

Freud on Religion

In my *Future of an Illusion* I was concerned much less with the deepest sources of religious feeling than with what the ordinary man understands by his religion, that system of doctrines and pledges that on the one hand explains the riddle of this world to him with an enviable completeness, and on the other assures him that a solicitous Providence is watching over him and will make up to him in a future existence for any shortcomings in this life. The ordinary man cannot imagine this Providence in any other form but that of a greatly exalted father, for only such a one could understand the needs of the sons of men, or be softened by their prayers and placated by the signs of their remorse. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so incongruous with reality, that to one whose attitude to humanity is friendly it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life. It is even more humiliating to discover what a large number of those alive today, who must see that this religion is not tenable, yet try to defend it inch by inch, as if with a series of pitiable rearguard actions. One would like to count oneself among the believers, so as to admonish the philosophers who try to preserve the God of religion by substituting for him an impersonal, shadowy, abstract principle, and say, "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!" Some of the great men of the past did the same, but that is no justification for us; we know why they had to do so.

The question, "What is the purpose of human life?" has been asked times without number; it has never received a satisfactory answer; perhaps it does not admit of such an answer. Many a questioner has added that if it should appear that life has no purpose, then it would lose all value for him. But these threats alter nothing. It looks, on the contrary, as though one had a right to dismiss this question, for it seems to presuppose that belief in the superiority of the human race with which we are already so familiar in its other expressions. Nobody asks what is the purpose of the lives of animals, unless peradventure they are designed to be of service to man. But this, too, will not hold, for with many animals man can do nothing – except describe, classify, and study them; and countless species have declined to be put even to this use, by living and dying and becoming extinct before men had set eyes upon them. So again, only religion is able to answer the question of the purpose of life. One can hardly go wrong in concluding that the idea of a purpose in life stands and falls with the religious system.

We will turn, therefore, to the less ambitious problem: what the behaviour of men themselves reveals as the purpose and object of their lives, what they demand of life and wish to attain in it. The answer to this can hardly be in doubt: they seek happiness, they want to become happy and to remain so. There are two sides to this striving, a positive and a negative; it aims on the one hand at eliminating pain and discomfort, on the other at the experience of intense pleasures. In its narrower sense, the word *happiness* relates only to the last. Thus human activities branch off in two directions – corresponding to this double goal – according to which of the two they aim at realizing, either predominantly or even exclusively.

As we see, it is simply the pleasure-principle which draws up the programme of life's purpose. This principle dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the very beginning; there can be no doubt about its efficiency, and yet its programme is in conflict with the whole world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. It simply cannot be put into execution, the whole constitution of things runs counter to it; one might say the intention that man should be *happy* is not included in the scheme of *Creation*.

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This behaviour reveals clearly enough its aim – that of making oneself independent of the external world, by looking for happiness in the inner things of the mind; in the next method the same features are even more marked. The connection with reality is looser still; satisfaction is obtained through illusions, which are recognized as such, without the discrepancy between them and reality being allowed to interfere with the pleasure they give.

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It is said, however, that each one of us behaves in some respect like the paranoiac, substituting a wish-fulfilment for some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him, and carrying this delusion through into reality. When a large number of people make this attempt together and try to obtain assurance of happiness and protection from suffering by a delusional transformation of reality, it acquires special significance. The religions of humanity, too, must be classified as mass-delusions of this kind. Needless to say, no one who shares a delusion recognizes it as such.

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Religion circumscribes these measures of choice and adaptation by urging upon everyone alike its single way of achieving happiness and guarding against pain. Its method consists in decrying the value of life and promulgating a view of the real world that is distorted like a delusion, and both of these imply a preliminary intimidating influence upon intelligence. At such a cost – by the forcible imposition of mental infantilism and inducing a mass-delusion – religion succeeds in saving many people from individual neuroses. But little more. There are, as we have said, many paths by which the happiness attainable for man can be reached, but none which is certain to take him to it. Nor can religion keep her promises either. When the faithful find themselves reduced in the end to speaking of God's inscrutable decree, they thereby avow that all that is left to them in their sufferings is unconditional submission as a last-remaining consolation and source of happiness. And if a man is willing to come to this, he could probably have arrived there by a shorter road.

from Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, chapter 2