Sigmund Freud remained a critic of religion throughout his life, though his interest was in the more concrete and superficial “outward forms” of religion, such as rites and rituals, as well as how the common man grows to understand religion and formulate his faith (Scharfenberg). His philosophical consideration of religion was initiated during a period of self-reflection in which he recognized that, during his childhood, he was exposed to two primary and somewhat opposing sets of religious views—those of the Jewish tradition by way of his Hasidic father and careful reading of the scripture and those of the Catholic faith through his nursemaid who regularly brought him to church services. Some have argued that these early experiences caused Freud to associate Catholic piety with femininity and thus to further repress these memories and to take on a more paternal and masculine view of religion in general. This may have been responsible for the overwhelming presence of the father problem in Freud’s religious philosophy (Salter).

Freud’s first published criticism of religion is presented in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” in 1907. In this work, he draws parallels between faith and neurotic obsession (Scharfenberg). For example, the ceremony and ritualistic aspects of religion are analogous to the compulsions and repetitive behavior of those with obsessive compulsive disorder; when one engages in the compulsions he is able to alleviate his anxiety (Lees-Grossman; Fuller). He later elaborates on this concept in Civilization and its Discontents where he states that “by forcibly fixing them in a state of psychical infantilism and by drawing them into a mass-delusion, religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis but hardly anything more”. However, Freud claims that religious neurosis, which he also calls “universal neurosis”, can actually protect a true believer from his own personal neurosis (Goering; Lees-Grossman). Nonetheless, one’s neuroses increase to the point that the benefits of religion are diminished. Because of this, Freud believed that there must be something inherently wrong (and even repressive) with the lifestyle requirements laid out by religion, which is preventing religion from enacting positive social changes in humanity (Goering). For example, he claimed that biblical commandments such as “love thy neighbor as thyself” are disconnected from the realities of human life and can therefore lead to personal unhappiness and guilt (DiCenso).

From this line of thinking, Freud developed the notion that God is actually an “elevated father” figure, which would again tie into his later theories about the connections between religion and the Oedipus complex (Scharfenberg). He claimed that this dependence on “the father” actually hinders human potential for independence and has prevented rational reflection on morality and inhibited society from developing its own appropri-
ate moral code (DiCenso). The God as a father figure notion appears again in *Totem and Taboo*, in which Freud theorizes that the true original sin was an instance of patricide for which mankind has felt lifelong guilt. Jesus was crucified in order to allay man’s consciousness of guilt, and the crucifixion is symbolic of the original act of patricide. Furthermore, the eucharist is a “fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the atoning deed” (Scharfenberg; Fuller).

Much later in life, Freud again approached the problem of religion this time drawing concepts from his own writings on the interpretation of dreams. In these writings, he had identified wish fulfillment as a key element of dream formation and child development and claimed that human existence consists of a choice between the pleasure principle, in which one is dominated by the need to fulfill wishes, and the reality principle, in which one concentrates on what is true and attainable within the real world (Schafenberg; Fuller). Human development involves a process of maturation whereby one gradually learns to pass up the pleasure principle in favor of the reality principle. Freud believed that for one to have religious faith he must “misunderstand truth as information about a segment of reality”, thus making religion actually an illusion (Scharfenberg). He is careful to distinguish “illusion” from “delusion”, as he did not believe that those with faith had actually made an error in judgment and he was not trying to comment on the validity of their beliefs (DiCenso). They were actually simply attempting to fulfill their wish for protection from an omnipotent and loving father figure. An extension of this wish, which is integrated into religion, is the establishment of a “moral world order” in which all good is rewarded and all evil is punished (Goering).

Despite his many criticisms of religion, Freud believed that it has had some positive impact on society and that it may even be necessary for the existence of modern civilization. First, the rules and moral code outlined in religious text and teachings prohibit certain behaviors and restrain mankind from following its socially harmful instincts (Scharfenberg; Fuller; Goering). Additionally, religion has a socially integrating function and brings people together through common ideas and beliefs (DiCenso). This translates to a sense of community and development of a common culture (Fuller). These characteristics are similar to those of other major structures of civilization (DiCenso).

Conclusion: Sigmund Freud joins Albert Einstein and Karl Marx to rank among the top three intellectuals who have had the greatest impact on Western society and culture in the last 100 years. Beside their Jewish heritage, the three men had few things in common. While Einstein described religion in more sympathetic metaphors like, for example, ‘science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind’, Karl Marx and Freud chronicled religion and its history in more uncharitable psychological terms. For Marx, religion is the ‘opiate
of the people’, and for Freud, it is ‘universal obsessional neurosis of mankind’. Where Marx analyzed religion from an economical perspective, Freud investigated it from a psychological perspective.

Freud argued that religion originated in the Oedipal complex, which he illustrated as an emotional trauma caused by the conflict between the simultaneous love and hatred of the father. The primary force in this clash is sex. The idea of God is a wish fulfillment that is born out of this conflict, a father figure, who forgives our sin, which is hatred of him. Freud described religion as a social mechanism by which human beings try to handle the conflict between human psychological processes and the demands of civilization.

Freud elaborated his theories of religion in his famous books, Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism. In Totem and Taboo, his 1913 book, Freud launches on a study of primitive humanity, out of which religion arose as a form of mass neurosis. In Moses and Monotheism, his 1937 book, he reconstructs the history of Judaism as a psychoanalytic theory. He portrays Moses as an arrogant father figure who leads Jews to renounce their original religion and to embrace a different monotheistic religion. Then the Jews rebel against Moses and kill him and give up their monotheism. But they go through an intense psychological trauma born out of their guilt for killing Moses and develop Judaism as a mechanism to subdue it. The religious revolution that born out of this psychic trauma eventually takes a different shape in the form of Christianity, which is a religion of the son, not the father.

Being an atheist, in his determination to naturalism and materialism, Freud offered a purely psychological basis for religion. Since his worldview is devoid of a God who is transcendent and powerful to intervene in the history of mankind, he had to attribute historical developments to psychological conflicts. Denying a role for the Creator, while Darwin put the responsibility of driving history on choices of natural selection, Freud relied on conflicts of psychological processes to explain the progression of civilizations. While his psychoanalytic theory has some nuggets of truth, at its roots it is only a pseudoscience. Beside, his reconstruction of religion is not based on historical facts, for example, the death of Moses. The Jews did not kill Moses, as Freud recounted.

The biblical description recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 34 tells us that Moses died a natural death according
So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days: so the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. (Deuteronomy 34:5-8).

Moses died in the will of God. God himself attended Moses’s funeral and buried him in a valley in the land of Moab. The Jewish people followed the leadership of Joshua after the death of Moses. The turmoils in Jewish history happened due to their lapses in their adherence to the laws of God of Moses, rather than guilt born out of their murder of Moses. Freud committed the ultimate act of sacrilege when he portrayed the holy union between God and Jews in sexual terms such as Oedipus complex, which he borrowed from Greek mythology. Freud’s life offers us an illustration on how far an unhinged mind could go in explaining away the deeds of God in the history of His creatures. In this respect, he foreshadowed the thinking of modern atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris.

Freud associated the relationship between mankind and God the father with the Oedipus Complex from Greek mythology

Freud described religion as a form of false consciousness, a way of hiding from the conflict born out of two principles that govern our lives: ‘the pleasure principle’, which seeks the satisfaction of our instinctual amoral desires and ‘the reality principle’ which makes us aware of our own limitations in achieving the fulfillments desired by the pleasure principle. The conflict between these two principles produces neurosis, of which religion is one manifestation. Lord Jesus gave a better explanation of human condition. He described the true source of our conflicts, ‘For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness
and blasphemies› (Matthew 15:19). The real conflict is not between a pleasure principle and reality principle, but between a Holy God and a sinful man. Freud says that it is impossible to revolve the psychic conflict even with using his psychoanalysis, as a therapeutic maneuver. But Christ not only diagnosed human quandary, he also offered a solution for our salvation. He became the ground on which individuals can reconcile with God and regain fellowship with Him. When we restore our fellowship with God, He gives us peace to our hearts and minds.

Because of the impact of Freud’s atheistic psychoanalytic views, the Western society has developed a very distorted image of human condition. Christ not only offered us a true lens to glance at human predicament, He offered us a way of salvation. The end result is not neurosis, but a new relationship with our Creator.

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