

The Future of an Illusion

Viewed Thirty Years Later

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ONE OF THE great struggles in the arena of ideas of the twentieth century has been the attempt of religion to show its relevance for our time. At the dawn of enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries religion faced the challenge of the new science. No longer was the universe to be understood in mystical terms, in vague religious terminology, but through the framework of natural law. Men had perceived a decisive pattern functioning in nature. Its laws were unchangeable binding together both animate and inanimate life. The modernists in religion were at once faced with the task of reconciling their views with the new knowledge of the age. For the most part they performed this task with adeptness and courage.

In the twentieth century, psychology, that discipline which attempts to scientifically probe the essence of human personality, shook the foundations of our conception of human nature. Not only philosophy but religion as well was faced with

the task of appraising once again its claim of relevance for the "modern man." Dr. Sigmund Freud the foremost exponent of the psycho-analytic method, threw an open challenge to religion. He called the entire framework of religious thought an "illusion" and advocated that we as human beings recognize it as such. In primitive circumstances, at the "dawn of conscience" this "illusion" may have been a necessary step in man's development, but in the sophisticated twentieth century we must come to recognize religion as a prop for our infirmities. This opinion as advocated by Dr. Freud was first brought to light in his book, "The Future of an Illusion" which was published just thirty years ago. It is brought to our attention again in the recently published biography of Dr. Freud by Ernest Jones, the leading exponent of the Freudian School in the United States. Though many religious leaders have cried out for a "restructuring" of religion along the lines of the new psychology, we

must beg pause to examine the nature of the attack, and to test its validity at the bar of reason.

Sigmund Freud was one of the outstanding revolutionary minds of our time. His development of the psycho-analytic method is indeed one of the milestones in human thought. To the extent that psychoanalysis has helped to unburden the hearts and minds of troubled men and women it is to be highly commended and recommended. To the extent that this discipline has helped to bring back into focus blurred personalities it is a boon to these anxious times.

In "The Future of an Illusion," however, Dr. Freud does not concern himself with the psychoanalytic method as such. He engages in a serious polemic against religion and its dogmas. Before proceeding to a critique of these views it is proper to cite his thesis as developed in this and some of his other works.

Freud attempts to turn our attention to the future that awaits human culture. In the process of developing his thought, he finds it necessary to deal with the origin and purpose of human culture as such. By human culture, Freud means all those respects in which human life has lifted itself above the animal condition. and in which it differs from the life of the beast. Human culture includes

on the one hand all the knowledge and power that men have accumulated in order to master the forces of nature, and on the other all the necessary arrangements whereby men's relations to each other may be regulated. These two conditions for culture are not separable from one another because the existing resources and the measure by which they satisfy the desires of our instincts, are deeply intertwined. Although man forms culture, he is at the same time subject to it because it tames his raw instincts and makes him behave in a socially acceptable way. Thus Freud writes:

"It seems more probable that every culture must be built upon coercion and instinct renunciation."

Freud maintains that the essence of culture does not lie in man's conquest of nature for the means of supporting life, but in the psychological realm, in every man's curbing his predatory instincts.

One of the instinct restrainers that man has devised to perpetuate his culture is religion. The unique aspect of religion as reflecting moral conscience was recognized by Freud as he writes of one of its functions as attempting, ". . . to correct the so painfully felt imperfections of culture." Religion is dealt with in

the following arguments on two levels. On the first he attempts to explain its physical origin by the extension of the famous Oedipus complex. When the child grows up and finds that he can never do without the protection against the mighty unknown powers he invests these powers with the traits of the father. Just as in childhood the father protects, bestows and punishes so does the God whom man himself creates and of whom he is sorely afraid. It is to this God that we pray and before Whom we lay our supplications. Just as He has interceded in the affairs of men in the history of the past, so we implore Him to intercede for us in our trials and in our conflicts. The second level of Freud's investigation deals with what he calls "the matured stock of religious ideas," as culture and tradition transmits them to the individual.

Freud defines religion as consisting of "certain dogmas, assertions about facts and conditions of external and internal reality which tell one something that one has not oneself discovered, and which claim that one should give them credence." Religious concepts are transmitted in three ways and thereby claim our belief. "Firstly because our primal ancestors already believed them; secondly, because we possess proofs which have been handed down to us

from antiquity, and thirdly because it is forbidden to raise the question of their authenticity at all."

Psychologically speaking, these beliefs present the phenomena of wish fulfillment. They are illusions of the oldest and strongest kind; they represent the most insistent wishes of mankind. Among these are the necessity to cling to the existence of the father, the prolongation of earthly existence by a future life, and the immortality of the human soul. Thus religion for Freud is the "universal obsessional neurosis." It is the bogey man of humanity.

Let us now view these two levels of argument somewhat critically. At the outset it would seem that Freud has read religious literature in the same manner as a geometry book. A triangle has three sides and is universally recognized as such. It is what it seems to be. Religious literature, however, speaks in figures, symbols, similes and parables. It is poetry which addresses itself to the very core of man's being. As all human creation religious literature is limited by language. Our sages said that the Torah is admittedly written in "the language of man." Hence the Father-figure as God is a way of picturing not God but His attributes. Just as we expect mercy, justice and love from our paternal father, so we hope for the realization of these qualities

from the Source of all life. As a poetic picture this is forceful and imaginative. The religious man is not as naive as Freud makes him out to be. He realizes that this is only a glimpse of God as He manifests Himself in the world and in the discourse of men. We have learned that the unfolding of truth is a never ending process and that subsequent generations will view the very vistas we behold, but from a higher hill of culture. Their view will be more encompassing than was ours.

We surely realize with regard to Freud's second argument that his definition of religion is not at all a universal one. Religion as a private or group experience is not as stagnant as it is made out to be. Religion need not be something that the individual absorbs from without, from an external source without applying to it the test of rational compatibility. On closer inspection one finds that Freud is discussing only a certain type of religion, namely one that posits an unchanging dogma which has been traditionally handed down. He allows no internal development in his concept of religion, no growth or expansion of ideas and feelings. This portrait of religion does not at all encompass either liberal Judaism or Christianity. In both of these spiritual movements there is change in the

mode of theology and perception as to the nature of God.

To the suggestion that religious aspirations represent a desire for "wish fulfillment" of illusory ideas, we take exception only to the last statement. One of the ideals and hopes of Judaism and Christianity is the establishment of a just society. We grant that we should like to have this wish, if one were to call it such, fulfilled. There is nothing derogatory in this desire, nor is it of less value than Dr. Freud's wish to create a "mature society." An illusion is a false perception, a wrong impression of the nature of things. An enlightened and informed religious orientation, a sound program for social improvement can hardly be called an *illusion*.

Orthodoxy and its rigidity of outlook was what disturbed Freud. He, as we today, takes exception to its claim of one revealed and unchanging law. Its preoccupation with ritual is what he designated as obsessive. It is rather unfortunate that modern expressions of ancient religions which hold to change and progressive reform should suffer in contemporary polemics from Dr. Freud's all-encompassing generalization.

The religious life adds a dimension of depth to our lives. It adds colorful hues to the drabness of daily

existence and holds out worthwhile goals to which we can bend our emo-

tions and intellect. If this be an illusion, it has a glorious future.

Lao Tzu and The Strength of Weakness

Georges Fradier

EVER SINCE men first gave thought to the best way of living together in a community, their ideas have inevitably turned to ways of ruling their fellow-men. Famous philosophers have discussed the most effective means of maintaining law and order and ensuring prosperity within the State — take Plato, for example, whose totalitarian “Republic” anticipates Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World.” In every period thinkers have worked out wonderfully efficient systems designed to ensure the happiness of all citizens . . . generally by depriving them of their freedom: for even the most benevolent utopians envisage the use of force and the strict organization of functions, work and leisure as necessary means towards this end.

But there are also philosophers (some people might call them hopeless dreamers) who believe in trusting human nature, in interfering as little as possible in men’s affairs. The form of government they favour is

not based on force, but on gentleness and non-violence.

Among the works which advocate these ideas, one of the strangest is a little book written in the 3rd century B.C. by the legendary philosopher Lao Tzu. It is called the *Tao Te Ching* — The Way and Its Power.

The author of this book shows little respect for legislators or military leaders:

“The more prohibitions there are the poorer the people will be . . .

The more laws are promulgated

The more thieves and bandits there will be.”

“Where armies are, thorns and brambles grow.

The raising of a great host
Is followed by a year of dearth.”

These quotations are from the famous translation by Arthur Waley, whose brilliant study on “The Way and Its Power” was recently pub-

lished in a pocket book edition by the Grove Press, New York, in the Unesco Collection of Representative Works (Chinese Series) *

In his remarkable introduction Dr. Waley presents The Way and its Virtue within the general context of Chinese thought, stressing the political significance of the poems which are usually regarded as primarily mystical works. “About 240 B.C.,” he writes, “an anonymous Quietist produced a small book, known from the early centuries of the Christian era as the Tao Te Ching. It was an extremely polemical work. . . .”

In the 3rd century B.C. the Quietism of the Tao was certainly not a widespread doctrine among Chinese scholars and noblemen. The ideas of the so-called Realists or Legalists were then the order of the day. To the common people they preached obedience, to the sovereign they counselled violence. The decadence of the State, in their view, was due to its tolerating private standards of good and evil, and failing clearly to “label,” to give names to the things that are good and evil from the public point of view. This, the Realists maintained, lead to a discrepancy between ‘names’ and ‘facts’ (i.e. realities as conceived of by the State), creating in the network of Law in-

numerable loopholes which, in turn, lead to anarchy.

Such is the doctrine which the author of the Tao Te Ching combats. This mysticist whose methods of meditation and reasoning are very close to those of the Hindu yoga, views Society as a complicated structure, consisting of myriads of contradictions. He calmly repudiates the idea that there is such a thing as ‘public good’ and considers that the ambition of the State to mete out punishment and reward is futile. As for ‘names,’ he knows that they cannot be given to all realities, especially to those vital ones, undreamt of by the Realists, which meditation alone can uncover:

“The Way (Tao) that can be told
is not an unvarying way;

The names that can be named are
not unvarying names.”

Yet it is knowledge of these nameless facts that gives *te* the true power or virtue that can dissolve the myriad contradictions and discordances of the universe.

The mystical philosophy of the Tao Te Ching is also a political ethic. When the poet writes: “The world is full of people that shine: I alone am dark,” he suggests a portrait of the

* The Way and Its Power — A Study of Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought, by Arthur Waley — Evergreen E. 84, Grove Press, New York.