still other weaknesses show up. First, its approach is essentially a form of psychological reductionism vis-a-vis religion. It fails to take into account other possible models of reductionism such as the sociological or historical. The depth psychology explanation of religion is not the only one. If for Freud religion was the universal neurosis of mankind, for Marx it was the opiate of the people—an alternative Freud does not come to grips with. Second, the manner in which the psychological model of reductionism is applied in this book leaves several questions unanswered. Basic to the application of the model are analogues with the child. But whereas the child is a person, religion is a phenomenon. Can conclusions about the one be used as a basis for generalizing about the other? And even if resemblance is accepted between child-

14. See T. M. P. Mahadevan. *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Limited, 1960), p. 91.

hood and religion (for example, “both grow”), can analogous morphology be used as a key to etiology?

Thus from the standpoint of comparative religion the book takes into account only one method of reductionism and applies it in a biased way to a narrow sample. Moreover, in applying this method it relies too heavily on a biological analogy. One can, in concluding, now go a step further and ask: is a reductionist approach to religion sound?¹⁵ Comparative religionists may not have the answer, but at least they ask the question. Freud asked many questions—but this one, never.

15. One who works through open-ended questions of these kinds is likely to come out with something closer to H. Fingarette's *The self in transformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963) than to Freud's *The future of an illusion*.