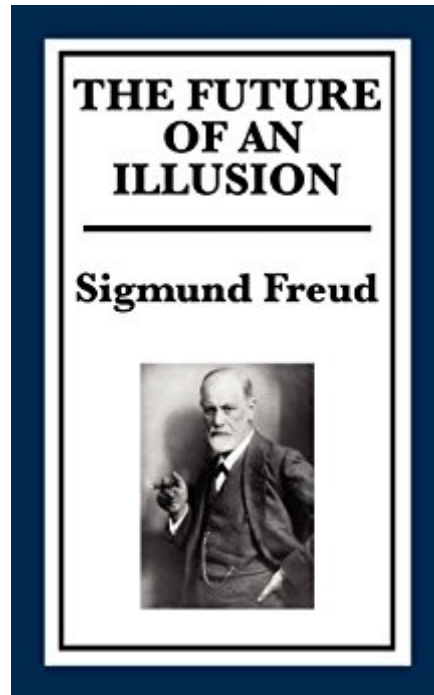




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THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION



Synopsis

I find another advantage of religious doctrine in one of its peculiarities, to which you seem to take particular exception. It admits of an ideational refinement and sublimation, by which it can be divested of most of those traces of a primitive and infantile way of thinking which it bears. What is then left is a body of ideas which science no longer contradicts and which it cannot disprove. These modifications of religious doctrine, which you have condemned as half-measures and compromises, make it possible to bridge the gap between the uneducated masses and the philosophical thinker, and to preserve that common bond between them which is so important for the protection of culture." Sigmund Freud

With a linked Table of Contents for easier navigation.

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Publication date: 1927"... If you wish to expel religion from our European civilization you can only do it through another system of doctrines, and from the outset this would take over all the psychological characteristics of religion, the same sanctity, rigidity and intolerance, the same prohibition of thought in self-defence." (This is not Freud speaking, but his "imagined antagonist." Still, I admire the

equanimity with which Freud states objections to his thesis. This too, is more than we get from other militant atheists:)... There is another point in which I wholeheartedly agree with you. It is, to be sure, a senseless proceeding to try and do away with religion by force and at one blow—more especially as it is a hopeless one. The believer will not let his faith be taken from him, neither by arguments nor by prohibitions. And even if it did succeed with some, it would be a cruel thing to do. A man who has for decades taken a sleeping draught is naturally unable to sleep if he is deprived of it. That the effect of the consolations of religion may be compared to that of a narcotic is prettily illustrated by what is happening in America. There they are now trying—plainly under the influence of petticoat government—to deprive men of all stimulants, intoxicants and luxuries, and to satiate them with piety by way of compensation. This is another experiment about the result of which we need not be curious. I admire the brevity, and dare I say, the grandeur of this book, written by Freud when he was seventy. His theory of society is positively Hobbesian: "... Insecurity of life, an equal danger for all, now unites men into one society, which forbids the individual to kill and reserves to itself the right to kill in the name of society the man who violates this prohibition. This, then, is justice and punishment." Worth reading, and re-reading.

Bottom Line First: Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* is a monograph that proposes a psychological origin of all religion and while expressing his preference that religion, at least in Europe should fade away. Freud admits that the alternative may be little other than an earth bound doctrine. Ultimately he is not certain that this change can happen only that he would prefer it. This is a relatively easy read. Freud rarely employs academic language or sophisticated logic. The result is progression of ideas driven by logic and built around a nearly Socratic dialogue between himself and a doubting other self. Unlike Socrates, Freud does not hobble the doubting speaker by limiting doubt to weak defensive arguments. The result is a re balanced discussion of a topic that could have been hyperbolic or designed to humiliate religious believers. *The Future of an Illusion* is recommended. Freud treats his reader with respect. He is advocating an end to religion but not in such a way as to deny the honorable role of religion or to question the intellect of the believer. *The Future of an Illusion* is one of several extended essays by Freud outside of his medical and psychological studies. It is not his only work to address the role and root causes for religious belief. He embraces the social utility of religion as a major factor above nation and therefore above question in its authority over certain socially necessary values. If we accept a purely logic driven basis for religion and play down any human need for magic or extra logical stories and authorities, it is possible to project a time when people stop needing or desiring religion. However I think Freud

steps too quickly from the individual, psychologically driven purpose for religion into it as role in smoothing social conformity. Freud concludes that religion is seized upon by an immature person to give a more identifiably human identity to the indifferent blank stare and harsh hand of nature and fate. The more god are like humans the more likely the human can seek exception to the random violence of nature. So far so good. But as much as the religious like to evoke their \hat{A} of god just as many extolled the majesty and beauty of a magic that lights the life of the believer. Ultimately in a choice between logic and magic. It seems unrealistic to believe that the one will ever remove the other as operating force among humans. Freud recognizes that many become religious before they are old enough to question it. He does not seem to grasp that humans are varied and that a individual preference for logic over religion implies that there will always be others with a preference for religion over logic.

Here is what Freud argues: Religion is an illusion based in childish notions. It offers a comfort against the brutal supremacy of nature. In the past it may have provided some benefit, and for some it may prove benefit still, but Freud is absolutely convinced that it is neurosis that does more harm than good. As we are destined to outgrow childhood, so to the enlightened and reasonable mind must be destined to outgrow the childish comforts of religion. Better to give a secular education a try, and make confident in the rational basis of cultural law and civilization. End of argument. Freud has probably summarized some essential modern criticisms of religion, and tapped on a few valid nerves. But that religion is as detrimental as he suggests, or that belief in morality and reason as thin as supposed may be unwarranted assumptions. Whether one believes or not, I think these criticism are still important to confront and to evaluate for oneself.

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