



RELIGION: SIGMUND FREUD'S INFANTILE ILLUSIONS AND COLLECTIVE NEUROSIS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstrak

This paper concerns Freud's thoughts on religion. Religion is not only about faith in a great God, but also encompasses the order and discipline of life. Religion involves human relationships, either with God or with others. Freud saw religion as the fulfillment of a childish desire. This can not be separated from his work as a psychologist who produced the concept of psychoanalysis and human sexual stages. Freud disputed the basis of human trust claims by giving three mutually exclusive and holistically unsatisfactory reasons. First, we must trust without demanding proofs; Second, we must believe because our ancestors also believed; And third, we must believe because we have evidence from ancient times. Freud contends that such beliefs are nothing more than an illusion.

Keywords: *Religion, Illusion, Neurosis, Sigmund Freud, Psychoanalysis*

A. Introduction

For humans, religion does not exist in a vacuum. It does not merely fill the void or fulfill the inner needs but also regulates the life style, both in the present and the future. It even serves as the most important reference to determine the ultimate meaning of life. Clifford Geertz (in Tabrani ZA) defines religion as (1) a system of symbols; (2) which builds strong, endless, pervasive feelings and motivations (easy to spread, penetrate or absorb) in human beings; (3) by formulating the concept of a general order of existence; and (4) wrapping up these conceptions with an aura of factuality; (5) that the feelings and motivations are realistic.¹

¹ Tabrani. ZA, *Arah Baru Metodologi Studi Islam*, (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2015), hal. 17.

While the substance of religion, according to Tabrani, is transcendent, it is also immanent at the same time. Tabrani explains that religion is transcendent because the substance of religion is difficult to define and is unreachable except through its predicate or outward formal forms. However, religion is also immanent because the relationship between predicate and substance can not be separated. If only the substance of religion could be depicted as a hierarchy, then the most primordial religious substance is surely the highest one. It is parenial and infinite because it is the projection of the absolute. When the substance of religion is present in a limited form, then religion is universal and particular at the same time.²

Religion in primitive societies can be divided into three typologies, namely: the religion of dynamism, animism, and polytheism. Dynamism refers to a religion that contains beliefs in mysterious magical powers. Some magical powers are good and some are evil. Animism is a religion which holds that every thing, both living or non-living has a spirit. The spirit referred to here is different from the one understood in the advanced society. It is composed of a subtle matter which resembles steam or air and has a leg or a hand. While polytheism is a religion that contains beliefs in the existence of gods.³

In most advanced societies, people no longer embrace dynamism, animism, or polytheism, but mostly monotheism (the religion of *Tauhid*). Monotheism is based on the teachings of Tauhid, which is a belief that men are from God and will eventually return to God. Other typologies which are often used to classify these religions are ardhhi and samawi. An ardhhi religion is a religion that is not based on the words of God or a religion that does not accept the words of God. While a samawi religion is

² Tabrani, ZA, *Arah Baru Metodologi...*, hal. 24.

³ Harun Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspek*, Jilid I, (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985), hal. 11-19.

a religion that is revealed to the prophets or apostles through holy books containing the words of God. Samawi religions are also often referred to as monotheistic religions. The religions often categorized into monotheistic or samawi religions are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Apart from the various typologies into which scholars have classified religions as described above, it is undeniable that the definition of religion today depends on which aspect and from which point of view it is defined or reviewed either normatively, empirically, historically or even scientifically.

The discussion in this paper focuses on the psychological aspect of Sigmund Freud's view on religion. Religion was one of the most problematic issues for Freud during his youth. He theorized that religion was as a tool to make people believe in the existence of God or Gods and that the gods function as a medium to overcome the threat of nature, to make people accept the cruelty of their fate and promise rewards for the suffering and the frustration demanded of human beings.⁴

So through religion, men protect himself against all kinds of threats and suffering. But for Freud, this protection is only an illusion. The gods do not really protect human beings, but are only imagined to have protected them. These are called illusions. An illusion is a belief that a hope will be fulfilled, not because the reality supports it, but because people want it that way. According to Freud the illusion is infantile because expecting what is truly desired to be fulfilled is a characteristic of a child, who then faces real problems with wishful thinking. Freud therefore believes that religions cripple people. They expect the passive salvation of "God" or "gods" rather than finding a way to pursue it themselves and thereby develop their own powers.⁵

⁴ Bryan S. Turner, *Agama dan Perubahan Sosial*, interpreting: Inyik Ridwan Muzir, (Yogyakarta: IRCiSod, 2003), hal 412-413.

⁵ Sigmund Freud. *Sekelumit Sejarah Psikoanalisa*. Translated by K Bertens, (Jakarta: Penerbit PT Gramedia, 1983), hal. 21.

Freud's main criticism of religion is summarized in four works. In some of his works he questions things more deeply than only looking into religious rituals. He also asks a question, "what is truly the idea of religion?" He proposes a reductive view of these problems in "The Future of an Illusion (1927)." What is new about religion is no further than a historical analysis, especially as a contemporary social phenomenon. The idea of religion teaches and explains the facts and conditions of external reality (perhaps also internal) that show to a person what he or she does not find and that present a claim regarding one's beliefs.

Freud questiones the basis of the claim by giving three conflicting and holistically unsatisfactory reasons. First is that we must trust without demanding proofs. Freud suspects that this happens because we surrender to uncertain and groundless claims. Second, we must believe because our ancestors also believed. Freud asserts that our ancestors were far more conservative than we are and chose to believe in something that we can no longer do now. Third, we have to believe because we have evidence from ancient times. Freud asserts that the records that are often used as the evidence are not authentic, full of contradictions, needing corrections, and often wrong. The use of the revelation itself as proof to their doctrine is not authentic.⁶

However, religion is so strong in its grip on humans because religion, in Freud's view, is not only a mistake about hoping for a savior who will never come because this savior does not exist, but also a collective neurosis. By the word "collective" Freud does not refer to of the fact that every individual who is religious must be neurotic in the clinical sense, but they are neurotic due to the fact that as they grow up in a society. They undergo a basic socialization process in an already religious society and therefore believe, experience, and observe all other elements of their community's worldview.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Musa dan Monoteisme*, (Yogyakarta: Jendela, 2003), hal. 35.

B. Freud on the Theory of Human and Community Relations and the Theory of Evolution

Sigmund Freud was one of the founders of the concept of psychoanalysis who was born into a Jewish family in 1856 in Freiburg. Freud was the man of his day. He adhered to the values of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie society. It is undeniable that he was also influenced by scientific positivism and vitalism, and that his Victorian lifestyle also had an influence on his view of sexuality. Freud was also regarded as a controversial thinker. Such controversy was especially related to his thinking about sexuality and psyche, despite his brilliance in discovering psychoanalysis by analyzing the phenomena which were considered unanalyzable such as dreams and tongue-rattling (raved).⁷

There are two theories that must be taken into account in analyzing Sigmund Freud's thoughts: the theory of the relationship between humans (individual and society) and the theory of evolution. The first was pioneered by Thomas Hobbes, while the second was pioneered by Darwin.

There are two major theories that can explain the relationship between human nature and society, which also happen to contradict one another. The first was developed in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) of England. According to him, humans have a tendency to be competitive, aggressive, greedy, anti-social and animalistic. If left untreated, people would always wage wars against each other. The second theory was developed during the 18th century by a French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). His views were in contrast to Hobbes's. To him, men are good in nature. It is their community's mistakes that make them selfish and destructive. So, the state has the duty and responsibility to restore the genuine kindness of the

⁷ Sigmund Freud. *Sekelumit Sejarah Psikoanalisa...*, hal. 25.

people they once had. Then it can be concluded that, for Hobbes men in their natural state always want to subdue others, that is to seek profit and glory by harming others. Rousseau, on the other hand, claims that human beings are basically good, but the present state of the society is destructive.⁸ From both theories, the writer concludes that Hobbes's theory is more connected to Freud's than Rousseau's.

Later in the 19th century, Charles R. Darwin, a British natural scientist, discovered the theory of organic evolution through natural selection. The theory has spread a great deal into biological sciences, philosophy and religious thought, and has also influenced sociology, politics, anthropology and psychology.⁹ Freud, as mentioned above, who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, must have been influenced by certain scientific thoughts. Thus, Freud's way of analyzing social and religious phenomena must have been largely influenced by such scientific interpretations.

In Freud's view, evolution is not only physical, but also social and intellectual. Evolution in the physical or biological sense is the development process of all life forms. This means that "now is the child of the past, and the father of the future".¹⁰ In this case, Freud continued, it is social institutions that are constantly subject to change along the straight line of progressiveness as is the case with animals. So the consequence is that if we find signs of the personality of an adult in the character of a child, we will also find important signs of the current civilization in the culture of the past. In addition, human life emerges or evolves due to natural order, an area that is not always friendly to humans. Nature is always a threat to humans. So the consequence is that we must join a clan or community, thus creating what we call

⁸ Harold H. Titus, et al., *Persoalan-persoalan Filsafat*, interpreting: H.M. Rasjidi, (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1984), hal.46-48.

⁹ Harold H. Titus, et al., *Persoalan-Persoalan....*, hal. 46-48.

¹⁰ Harold H. Titus, et al., *Persoalan-Persoalan....*, hal 34.

civilization.¹¹ This is the philosophical framework which resonates well with Freud's theory.

Later, especially in the field of psychology, the framework underwent a significant change and development. But still the natural science flavor was prevalent, such as the psychoanalysis conducted by Freud, Alfred, C.G. Jung, and others in the medical profession. According to Freud, life energy or the structure of human life occurs due to three factors. First is id, a deep subconscious field that comes from instinct, impulse, and passion. Second is ego, an element of personality which can think and sometimes control id. Third is super ego, which is the internalization of the needs of society, also called conscience.¹² In analyzing a phenomenon related to religion Freud also uses this psychoanalysis theory.

Psychoanalysis is a dynamic system from the field of psychology that looks at the roots of human behavior in unconscious motivation and conflict.¹³ For Freud, psychoanalysis has three meanings.¹⁴ *First*, psychoanalysis is used as a method of research to analyze psychic processes that were previously untouched by scientific research. *Second*, psychoanalysis is also a technique for curing mental disorders experienced by neurotic patients. *Third*, psychoanalysis in a broader sense is a method to show the psychological knowledge gained through such methods and techniques.

C. Freud and Religion

Freud's thoughts about religion began from the concept of libido or sexual desire. Broader ideas about the feelings of affection as found in family were then incorporated. Freud gave an example of how an

¹¹ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), hal. 71.

¹² Harold H. Titus, et al., *Persoalan-Persoalan...*, hal 73-74.

¹³ Lihat dalam J.P. Chaplin, *Kamus Psikologi*, edisi ke-12, interpreting: Kartini Kartono, (Jakarta: RajaGrafindo Persada, 2008), hlm. 394.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psychoanalysis", in *Standard Edition*, Edisi 23, (London: Hogarth, 1940/1964), hlm. 120.

organized community, like a church in Christianity, depends on the love from their leader. Worship directed to Christ or affection given to a brother in faith proves that the diversity that exists in a community is bound by single solidarity.

Freud's central ideas on religion finally began to emerge in 1907, when he published an article entitled *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*, which talks about the behavior of religious people that is always similar to his neurotic patients. This resemblance, he says, lies in both emphasizing ceremonial forms of doing things, and the guilt that comes from not performing those rituals perfectly. In both cases these ceremonies are also associated with repression of fundamental impulses. Psychological disturbances usually arise from the depression of sexual desire. In the context of religion, this occurs as a result of self-repression, ie controlling the instincts-ego. Thus, if sexual repression can lead to self-induced mental disorder, then the practiced religion can be regarded as a universal mental obsession disorder. Therefore, the most appropriate concepts to study religion according to Freud are the concepts that have been developed in psychoanalysis.¹⁵

In his statement on Christianity, Freud talks about an astonishing phenomenon he observed in Tirol in 1911, when the crucified Lord's statues were regarded as the Lord Jesus by Christians. The fusion between the Father and the Crucified to him appears to stem from the religious need to satisfy the desire to play down the role of the Father. According to him, this makes *Oedipus Complex*¹⁶ the main problem related to Lord Jesus in Tirol.¹⁷

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Totem dan Tabu*, interpreting: Kurniawan Adi Saputro, (Yogyakarta: Jendela, 2002), hlm. 132-144.

¹⁶ Oedipus Complex is a desire that is pressed on the children to have sexual intercourse with her parents who are different sex with her. See also in *Philosophy of religion*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1990), hlm. 33; See also in Sigmund Freud, *Peradaban dan kekecewaan-kececewaan*, interpreting: Apri Danarto, (New york: Norton and Company, 2000), hlm. 157.

¹⁷ Joachim Scharfenberg, *Sigmund Freud: Pemikiran dan kritik Agama*, interpreting: Shohifullah, Subhan Zaenuri, Zulkifly, (Yogyakarta: Ak Group, 2003), hlm. 219.

The occurrence of the *Oedipus Complex* is due to the presence of two powerful human emotions in any boy. The childrens' attack on their father was the evil *oedipal* that had been committed hundreds of years ago due to jealousy and passion for their father's wife (their own mother), so they agreed to commit the murder which was followed by rituals of regret and affection. Therefore, humanity, as Freud, has inherited in whole this severe emotional ambivalence.¹⁸

Freud also equated the totem¹⁹ religious rituals in primitive societies with the sacraments or religious behavior existing in modern society, such as the Christian sacred banquet. At this feast, the flesh and blood of Christ, the Son of God symbolized as the oldest brother who was the leader of the assault, was eaten to recall the crucifixion and death he suffered as a punishment for the original sin for the murder of the father by the son. For the sake of his brothers, Christ repented for their prehistoric evil, a ritual that is repeated continuously until today. In Christian theology the Son and the Father are one, then the sacrament of the symbolic killing of the children is also a sacrament for the killing of the father. Thus, this Holy Communion is an attempt to recall the hatred of oedipal and the love at once and the emergence of belief in religion can be found in the *Oedipal* complex.²⁰

It is clear that Freud seems to have drawn a line that connects the religions we know today with the ceremonies in prehistoric societies. Although Freud's point of view is part of human emotion, for him, the prehistoric killing was the most important event in the history of human social life and the earliest social contract. From these events we can trace the origin of religion and the basic foundation for all civilizations. It also appears that Freud was also influenced by the evolutionist thought, the

¹⁸ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of...*, hlm. 67.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem dan Tabu...*, hlm. 161.

²⁰ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of...*, hlm. 70.

Darwinian biological evolutionary theory, as well as the theory of social and intellectual evolution.²¹

D. Freud and his Criticism of Religion

Freud's critique of religion at this stage focuses on the religions that exists today and how they will evolve in the future. This is different from the one during the first stage, which focuses on the past and prehistoric times. At this second stage, the critique focuses more on ideas and beliefs than on rituals, especially the belief in God.

Freud found no reason to believe in God, so he considered religious rituals meaningless and not beneficial to life. Freud considered religion a superstition and it was from this assumption that he was attracted to religion. But his interest here was not to embrace a religion but to study it. Freud is especially interested in looking at the issue of religion because it raises important questions about humans.

To answer questions about religion, Freud looked for examples from his neurotic patients. He believes that a religious person and a neurotic patient have similarities. For example, they both resort to ceremonial forms in carrying out their actions. Both will feel guilty if they do not perform such rituals perfectly. In Freud's view, religious behavior is similar to mental illness.

According to Freud there are three reasons as to why a person becomes religious. *First*, people are fully devoted to their religion that they no longer need proof or verification. *Second*, there is absolute respect for what ancestors have done. *Third*, historical evidence make people believe in religions.²²

Freud had the conviction that the best word to describe such beliefs is illusion. Illusions are different from delusions. An illusion is a

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion, in *Standard Edition*, jilid. 21..., hlm. 45.

²² Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion, in *Standard Edition*, jilid. 21..., hlm. 47.

belief that we hold firmly and that we regard as true, like a person's belief that he or she will be a successful person in the future. At some point, this belief may become true, even though the reason for believing it is a false one. A delusion is something that a person wants to see it as true, but everyone knows that it is impossible to be so, such as when someone says that at some point the height of something will reach 4 meters no matter how unlikely such growth will occur. In this scenario someone can be said to be delusional.²³

Freud questioned the difference between these two and found that the difference was very thin, even almost indistinguishable. He believed that the teachings of religion cannot be scientifically proven thus potentially leading to delusions. Religion is the habit of its adherents in describing their personal feelings and intuitions. Therefore, we should not truly believe in religions, although their teachings indeed served humanity in the past.²⁴

If that is the case, the questions are, is not it true that religious ideas are of great influence to human life? Why do people choose to believe in religious forces? A psychological approach can perhaps answer these questions. In other words, the psychological root of religion can perhaps explain this essence. Freud, in this case, attempted to apply his hope fulfillment model he discovered during his study of neurotic dreams and symptoms to his theorization of religion. This model includes the structure of the unconscious, the structure of the instinct, and the structure of dreams. Freud says that the idea of religion is not a reflection of the experience or the end result of our thinking, but, as mentioned above, is only an illusion, the deepest and most basic satisfaction of human hope. Hope in this context is the hope of an unhappy human childhood for the protection of the dangers of life, for the realization of

²³ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of...*, hlm. 70.

²⁴ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of...*, hlm. 71.

justice in an unjust society, for the extension of the existence of the earth in the future life, and to know the origin of the world and the relationship between the physical and mental fulfillment.²⁵

Finally the author concludes that Freud views religion as a mere illusion, a neurosis that hinders critical thinking and the fulfillment of childish attitudes. He considers religion as a fulfillment of childish desires. Perhaps this is the result of looking at religion as a psychoanalysis object where it is simply defined as a medical treatment for people suffering from neurological disorders as explained earlier.

Freud and his followers further believed that religion was something negative and neurotic (neurological / mental) and serves only to satisfy childish desires. Freud's view was based on two factors:

First is a strong belief in God as the father figure. This factor is largely due to the life experience of religious people at an early age as the children who look for to a father figure. They consider parents, especially fathers who can lovingly comfort children who are helpless and fearful, can ultimately create an artificial paradise for them. This is one of the reasons for Freud to claim religion as an illusion.

Second, compulsory rituals also function in a complex way. We cannot deny the existence of a number of rules in religion and other religious ceremonies. So it is not surprising for Freud to see religion as a symptom of neurosis or mental illness. He contends that the complete freedom of human-beings, becomes limited with so many rules that must be obeyed in religions. For him, the presence of religion prevents humans from acting according to their wishes, or in other words, is confined by it. Freud believes that only crazy people want to be restrained by the rules of religion where they are entitled to live freely.

²⁵ Hans Kung, *Sigmund Freud Vis-a Vis Tuhan*, interpreting: Edi Mulyono, (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2003), hlm. 57-58.

Religion is also described as a power to defend and survive or a mental defense in the face of all calamities such as natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, diseases, and so forth. Religious men in the face of such matters are seen by Freud as children who seek protection from their father. This is another reason for Freud to believe that religion is actually the fulfillment of childish desires.

E. Religion As Historical Truth

Religion as a religious doctrine is also thought to provide historical truth. So for the rest of his life, Freud was concerned with religious phenomena and humanitarian problems. But Freud's interpretation of historical processes still contains contradictions unless one can understand what Freud understands.²⁶

Freud as a representative of the enlightenment era, on the one hand believed in the progress of history as a continuous upward movement. But on the other hand, Freud also sided with traditions, the idea of the cycle of history. Thus Freud's interpretation of history can only be described as a compromise between ambiguous and conflicting elements. The second type of historical interpretation dominates his later works. So from this perspective, Freud is considered a conservative thinker. Because the future has no power to overcome the past, there is no slightest chance for a radical change in society to happen. Contrary to Marx, who believes that the past always contains future clues, Freud believes the opposite.²⁷

It can be understood from Freud's interpretation of history is that there is a necessity for history to repeat continuously. It is a repeated recurrence of the oppressed fighting to rid of the oppression. This shows

²⁶ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of...*, hlm. 74; See also in Joachim Scharfenberg, *Sigmund Freud: Pemikiran...*, hlm. 234.

²⁷ Joachim Scharfenberg, *Sigmund Freud: Pemikiran dan...*, hlm. 235-236; See also in Benjamin Nelson (Ed.), *Freud: Manusia Paling Berpengaruh Abad ke-20*, interpreting: Yurni, M. Psi, (Surabaya: IKON, 2003), hlm. 108-109.

that humans are immature psychically, and in the course of one's development, never finds something new. This is what characterizes the development of neurosis, which should not be a general law in history.

F. Conclusion

Religion basically covers not only faith in the great God, but also encompasses the order and discipline of life, the relationship between individuals in society, and the relationship between God and other beings. In short, religion includes human relationships, either with God or with other humans.

Freud saw religion as the fulfillment of childish desires. This cannot be separated from his work as a psychologist who produces concepts about psychoanalysis and human sexual stages. Freud admits that in the past religion had indeed contributed to civilization. But civilization has now become mature and well established. We as a modern society should not build society above superstitions and repression and will not impose restrictions on children, men and women to manage their behavior.

The theory proposed by Sigmund Freud on the origin of religion in primitive societies, contained in his book "*Totem and Taboo*" and the future of religion in his book "*The Future of an Illusion*" may well provide a new nuance to the study of the origins of religion. This concept inspired many people afterwards, such as Carl Jung, Fritz Perls and so forth. His background, which is an expert physician, helped give birth to psychoanalytic theories and the stage of the development of human sexuality, which is still being studied and developed today. His psychoanalytical theory was also used in the study of the origins of religion, which brought him to the conclusion that religion is the satisfaction of childish desires. He also concludes that religious people are similar to people with mental illness.

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