

# PHIL 502: World Religions Seminar 1

The Academic Study of Religion  
Part 3: Freud

# Sigmund Freud (1859-1939)

- Born in Moravia
- Jewish (though non-observant) family
- Grew up in Austria but family fled Nazis and moved to England.

# Freud

- Became an MD, studied mental illness and did physiological research on the brain. Authored study on *repression* and had success in treating *neurosis*. Developed a conversational approach to psychological therapy, “psychoanalysis”.

# Freud - Key texts

- *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)
- *Totem and Taboo* (1913)
- *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)
- *Moses and Monotheism* (1938)

# Freud: The unconscious and conscious mind

- conscious mind – aware of our daily activities
- unconscious mind: hidden source of our drives (sex, food, etc.)
- assemblage of emotions, impressions, and ideas associated with everything a person has experienced, done, or wished to do

# Freud – The unconscious

- Some material from the unconscious “floats up” into the consciousness or in our dreams
- Some material is forced down – *repressed*
  - emotions that are too intense
  - forbidden by society

# Freud – Neurosis

- Powerful emotion or event too powerful to express openly
- Consciously “forgotten” but alive in the unconscious.
- Repressed thought and emotions *release themselves* in ways no “rational” person would engage in.

# Freud – Neurotic behavior

- Pointless movements
- unfounded fears
- irrational attachments
- obsessive rituals

# Freud – Place of religion

Freud wanted to find the place of religious belief in the sequence of normal emotional growth.

# Freud: Stages of Human Development

- Ego, superego, id
- id – basic drives and desires, earliest stage, unconscious
- superego – influences imposed on the individual from the outside world (family, tribe, society)
- ego – “reality principle” or “choosing center”. Ego performs the balancing act between the extremes.

# Freud: Stages of Human Development

- oral – infant
- anal – to 3
- phallic/genital 3-6
- non-sexual latency – to early teens.

# Freud: Oedipus complex

- Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother.
- Mirrors children in phallic stage:
- boys want to become sexual partners of their mothers
- girls have penis envy and desire mother

# Freud and Religion: starting points

- Freud saw no reason to believe in God
- No value or purpose in rituals of religious life
- Religious ideas do not come from gods
- Religious ideas do not come from sound thinking about the world
- Religious beliefs are erroneous superstitions

OK.

So if they're so obviously false,  
WHY do so many people  
hold these beliefs?

# Freud and Religion

- Similarities between his patients and religious people
- Both place emphasis on doing things in a ceremonial fashion

# Freud and Religion

- Both feel guilty unless they follow the rules of their rituals to perfection
- In both cases, ceremonies are associated with repression of basic instincts: sex drive, selfishness, ego

# Freud and Religion

## The Analogy

Sexual repression results in an individual neurosis

Religion, which represses us, seems to be a universal obsessional neurosis.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

- An *illusion* is a belief we very much want to be true.
- We *wish* it were true.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

Prof. Pam:

“I am destined to look  
as good as Tina Turner  
when I am 65.”



# Freud: Illusion and Delusion

- A *delusion* is something we want to be true but which everyone else knows is impossible.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusion



Prof. Pam:

“One day I will be 7 feet tall will play with Lisa Leslie in the WNBA.”

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

“To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present inquiry. It is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions.” *Future of an Illusion*, 21:33.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

Religious beliefs are “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.” *Future* 21:33

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

Religious beliefs in the end *are* delusions: they cannot pass the scientific method, which is the only way we have of reliably telling truth from fiction.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

- When there is a failure to overcome trauma and repressions of earlier life, neurosis sets in.
- This is a state of psychological disorder.

# Freud: Illusion and Delusions

Religion's presence  
in this age of humanity can  
only  
be a sign of illness

# Freud: Evolutionary path

A “turning-away” from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development.”

*Future 21:43*