

On The Relationship Between Religiosity and Emotional Health: Tillich vs. Freud

Supported by Paul Tillich's book The Courage to Be, this essay will discuss how certain of Freud's sociological and psychological theories are appropriate to a philosophy arising out of his particular historical period and out of his own psyche and, as such, are insufficiently comprehensive in providing a methodology for the healing of despair resulting from ontological anxiety. Although much of Freud's work has become generally accepted, and as "the father of psychoanalysis" he certainly is to be taken seriously, I am here concerned with employing Tillich's theory involving anxiety as a basis for my investigation of Freud's negative and limited view of religion as it may subsequently have affected his understanding of the basic nature of some forms of anxiety. Freud's attitudes toward religion are significant inasmuch as he is a healer of the human psyche and therefore must ideally be able to approach the human condition with as unbiased an attitude as possible. Our human experience of existence - of being - is inseparable from our psychological processes and the neuroses by which we may be affected.

Paul Tillich's first assertion about the nature of anxiety is that it "...is the existential awareness of nonbeing" (Ibid. 35). He goes on to explain how fear is related to anxiety in that the anxious mind seeks a specific thing, or things, to fear. Finding a content for fears which are rooted in our ontological anxiety about our potential for nonbeing is a relief to the extent that an object of fear can be met, participated in, and provides the affirmation of being inherent in an act of courage. If, due to a neurotically limited self-affirmation that creates an uncentered ground of being, we are unable to affirm being through an act of courage then we become victims of the anxiety of despair. Tillich admits that the treatment for overcoming psychotic or pathological anxiety is largely the domain of science (and in this capacity Freud's approach is certainly relevant), however, he theorizes that the despair which results from the neurotic lack of courage to affirm one's being is the same despair which results from the ontological anxiety of the threat to being by nonbeing. Therefore this ontological anxiety is what must be overcome in order to find the courage required to affirm our being.

Freud, on the other hand, acknowledges ontological anxiety only insofar as the content of the resulting fear is the fate of death. As a member of humanity himself, Freud was subject to his own such fear and he was also subject to the neo-collectivist attitudes of his time in which technology and science became the gods worshipped in a 'religion' of progress and reason. In his dismissal of traditional religion as infantile, Freud may have justifiably criticized unconditional submission to the sacramental doctrines of the collectivist Church. Unfortunately, in doing so, he also dismisses all of human spirituality by de-emphasizing the possibility of an ontological need for what Tillich has called "ultimate concern"; a need to place our faith in that which is truly ultimate. In his book Dynamics of Faith, Tillich argues that a faith in any belief-system whose symbols fail to point beyond themselves to the "God above god" is necessarily idolatrous. Because the self is affirmed through the object of ultimate concern, the self-affirmation resulting from an idolatrous faith is limited and leaves adherents with a neurotically uncentered ground of being.

I would assert that because Freud has put all his faith in the power of the reasoning intellect, the main flaw in his theories lies in Freud's own inability to transcend the dogmatism which results from an ultimate concern with rational scientific explanations of the human experience. Tillich has suggested that the only faith which is not idolatrous is an "Absolute Faith" which accepts the despair of ontological anxiety and, through the courage to be that is a result of this kind of faith, takes that despair into itself, both encompassing it and conquering it in an acceptance of nonbeing as an element intrinsically implied in being. There is an experience of joy derived from such unlimited self-affirmation and it is this joy which Tillich believes is the only remedy for ontological anxiety. Freud is unwilling, however, for either conscious or unconscious reasons, to place any validity in an 'Absolute Faith' and its connection with either organized religions or psychotherapeutic practice. By arguing, in *The Future of an Illusion*, that the doctrines of religion are derived from the precepts of civilization and not in fact from God, Freud assumes that he has managed to satisfactorily prove that God is nothing more than a neurotic psycho-social illusion.

Freud has formulated brilliantly convincing psychological theories about the origins of an image of God and our need for it; theories which within Freud's conception of reality are the final word on the

truth and therefore on the validity of spirituality. While he might have been correct in his awareness that the question of the purpose of life can only be answered by religion and "...that the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system" (Ibid. 263), it is in his understanding of what that religious system *implies* that Freud's philosophical bias limits his conclusions. In our current age of the anxiety of meaninglessness, characterized by doubt in the meaning of existence, there are obvious signs in society of a quest for meaningful content for our lives. In our anxiety of doubt, we question the validity of even those things which have previously brought us meaning and thus our quest is inherently a religious one inasmuch as we are seeking the joy that may only be found in an unreified ultimate concern of Absolute Faith.

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