

## Freud's Critique of Religion & its Implications

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## Freud (1856-1939)

- Born (6 May 1856) in a Jewish family Freiberg in Mähren, Moravia – now Czech Republic.
- In 1859, Moved to Leipzig; in 1860 to Vienna to study medicine; had special interest in neuropathology.
- In 1886, started private practice specialising in neural disorder.
- In 1938, moved to London and died there in 1939 (23 Sept.).

## Freud's Religious Background

- "My parents were Jews, and I have remained a Jew myself" (*An Autobiographical Study*, 1925).
- At the same time, describes himself as "an author who is ignorant of the language of holy writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers—as well as from every other religion" but who remains "in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature" (*Totem & Taboo*, 1930).

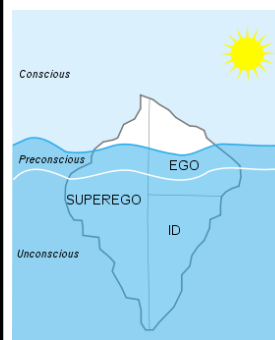
## Basic Concepts of Freud 1: The Unconscious

- **Conscious:** where the spot-light is on at our inner process;
- **Unconscious:** when the spotlight is on an inner process that was previously in the dark; this can be deduced from their effects (sometime things of everyday life – like slip of the tongue); bringing to awareness of unconscious material modifies effects;
- **Subconscious:** areas of the inner processes where the light is not yet reached.

## Basic Concepts of Freud 2: Defence Mechanisms

- Unconscious processes which reduce anxiety by distorting perception of external and internal reality;
- Useful and often necessary 'tactic' to manage perceived adverse situations – to maintain homeostasis of the psyche!
- But could be counter-productive long-term because the psyche uses up energy otherwise available for creative adjustment; also blocks reality-based development.

## Basic Concepts of Freud 3: Structure of the Psyche



- ID:** Pleasure principle; Irrational, impulsive component of personality: "I want this milk and I want it now"
- EGO:** Reality/Rational principle; Has the task of balancing between Id & Superego.
- SUPEREGO:** Moral principle; Moral order and ideals of society are internalised to form a superego – the moral watchdog

## Freud: On the origin of religion

### Totem & Taboo (1918):

- In the beginning was the male leader of the primal horde; he keeps all the females for himself; the young men gang up > kill him > and incorporate his strength & wisdom by eating him; This is referred to as 'patricide'.
- Then they **feel guilty**.
- To deal with guilt, they invent **taboos** (renouncing access to females of the horde/clan – incest taboo) and **totem** (the sacred animal that represents the slain father, normally not eaten, but eaten ritually once a year!
- These are early expressions of religion!

## Freud: Oedipus Complex

**Original Myth of Oedipus:** He is abandoned at birth, returns (*unknowing*) to his own country as an adult, kills king in battle and takes his wife as his own; only to realise he had killed his own father and married his own mother.

**Freudian Oedipus Complex:** each small boy wants his mother all to himself; so wants rid of the father; but fears him and can't beat him... so joins him by identifying with him and introjecting father's qualities of strength, wisdom, etc.

## From Oedipus Complex to the Father-God

- The psyche falls short of imitating the earthly father; and the qualities imbibed from the father are not adequate to deal with the difficulties and frustrations of the world...
- I want someone stronger and wiser to protect and reward me;
- So I project those desired qualities, and create a God!
- God: neurotic projection of the psyche of the unfulfilled desires.

## Freud: Religion is...

Religion: an illusion and a delusion;  
Religion was once necessary to restrain man's violent nature in the early stages of civilization, but today science and reason can replace it (*The Future of an Illusion*, 1927).

Freud's Conclusion: all religious belief can be explained through its function to society, not for its relation to the truth.

## Freud: On Religious Rituals

Religious rituals have the characteristics of neurotic compulsions (like washing hands):

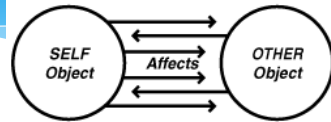
- Repeated;
- To be performed exactly;
- Feeling good (calm) when completed;
- Anxiety if omitted or 'not performed rightly'.

By providing a possibility for expression of collective neurosis, religion might protect us from individual neurosis.

## Evaluating Freud's Critique of Religion

- Intuitive conclusions and seem mythical! Not purely rational or scientific;
- Even Adler & Jung have not agreed with Freud's critique of religion – they see it playing positive role;
- Very Judeo-Christian in his concept of god; though attempts to look at 'primeval religion' (primitive religion), shows lacks of understanding of the sophistication of indigenous/traditional religions (I call: Primeval Religions)!
- However, Freud's criticism of religion could be considered a warning of the possible danger of an exaggerated religiosity – which might be in the realm of neurosis.

## Object Relations Theory



- \* The focus is on how the self (individual) relates to 'objects' (external world of people & things)
- \* The focus of PR: how this relationship becomes the template for humans relationship to religion and God!
- \* Source: Freud's concept of religion as illusion

## Inspiration: Freud

- \* Oedipus Complex
- \* The child's (esp. male) relationship with the father is marked by anxiety and guilt.
- \* ENVY > GUILT >

## Melanie Klein (1882-1960)



- \* The object the child relates to: The Mother > the breast.
- \* Comfort & Anxiety
- \* **Splitting**: good breast vs. bad breast!
- \* Splitting is a defence mechanism in dealing with the inability to integrate the positive and negative experiences of life.
- \* Examples of splitting in Christian tradition: God & Devil; unlike the taoist religion.

## Donald Winnicott (1896-1971): Transitional Object



Transitional objects like the blanket or teddy-bear is an object that provides comfort to the infant, but creating an illusory experience.

Religion in several ways provides consoling objects to create an illusory, intermediate area of experience that helps throughout life to bridge inner and outer realities (see Guntrap).

## Ana-Maria Rizzuto:

Work: *Birth of the Living God* (1979).

- \* Freud said belief in God based on child's idea of his father, Rizzuto: Freud was basically right, but God Representation (GR) draws from a variety of sources.
- \* She studied in detail 20 patients and 5 staff, none of them had formed the GR exclusively from one parental image. GR was formed from experience of real parents, wished-for parents, and feared parents.
- \* God-image develops through different stages of psychological development, or might stand in opposition to development.