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Religiousness – Between Defence Mechanism and Consciousness. A Study Based on Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*

ABSTRACT

According to Sigmund Freud, the emergence of Judaism should be associated with the murder of Moses, which the Hebrews allegedly committed against their leader. This thesis, which the psychoanalyst takes over from Ernst Sellin, became the basis for his reflections on trauma, which is the source of religious neurosis experienced by man. This paper attempts to show that the basis of neuroses related to religiousness should not be seen in the traumatic events related to the time of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, as Freud wanted, but in the individual approach of a person to religion and in the internal conflicts he or she experiences.

KEYWORDS: Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Religiousness, Trauma, Ecclesiogenic Neurosis

STRESZCZENIE

Religijność – między mechanizmem obronnym a świadomością na podstawie *Człowiek imieniem Mojżesz a religia monoteistyczna* Zygmunta Freuda

Według Zygmunta Freuda powstanie religii judaistycznej należy łączyć z zabójstwem Mojżesza, którego mieli dokonać względem swojego przywódcy Hebrajczycy. Teza ta, którą psychoanalityk przejął od Ernsta Sellina, stała się podstawą jego rozważań dotyczących traumy stanowiącej źródło doświadczanej przez człowieka nerwicy na tle religijnym. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę wykazania, iż podłoże nerwice eklezjogennej nie należy upatrywać w traumatycznych wydarzeniach związanych z czasem wyjścia Izraelitów z Egiptu, jak chciał Freud, ale w indywidualnym podejściu człowieka do religii oraz w przeżywanych przez niego konfliktach wewnętrznych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Freud, *Człowiek imieniem Mojżesz a religia monoteistyczna*, religijność, trauma, nerwice eklezjogenne

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The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is regarded in psychology as the father of psychoanalysis.¹ Freud himself made considerable contributions to the research in psychology of religion, which is a sub-discipline of psychology. This field of science is today referred to as the psychoanalytic perspective on religion and is related to the method of cognition and treatment of the human psyche he had adopted.² Freud devoted his last work, entitled *Moses and Monotheism*, to religion and its beginnings.³ This paper aims to critically discuss the essential theses on religion and human religiousness presented by Freud in this particular work. It should be seen as an attempt to present Freud's claims on the emergence of Judaism that he made near the end of his life, and the possibility of a modern critical examination of Freud's hypotheses.

The framework of this paper is as follows: (1) Initially, Freud's key assumptions regarding the origins of the Mosaic religion will be introduced. (2) Then, the Freudian connection between these contents and human mental disorders will be presented. All this, in order to (3) ultimately address these analyses and provide the views on the subject of religiousness expressed by contemporary psychologists of religion. The whole paper will be closed with a summary containing the conclusions resulting from the conducted analyses (4).

The emergence of Judaism according to Freud – an outline of the concept and its critique

Freud finished *Moses and Monotheism* in 1939. Witnessing the increasing resentment towards the followers of the Judaic religion, he began inquiring about its origins and, more specifically, about the source of religiousness of the people who in his time were brutally persecuted due to their belief in the God YHWH. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Freud

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- 1 One of the key assumptions of this current is the idea that there are three essential systems in the structure of human personality: *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. According to Freud, the *id* is supposed to correspond with the most primitive processes that refer to the pleasure principle, the *ego* acts according to the reality principle, while the *superego* was considered by him to be a moral instance of one's personality (Hall, Lindzey, & Campbell, 2013, pp. 56–59).
 - 2 In addition (Zimnica-Kuzioła, 2012, p. 61) to the aforementioned psychoanalytic perspective there are four others: behavioral, humanistic, historical-psychological, and cognitive.
 - 3 Original title: *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*. As pointed by the author himself, the three-part work was created in stages. The final, third chapter (the second part of the work), was completed by Freud when he was forced to flee to England in result of the German Annexation of Austria in March 1938. Emotions associated with Hitler's actions that accompanied Freud during writing are described in: Nurmela, 2016, pp. 225–229.

began to blame the Nazi persecution on Moses himself. He regarded the latter as the founder of Judaism. A few years earlier, he explicitly stated that Moses had created the Jews.⁴

Freud, therefore, constructed his hypotheses for the origins of Judaism by referring to the story of the biblical Moses and outlining his initial connection to ancient Egyptian religion. He notes that the very name “Moses” is misinterpreted by the author of the biblical text as its origin can be traced back to the Egyptian language.⁵ Freud (1939, pp. 12–14) argues that Moses’ original name may have been *Patah-mose* (“Patah gave the child”) or *Amon-mose* (“Amon gave the child”), which was eventually shortened to *Mose* (“child”) in everyday speech.⁶ Freud further states that the story of Moses’ early life is reminiscent of the descriptions of the birth and infancy of folk heroes who later gave rise to primal civilisations. According to him (Freud, 1939, pp. 20–21), the description of Moses’ life should be treated as a legend that descended from the recast myth.

Freud sees the link between Moses and ancient Egypt, which would also prove his Egyptian heritage, in the transmission of monotheism to the Hebrews in exile, which resulted from the intended religious reform of pharaoh Amenhotep IV, better known by his altered name Akhenaten from the Eighteenth Dynasty.⁷ The exact date of Akhenaten’s reign poses many difficulties to historians and archaeologists. By combining various approaches, it may be assumed that he ruled Egypt in the 14th century BC. According to Freud, the Exodus of the Hebrews under the leadership of Moses occurred at the same time. Most exegetists suggest dating the departure to 15th century BC, as indicated by the biblical data, or the

4 He shared this hypothesis with his friend Arnold Zweig in a letter addressed to him that is dated on 30th May, 1934. See Freud, 1970, p. 102.

5 Freud refers here to the passage which describes naming the boy drawn out of the water by Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex 2:10). He rightly notes that Hebrew term מִשֶׁה, which is morphologically *qal participium praesentis activi* derived from the Hebrew stem מִשָּׁה, should be correctly translated as “the one who draws out,” while the biblical author suggest in the comment present in the text that the name should be interpreted in *passivum*. Pharaoh’s daughter says: “because I drew him out of the water” (thus he is drawn out). A morphologically active form of the name indicates Moses’ future role and task – to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt across the waters of the Red Sea (Lemański, 2009, p. 122; Carpenter, 2012, p. 142).

6 A similar etymology of this name is suggested by: Griffiths, 1953, pp. 225–231. Cf. Cole, 1973, p. 153; Durham, 1987, p. 17; Propp, 2008, p. 152.

7 Freud (1939, pp. 34–41) presents detailed analyses confirming this thesis, and the relationship between Judaism and ancient Egyptian cults in the second part of the chapter entitled “If Moses was an Egyptian.” The issue of the relationship between Judaism and the ancient Egyptian religion is undertaken by modern scholars researching the Middle East: Okon, 2012, p. 418–427; Waszkowiak, 2022, pp. 29–44.

13th century BC.⁸ Yet, Freud's thesis fits into another hypothesis which assumes that the Israelites' departure from Egypt was not a singular event, but rather was extended over the period between the 15th and 12th centuries BC, when different groups of Hebrews were leaving Egypt (Malmat, 2012, p. 22).

Freud argues that Moses enforced the elements of the Egyptian religion on the departing Hebrews. This ultimately led to aggression that reached its peak when they murdered their leader in Shittim after he had imposed moral norms that were too strict on them. Freud (1939, pp. 76–77) writes:

Those who felt themselves kept in tutelage, or who felt dispossessed, revolted and threw off the burden of a religion that had been forced on them. ... The savage Semites took their destiny into their own hands and did away with their tyrant.

Freud (1939, p. 59) borrows the thesis about the murder of Moses from Ernst Sellin (1867–1946) who was a German archaeologist and protestant theologian.⁹ While interpreting the passage from Num. 25:1–5 which describes the adultery of the Israelite men with Moabite women and acts of idolatry committed then, Sellin (1922, pp. 49–50) assumes that Moses was murdered by the Hebrews as he ordered them to kill anyone who had sinned against YHWH.¹⁰ Sellin's claims were not acclaimed by the

8 There are arguments for and against both the first and the second dating proposals.

9 Professor Ernst Sellin seems to be a fairly bold scholar for his times. In his "Introduction to the Old Testament" (*Einleitung in das Alte Testament*) published in 1910, he was much inclined to apply the principles that today are regarded as the foundations of historical-critical method as he carefully distinguished legends from historical events in the texts he analysed. According to Jacek J. Waszkowiak (2022, p. 26), Freud adopted the relation between Moses and Akhenaten from James H. Breasted instead of E. Sellin. However, Waszkowiak does not provide arguments to support his thesis. Furthermore, Freud himself mentions Sellin as the author of the murder of Moses theory.

10 Thesis on the death of Moses fits the research conducted by Sellin. In 1924 he published his groundbreaking two-volume work (*Geschichte des israelitisch-juedischen Volkes* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer) in which he described the history of Israel in biblical times. In his analyses he demonstrated the relationship between Israel's geographical position and the life story of its inhabitants. He assumed that it is futile to look for one coherent current of Yahwism in the Bible. Instead, it is more appropriate to recognize the various, often competing currents of political and theological nature, which were only unified during the reign of Saul and David. In his research Sellin distinguished two rival traditions, hypothetical in his view, that are present in Hebrew Bible concerning Israelites' wandering in the desert: (1) Sinai tradition (a wishful-orthodox tradition, critical of any assimilation of Canaanite rites, especially incorporation of Canaanite deities into nascent Yahwism) and (2) Kadesh tradition (realistic-life one, to which he includes descriptions of every case of idolatry and rebellions against Moses and Aaron). Sellin conducted interesting research regarding intertextuality as part of the study on the Sinai current. He sought to show the parallels

scientific community and faced criticism from historians and Biblical scholars contemporary to him (Baron, 1939, p. 476; Hyatt, 1940, p. 88).¹¹ According to some sources (Nurmela, 2016, p. 229), Sellin eventually abandoned this assumption. Freud was aware of that, yet it did not prevent him from adopting this postulation as the basis for his theory. It is worth mentioning a comment on this fact made by David Bakan – he states that Freud adopted only these ideas from Sellin that suited his views on religion while wishing that Moses was indeed murdered by the Hebrews.¹²

Traumatic events and their connection with religion – Freud's proposal

In Freud's view (1939, pp. 65–67), the murder of Moses, “the father of the nation,” was to reappear later in the form of traumatic memories. The author supposes that the Hebrews eventually regretted their deed and thus tried to forget about it by using the mechanism of repression. According to him, it was not until the third generation after this tragic event that the story of Exodus was re-interpreted. The credit for leading the people out of Egypt was attributed to YHWH Himself, who would assume the role of Moses.¹³

occurring between the Book of Hosea and the Book of Amos (he dated them to the second half of the 8th century BC) in comparison with the Book of Exodus at the linguistic level. Sellin's Goal was to link monotheistic traditions present within the Book of Hosea and the Book of Amos through the material from the Book of Exodus. Then, he noticed the same narrative structure in these prophetic books: rebellion of Israel – betrayal of YHWH – pleading to God – repentance – restoration of worship. Assuming that the later prophetic books are an intertextual reflection of Pentateuch, the scholar proposed interpretation of the Book of Exodus according to this very structure. In order to make the motifs match, Sellin introduced the motif of Moses' death at historical level. Using intertextual analysis, this would correspond to the betrayal of God. Sellin (1928, pp. 26–33) supported this thesis in his article where he interprets the passage from Hos. 12 in the context of Moses' death. Jan Assman (2018, p. 146) notes that, from Sellin's perspective, the murder of Moses should be regarded as the beginning of the later violence of Israelites against the prophets. Sellin's assumptions should be seen as methodologically flawed, because historical facts should not be deduced on the basis of intertextual literary techniques. Nevertheless, given the period during which Ernst Sellin lived, his work should be regarded as praiseworthy.

- 11 Contemporary criticism of Sellin's work has been attempted, for instance, by: Assmann, 2018, pp. 144–147.
- 12 „The fantasy of the murder of Moses is a current one, one that Freud engages in at the very moment of writing (...). It is Freud who wishes that Moses were [sic!] murdered” (Bakan, 1958, p. 164).
- 13 Freud (1967, pp. 127–128; 1998a, pp. 216–217. Cf. Chwalisz, 2007, pp. 270–271; Onfray, 2012, pp. 176–177) derived the relation of man to God from a hypothetical concept which claimed

According to Freud, a traumatic experience is a sudden and destructive external stimulus that provokes inner suffering and breaches the integrity of the subject, thus triggering powerful disturbances in the body's energy deposits, which ultimately leads to the activation of all defence mechanisms.¹⁴ In this process, the pleasure principle is suspended, making it difficult for a person to control the resulting tension (Freud, 2005, p. 31. Cf. Onfray, 2012, p. 176). The result of experiencing a traumatic encounter is the suspension of symbolisation so that the subject becomes locked into the fearful event and replicates it compulsively (Kisiel, 2016, p. 118). According to Freud (2005, p. 38), this repetition compulsion is an inevitable return to inanimate matter, which is defined by him as the death drive.

In the work analysed in this paper, Freud (1939, pp. 109–110) provides an example of a traumatic event that causes the development of a disorder called traumatic neurosis. He describes a person who walks away “apparently unharmed” from the scene of a serious accident in which he or she was involved. According to Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 22), this Freudian observation of “apparently unharmed” is crucial to understanding the traumatic event. She states:

The trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure. It is a departure that, in the full force of its historicity, remains simultaneously absolutely opaque, both to the one who leaves and to the theoretician, linked to the suffering in his attempt to bring the experience to light.

Referring to the incident, Freud (1939, p. 110) later explains that after such a shock, this person experiences severe mental and motor symptoms resulting from this experience. He describes the time that passes between

that humans initially lived in small nomadic groups occupying specific territories. Such a group would be led by the most aggressive male, who, guided by his drives and instincts desired to have as many females around him. To defend his status, this leader would dispose of his male offspring when they began to mature, thus becoming a threat to him. Such action must have led to a rebellion of the sons against their father. Such rebellion culminated with patricide and an act of cannibalism, which Freud believed to be a form of identification with the late parent. Hatred towards the father (manifestation of Oedipus complex) was at the same time combined with loving him for the life he had given them. These two extremes – love and hate – finally led to a sense of guilt emerging in the sons for the committed act of murder. To alleviate this feeling, the sons began to obey the remembrance of their father still living in their memory. Such obedience became the basis for religious worship.

14 The term “trauma” used by Freud is not limited solely to factual events, but refers also to events from early childhood as well as to so-called primal scene, that is the first sexual fantasy which cannot be fully comprehended by the child; thus, it reappears as a traumatizing memory (Kisiel, 2016, s. 116).

the traumatic event and the first symptoms of the disorder as latency. During this period the consequences of the event are yet unknown.¹⁵

The traumatic experience becomes the beginning of neurosis development which is rendered by Freud in the following formula: early trauma – defence – latency – outbreak of the neurosis – partial return of the repressed material. Freud (1939, p. 129) ultimately states:

I have, I believe, divined these processes and wish to show that their consequences, which bear a strong resemblance to neurotic symptoms, are the phenomena of religion.

Then Freud applies the same formula to the initial stages of the development of Judaism, from the aforementioned murder of Moses to the recognition of YHWH as the leader of the nation succeeding Moses – he labels it as a partial return of the repressed material. By defining the story of Exodus in this way, with particular emphasis on the motif of the “return” to Canaan, Freud suggests his own interpretation to the reader. He presents the story of a “return,” but to the repressed story.¹⁶

Based on the Freudian interpretation of the Exodus and the rise of Judaism presented above, it must be concluded that the father of psychoanalysis reduced the phenomenon of religion to mere psychological experiences rooted in the father–son relationship. Freud (1967, p. 173; 1998a, p. 172) claims man creates the idea of God within himself as a result of the exaltation of the idealised image of his father, who used to be the perfect authority in childhood. As the years pass by and the child grows up, the father ceases to be so. For Freud, religion becomes only a compensation for childhood desires on a biological-psychological level that seek fulfilment in adult life. It should be considered a psychopathological symptom. The neurosis that religion represents in human life has its origins in the Oedipus complex, which is linked to the forever-lasting sense of childhood helplessness in the face of the father (Czernianin, 2017, p. 28. Cf. Onfray, 2012, pp. 160–163).

People who are reluctant to learn about the real reasons for their behaviour push themselves down to their subconsciousness, which leads to numerous anxieties, delusions, and neuroses. Freud expressed this

15 It is important to note that the victim of the accident is not fully conscious of what is happening to them during the event itself. The latency is therefore inseparable from the experience. The potency of trauma is that it is experienced only in and through a specific event. The history of trauma is more dependent on the event than the event itself. This history “can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth, 1996, pp. 17–18).

16 C. Caruth (1996, pp. 12–13) states that the Exodus should be understood more in the context of “departure” rather than “return.”

thought by relating it to religion in his previous works. He wrote (Freud, 1907, pp. 126–127. Cf. Freud, 1993, p. 137; 1998b, p. 151):

one might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as the pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis.

The very same pattern, in his view, can be furthermore observed in reference to both historical and cultural processes. In the same way, a person forgets childhood traumas, he or she “eliminates” the events and causes that could be considered as a basis for the adopted religion or culture from one’s consciousness. Only emancipation from the yoke of religion and overcoming this childish fixation may bring true freedom (Stasiewicz, 2014, p. 199).

Freud’s views on religion – identifying it as a psychic phenomenon that satiates human needs – are contemporarily described as a reductionist approach towards religion, as it is considered to be merely a world shaped through projections and emotions. The effect of such an approach is the belief that religiousness is a result of an individual’s non-religious pursuits or a social construct, both of which aim to keep humankind in existence by appealing to divine power (Chlewiński, 2000, p. 99). Ultimately, it must be concluded that the hypotheses formulated by Freud and his reflections about religion, from a methodological standpoint, do not have a solid scientific basis but are rather a validation of the inner beliefs of their author.

Contemporary approaches to neuroses related to religiousness – ecclesiogenic neuroses

It is difficult to disagree with Freud in recognising the connections between one’s religiousness and accompanying neuroses that are observed in some cases even today. This raises the question of the interdependence between religion and this disorder. As demonstrated above, Freud claims that religiousness always leads to neurosis as it is the result of a trauma, either conscious or repressed, present in the life of a religious person. Contrary to the modern psychologists of religion, in his proposals Freud does not seem to distinguish between mature and immature religiousness.¹⁷ Religious maturity is manifested by a personal approach to religion, a positive attitude towards it, internally motivated religiousness perceived as a life-guiding

17 The research on mature and immature religiousness was initiated by G.W. Allport (1966, pp. 447–457) a quarter of a century after the publication of Freud’s work analyzed in this paper.

force, an undistorted image of God, the authenticity of religious beliefs, and the ability to overcome religious crises (Wnuk & Marcinkowski, 2012, p. 246). It seems that Freud entirely overlooked the possibility of recognising a positive dimension in religion and human religiousness, focusing solely on the negative effects it has on humanity and the individual.

Religious immaturity – the features opposite to the ones mentioned above that define religious maturity – may lead a person to the so-called ecclesiogenic neurosis¹⁸ which accounts for more than 10% of all diagnosed neuroses today (Prusak, 2016, p. 35). The distinguishing feature of ecclesiogenic neuroses is a religious conflict concerning the inner struggle between ideals (including religious ones) and the needs of the individual on one hand, and the reality in which the subject exists, with its rules and principles – on the other (Pfeifer, 1994, p. 93). It should be noted that in all aforementioned areas, religiousness may be a significant factor for this type of neurotic conflict, so that the person suffering from neurosis may see it as the basis of his or her condition (Molenda, 2015, p. 191). From his clinical observations, Samuel Pfeifer (1994, p. 93) distinguishes seven fields within which patients adhering to Christianity may experience conflict in relation to their religion. They are as follows: (1) General tendency toward conflictuous functioning; (2) Conflicts involving family loyalty versus perceived trauma or injustice; (3) Conflicts between ideals and reality; (4) A basic tendency toward increased anxiety; (5) Feelings of guilt as part of the human condition; (6) Dependence on God versus taking personal responsibility; (7) Human legalism versus Christian freedom.¹⁹ The recognition of these symptoms, sometimes with a necessary help of a therapist, is significant to diagnose and treat ecclesiogenic neurosis. It seems to be a considerable challenge due to the latent nature of this disorder. Affected patients who recognise only religious authorities in their lives do not perceive incoherencies in the form of religiousness adopted by them. Thus, they lack motivation for treatment (Molenda, 2015, p. 193). Unfortunately, their religiousness and the associated subjective demands and obligations are often inconsistent with the real desires and needs of an individual. These needs sometimes make one feel ashamed in the context of the adopted religious practice. Such religiousness should then be regarded as toxic (Pfeifer, 1994, pp. 93–94; Morrow, 1998, pp. 266–267). However, the problem does not lie in religion itself, but rather in understanding of it by an individual. Then what is the real reason for these neuroses? In addition to the aforementioned predispositions to neurosis,

18 A condition concerning sexual dysfunction was first described by Eberhard Schaezting (1955, pp. 97–108), a German gynecologist, who saw church dogmatism as the basis of the problem.

19 Similar sources for ecclesiogenic neuroses are singled out by Cumbee, 1980, pp. 254–267.

incorrect religious upbringing has a significant influence on the occurrence of the described disorder. Its essence is often reduced to: (1) Complying to the commandments of God and the Church which are encumbered with the image of God's punishment or reward; (2) equating the demands issued by parents with the ones of God; (3) demonization of human sexuality (Molenda, 2015, pp. 194–195). The religious development of a child and then of the adult is thus shrouded in a destructive and panic-stricken fear that is further reinforced by the developing immature religiousness which portrays God as demanding and thus threatening to a person. Then the motivation for religiousness is not the need for an authentic relationship with God, but the desire to protect oneself from His punishment by trying to please Him, placate God, and earn His love (Molenda, 2013, p. 187). Such a fearful approach to religion means that adherence actually becomes a defence mechanism, which legitimately casts doubt on the authenticity of one's faith (Zimnica-Kuzioła, 2012, p. 68).

Summary

The subject presented in this paper concerned human religiousness. The ideas developed by Sigmund Freud which he presented in his last book entitled *Moses and Monotheism* were taken as the basis for this analysis. Freud aimed to demonstrate that religion should be considered a kind of neurosis which ultimately becomes a threat to humankind. He builds his convictions on the assumption of Ernst Sellin who claimed that Moses was brutally murdered by the Hebrews because of too strict religious demands imposed by him on the people who departed from Egypt. On this foundation, Freud regards religion as the product of a fearful human being who only desires to satisfy his psychological needs. As proven above, it is difficult to accept Sellin's assumption that the Hebrews killed Moses. If the methodological premises are included, this thesis seems to be wrong. This faulty premise was subsequently adopted by Freud who based his reflections on religion on it, which should be considered a serious scientific error on his part.

This paper also presents Freud's thesis that the repression of the act committed by the Hebrews as well as the trauma and guilt arising from the murder of Moses resulted in the mental disorder (neurosis) that humans experience to this day. Freud tries to convince the reader that both the killing (which actually did not happen) and the defence mechanisms employed as its result, ultimately led to the failure of humankind – as it embraced a religion that became a considerable burden for it. The psychoanalyst thus recognises that religiousness and religion itself should be regarded as the reason for mental diseases. Finally, by referring to contemporary approaches in the field of

psychology of religion, the definition of ecclesiogenic neurosis was provided. It is a mental disorder associated with religion, in which it is not religion itself that causes the problem, but rather one's approach to it resulting from an inappropriate religious upbringing and distorted image of God that eventually leads a person to anxiety. Such actions result in an inner conflict that the person must confront. On the basis of the outlined concept of ecclesiogenic neurosis, its sources, and effects on human life, one cannot ultimately with Freud who sees reasons for the mental problems of the individual and society solely in the religious system. Religion *per se* is not a threat to humans – it is rather the approach to it and immature religiousness which stems from unawareness of one's own limits, tensions, and inner fears that finally lead to the distortion of the image of God. The realisation of this immaturity, which originates in religious determinism, ultimately renders our perception of God more conscious, and our actions become more mature.

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