

The History of an Illusion

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Sigmund Freud's book *The Future of an Illusion* was a frank statement of his view that the idea of God was a pathological symptom in culture as well as in individuals: the image of a universal traumatically broken connection with the subject's father projected onto an imaginal cosmic screen. In Judaism it is evidently not impossible to be an atheist, as Freud was. Freud though was a serious student of religion, including his own Judaism, Christianity, and other traditions. He once poignantly quoted from a Muslim poet, apologizing for his own awkward steps toward a science of the human mind "We would like to have wings in order to fly toward God; but it is not forbidden to go in that direction, even limping."¹

It has been seriously proposed that Freud was an inheritor and transmitter of the Jewish kabbala tradition² but that, working in that crucial transformative period in European culture of the first decades of the 20th century, amidst the encroaching antisemitism of Vienna, he had to develop a new language to express some of its deepest psychological teachings.

In fact, in esoteric branches of many religious traditions, God, when mentioned is often made so transcendent, so distant from the everyday world, as to make the concept of such a god almost identical with atheism. Of course this is not true of the popular received versions of most religions, in which God is front and center and belief in God is obligatory (Buddhism might be an exception). But rigid adherence to such dogma had been fading at least in Western culture for

¹ Quoted thus in Michel de Salzmann's 1989 talk "Seeing: The Endless Source of Inner Freedom." Michel, a son of Gurdjieff and later a teacher of his ideas and methods, was a trained psychoanalyst and had read much Freud. The source is Freud's seminal 1920 monograph *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* whose main message was that people need to grow up and seek higher values than pleasure [here from the standard translation of Strachey]:

...Only believers, who demand that science shall be a substitute for the catechism they have given up, will blame an investigator for developing or even transforming his views. We may take comfort, too, for the slow advances of our scientific knowledge in the words of the poet:

Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken.
Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken.

'What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping.
The Book [the Koran] tells us it is no sin to limp.'

These are the last two lines of 'Die beiden Gulden', a version by Rückert of one of the Maqams of al-Hariri. The passage somewhat distorts the Koran, which says simply that a person who "limps" is excused from the commandment to engage in Jihad, Holy War.

Freud also quoted these lines in a letter to Willhelm Fliess of Oct. 20, 1895.

² *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, David Bakan 1958. See also Freud's own *Moses and Monotheism*, 1939, and the excellent 1993 commentary by distinguished Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (the subtitle is a play on the long-debated question of whether psychoanalysis is terminable or interminable).

quite a long time—since at least the beginnings of “modernity” in the Enlightenment of the early 17th century—and Freud is, in part, simply joining this movement, proposing that the future of religion is that it will be widely recognized as an illusion.

But this does not quite do justice to religion. I would like to propose a project for study based on the question: not “the future of an illusion”³ but “The History of an Illusion”⁴—when, how, and why did the idea of God (and/or gods) arise, and through what mutations did it pass before arriving in its present received forms?

The source material for such a study is vast. It begins with a few scriptural texts going back at least to the Bronze Age—we have certain texts from Egypt, the earliest Zoroastrian “Gathas,” a quantity of largely fragmentary cuneiform material preserved in fired clay from the fertile crescent, and ancient Chinese texts; but almost all these texts are quite problematic to understand, their language and worldview being very distant from ours.

Then, shortly after 1200 BCE in the “Great Catastrophe”⁵ which saw the downfall and destruction of most urban centers and empires of the Bronze Age world, a dark age of several centuries began: dark mainly in the sense that very little writing survives. For a while life ceased being organized around urban centers, with complex steep imperial hierarchies of power certified as it were by state religions with hierarchies of gods parallel to the human hierarchies, all of which was perhaps symbolized by the towers and pyramids built all over the world in such centers. People now lived mainly in smaller villages and towns. We know very little in detail about how they lived, worshipped, and thought. It may not have been much different from contemporary rural agrarian life. Perhaps it does take a village, to live in a truly human-centered way.

Even the gods themselves seem to have changed in the Great Catastrophe. Julian Jaynes⁶ detects a change in the way they appear in later writings: in the pre-Catastrophe *Illiad*, for example, people often hear the voice of a god, and usually obey it. In the post-Catastrophe *Odyssey* it is the individual person who thinks out what to do; the voice of god is still heard but only distantly and occasionally, and obedience is more optional. The new ruler is the individual’s consciousness, and perhaps conscience.

³ The future itself may be an illusion. Our incomparable guru Yogi Berra once said “prediction is very hard, especially concerning the future.” And chaos theory in mathematical physics informs us that we cannot even in principle predict beyond a certain limited horizon of time.

⁴ But history too may be largely an illusion, written up, as is said, mostly by the “winners.” Winston Churchill once quipped concerning Chamberlain’s deceitful 1938 accommodation with Hitler: “History will judge Chamberlain harshly. I know because I will write that history.” He did so both in the sense of helping create it, and in writing about it. But later revisionists have proposed that what Chamberlain did was a noble and necessary self-sacrifice of his own place in history, which allowed Britain almost a year to prepare for and ultimately survive the Nazi onslaught.

Even personal history is fungible—sometimes one finds out that what one remembers is not what really happened.

⁵ *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* Robert Drews 1993

⁶ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes 1976

The dark age began to lift in what has been called the Axial Age⁷, starting around the 9th century BCE and picking up speed rapidly with the emergence of the Scythian empire⁸, ancient Iran⁹, classical Greece, the Tang dynasty in China, the pre-Buddhist Zhangzhung kingdom of Tibet with its Bon religion, and latter Hinduism and Buddhism in India. A rich literature poured forth that is somewhat easier for us modern readers to engage, but of course it is still very hard to be certain about the real intent and motives behind what is being said.

It seems that a similar transformation may have taken place only a little later in ancient Mexico: the foundations of Toltec, Olmec, Teotihuacano, and later Aztec and Mayan culture are dominated by a culture-bringer figure Quetzalcoatl who shows striking similarities to Axial prophets¹⁰. But the New World arc was cut short by the Conquest. Before the arrival of the Spanish there was a period comparable perhaps to the Bronze Age, complete with empires, state religions, and pyramids, but this era had recently come to an end, perhaps because of widespread drought, except in the valley of Mexico where it was destroyed by the conquistadors. Nevertheless, very large Mayan populations still exist in some of the same regions as in ancient times, and maintain much of the ancient calendar, language, rural agrarian way of life, cuisine, art, religion (in part syncretized with Christianity), and ceremonial.

Certain diffusionists have suggested that the civilizations of Mexico may have been started or influenced by ancient overseas voyagers. In fact I made such a suggestion in the paper cited above, but half-jokingly. But in view of the absence of authenticatable evidence for such sea voyages, and practically no non-accidental similarity of words, symbolic representations in myth, religious ideas and formula, or iconography, such suggestions can be dismissed as fantasy. Even the proposal of similar archetypal roots for some myths, such as the parallel I adduced between the story of Quetzalcoatl and that of Persephone, seems hard to prove, and of little ultimate value.

This is not to say however that the arcs of the rise, cultural maturation, high development of philosophy and religion and art, building of monumental architecture, and ultimate decline of urban-centered imperial civilizations do not have similar causes, to be sought in the nature of human beings trying to live together in large groups, to understand the meaning of their life together, to protect their personal and collective realms, to exploit scarce resources, all under the effects of ineluctable natural and man-caused changes in the environment. It will happen again, it may be happening now!

⁷ The term “Axial Age” was coined by Karl Jaspers who proposed that this was when philosophy began: *The Origin and Goal of History*, 1949. A useful and magisterial secondary source on this era is Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation: The Beginnings of our Religious Traditions*, 2007.

⁸ *The Scythian Empire: Central Eurasia and the Birth of the Classical Age from Persia to China*, Christopher Beckwith 2023

⁹ *Iranian Leviathan: A Monumental History of Mithra’s Abode*, Jason Jorjani 2019

¹⁰ “The Way of Sacrifice and the Light Within,” R. Hodges 2015 <https://richardhodges.com/SacrificeAndLight4.htm>

So, what can we divine about the history of the Divine? In particular, how did certain traditions nurture and achieve fine and deep ideas of the Divine, not always under the name of God? Ideas, illusory or not in whole or in part, that when made a part of one's inner life can lead to extraordinary perceptions and feelings, well beyond the pale ordinariness we all experience so much of? Or is it possible that ordinariness itself can be sensed in a different way, as something very fine, as for example seems to be the project of Zen?

That is the question I wish to ponder. It seems to me that the answer lies in the following direction: There is a natural human impulse to develop finer and finer perceptions. In most people it is not active much of the time, even almost never. But in some it works at a high pitch, and the results of its working may be, in some cases, expressed outward, in art, writing, even just in emanations of personal presence, and these expressions may help bring others to nearly as high a pitch. Freud was one such—he sang innerly with his lifelong quest to reveal to the self the broken heart at its core, and thereby help free it “to love and to work.”¹¹

Such transmission, such nurturing of inner freedom, is, or ought to be, the aim of inner work in monasteries, spiritual communities, guru-disciple relationships, on the psychoanalyst's couch, and of writing and music and art and other works in the name of the Divine.

There are two practical questions here: how to find and recognize and make use of these emanation-containing forms; and, for some people, how to develop and strengthen the action of this impulse in oneself, were this possible, which is of course not guaranteed, either in general, or for a particular person. We have the example of many “ways” and communities of practitioners and so on in which this is so-to-say pursued—but “pursued” is one thing, “found” is another. So that is another practical question: how to recognize a suitable Way—and in most cases a very serious question of how, and whether, to actually try to follow the Way, which usually entails a high price in time, energy, suffering, and the giving up of other desirable things.

My personal observation and feeling, and also the advice of certain wise men such as Krishnamurti, is that following a Way almost always turns out to have been an expression of vanity—chasing an illusion. Isn't this exactly what Ecclesiastes 1:14 says: “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit”? And 1:17 “So I set my mind to know wisdom and madness and folly; I learned that this, too, is chasing after wind.” It were probably better not to attempt any such thing, but to just live—unless driven to following a particular Way by, as is said, “one's karma.” It might still be possible to live ordinariness with such simplicity and directness that it becomes a fineness that, really, cannot be achieved any other way. This is what some of these wise men have called a “Way in life.”

What is this Way?

¹¹ Freud's student Erik Erikson reports in *Childhood and Society* (1950) Freud saying that what psychological health consists of is the ability “to love and to work.” Freud himself wrote in *Civilization and its Discontents* “The communal life of [early] human beings had a twofold foundation: the compulsion to work and the power of love.” He goes on to say that this “Eros and Ananke” [Love and Necessity] were the “parents of civilization.”

As it is put in the first two stanzas of the Chinese wisdom book *Tao Te Ching* (my translation):

The Way (Tao) that can be followed is not the real Way.

The word that can be expressed is not the true Word.

And as expressed in *The Summation of 'The Cuckoo of Awareness'* by Vairocana, an ancient Tibetan Dzogchen text discovered in the 10th Century in the Gobi desert at the Buddhist Dunhuang meditation caves (my trans-creation of the more flowery original Tibetan):

The way things are is non-conceptual

but the way of action is conditioned by forms.

Having abandoned the disease of striving,

Since one already has it all,

through being spontaneously present

one leaves it as it is.