

Religion: Illusion or Path to Reality?

In “The Future of an Illusion,” Sigmund Freud characterized religion as a false belief system arising from the most urgent of human wishes. Religion an illusion? It all depends.

There are those scholars of religion, as well as many practitioners, who regard religion as concerned with the creation of meaning. Religion helps bring order to an otherwise chaotic or absurd existence, especially in the face of human fallibility, finitude, and failure. Those who see religion in this way understand the various rituals and practices of religion as elements in the construction of a meaningful universe in which our lives can express purpose and make sense.

Many forms of religion do seem to function in this way. Insofar as they do, I believe Freud was right – religion is an illusion. Human beings are incapable of constructing a meaningful universe, and they deceive themselves when they attempt to do so.

As I see it, the universe is either meaningful or not. If not, then life is finally absurd, and there is really no way to change that. But what if the universe is meaningful? Then there must be some ultimate purposive power that transcends all our finite, fallible, and otherwise futile endeavors. Then the religious life may be understood as a pilgrimage, quest, or exploration to discern that which is meaningful and enduring.

There is really a world of difference between the presumptive creation of meaning and the receptive discernment of meaning.

Thus the authentic religious life always demands a quest for truth. We must be disabused of what is illusory as we come to know more fully what is real.

I hardly mean to suggest that we can grasp the whole truth of our existence! For the most part, we continue to live by illusions of all sorts, not just those promulgated by religion. Nonetheless, it is a basically religious undertaking to engage the world in pursuit of whatever truth we can know about whatever may ultimately be so, and whatever may ultimately matter.

We human beings relentlessly struggle to protect ourselves from all that is fruitless, fallible, and finite about our existence. We become enthralled with spurious religious notions, but also with all sorts of ideologies and “isms” that we construct to govern our social, economic, and political lives. Becoming disenthralled with our own illusions is integral to the apprehension of that reality which ultimately bestows meaning to our days.

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