

resisting verbal expression. Philosophy to the contrary is rational, universal, and purely intellectual; it lives in words and must therefore be sharply distinguished from religion. It's not that philosophy has no use in religious matters: it can help eliminate incoherencies or scientific falsehoods that may infiltrate religious belief, perhaps even help religious believers reach consensus on essential issues. But though attempts to philosophize about religion may always go on, these attempts are always secondary processes that in no way add to the authority of the sentiments from which they derive their own stimulus. No philosophical theology could ever arise or prosper in a world devoid of or divorced from the individual experiences, the lived perceptions – the religious feelings – at the foundation of all religious belief.

RELATED CHAPTERS

11 Avicenna, 34 Descartes, 45 Leibniz, 50 Paley, 59 Kierkegaard, 63 Otto, 64 Buber, 85 Davies, 87 Behe, 90 Dawkins.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Having Daddy for dinner

Belief in God is neurosis on a social scale

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – or, in English, the stages of development through which a child journeys to adulthood (ontogeny) mirror the stages of development through which the human species as a whole has journeyed from primitive times to today (phylogeny). This idea is central to Freud's account of human belief in God: both the individual and the human species as a whole, he thinks, are grappling with an *Oedipus complex*.

Oedipus was a mythological Greek prince who unwittingly ended up killing his father and marrying his mother. Freud invokes his name for the stage in which a very young boy develops something like a romantic attachment to his mother and comes to see his father as a powerful and hostile competitor for his mother's affections. This can be so strong that the child, despite also feeling love and respect for his father, even wishes for the father's death. When this complex is successfully resolved, over time, it results in the development of one's *super-ego*, or moral conscience. When it is not successfully resolved – when the negative feelings aren't dissipated but merely repressed into the unconscious – it may lead one to various forms of neurosis.

Let's rewind, to humanity's distant past.

Freud believes that human beings once lived in packs or hordes. The father of the horde was in full control: he seized all the women for himself while his sons, dangerous rivals to him, were either killed or driven away. One day, however, the sons came together not merely to kill their father but also to devour him, to incorporate him into themselves, for he was not merely their enemy but also the ideal male role model towards which they themselves were striving. These torturously mixed feelings they had for the father – love and reverence mixed with fear and hatred – remained, if repressed. Subsequent generations struggled with the conflict between feeling guilt for the ancestral murder while exulting in the advantages this act had brought (namely their own power). Over time the ancient father became the prototype for God, the being whom is simultaneously feared and revered – and resulted in Christianity, in which the killing of God the Father and the devouring of his flesh (via communion) take center stage.

Fast-forward back to today.

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Each child goes through his own personal Oedipus complex. Many of us never quite resolve it: those complex negative feelings towards our father become repressed into the subconscious and manifest themselves in various neurotic ways. Organized religions allow us to ease our resulting psychological unease by sharing the problem, as it were. Subconsciously a man may wish that his mother be pure and virginal, an “ideal” spouse for himself, while remaining in great fear of his all-powerful father. Were he to express these feelings explicitly, consciously, he would be considered mentally (or morally) disturbed. But it’s acceptable for him to express them socially, as part of a religion that features a virginal mother and a fearsome omnipotent Father. What would be neurosis on the individual scale becomes acceptable on the social scale.

The implication here, however, is quite clear: religious belief amounts to a kind of social neurosis. Which in turn has another implication: just as the individual neurotic heads off to psychoanalysis to be cured, so too society is in need of psychoanalysis on a collective scale.

Belief in God is something of which we should be cured.

RELATED CHAPTERS

60 Nietzsche.