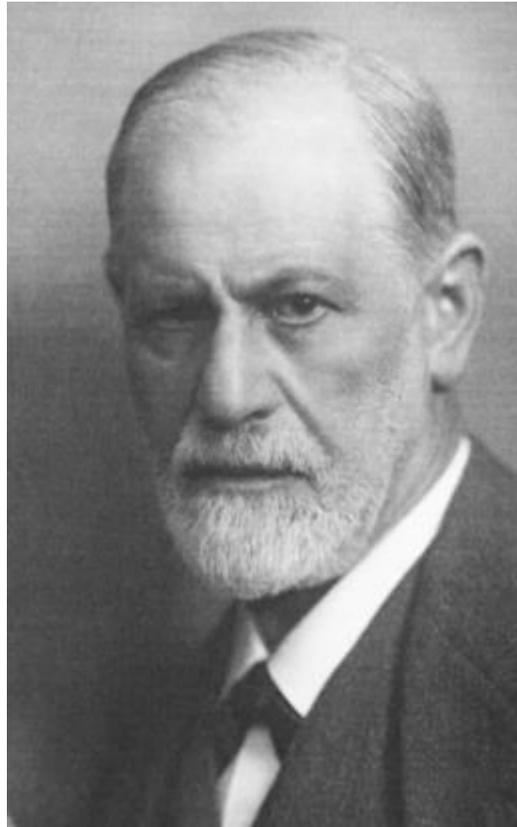




Reverend Oskar Pfister



Sigmund Freud

Freud and the Question of God

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Sigmund Freud, an atheist and a non-religious Jew, was fascinated by the psychological underpinnings of theism and religious practice. In the first part of this article I will reflect on Armand Nicholi's book *The Question of God*, which examines Freud's atheism and C.S. Lewis's theism; I will also address the stage play, *Freud's Last Session*, which was based on Nicholi's book and presents us with a dialogue, which actually never took place, between Freud and Lewis discussing their differing points of view. In the second part I will recall a dialogue that actually did take place between Sigmund Freud and his friend the Reverend Oscar Pfister, regarding their respective positions on atheism and theism. And I will then offer a few of my own thoughts on the clinical implications of the issues raised.

THE QUESTION OF GOD

The premise of Armand M. Nicholi, Jr.'s *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex and the Meaning of Life* (2002) was to create a kind of

“debate” on the existence of God between two great thinkers, C.S. Lewis, a theist, and Sigmund Freud, an atheist. It is an extraordinarily creative idea and an appealing subject so I was not surprised to see the book’s popularity. That said, I found the book disappointing. Nicholi is a theist and a psychiatrist but I found his treatment of Freud’s position lacking.

Nicholi makes a strong point, based in Freud’s psychoanalytic reasoning, that Freud’s atheism was derived from his “disgust and bitter disappointment” with his father (Nicholi, 2002, p. 49). He makes this point repeatedly and yet in another context quotes Freud on the death of his father. “The old man’s death has affected me deeply. I valued him highly, understood him very well, and with his peculiar mixture of deep wisdom and fantastic light-heartedness he had a significant effect on my life” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 223). While Freud’s relationship to his father was complex and obviously included a great deal of affection as well as disappointment, Nicholi, used Freud’s reasoning that the relationship to one’s father is related to one’s attitude toward the concept of God, to conclude that this one factor explains Freud’s atheism and Lewis’s 19 years as an atheist as well.

Lewis’s mother died when he was 10 years old. Following this devastating blow, his father became emotionally inaccessible and shipped young Lewis off to boarding schools. At age 15 C.S. Lewis became an atheist declaring he was “very angry with God for not existing” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 51). I would not say that the only reason Lewis became an atheist was his anger with his father for abandoning him emotionally, that is, “not existing” but Nicholi seems to do just that.

The relationship between a son and father is not uncommonly organized around pride and disappointment moving in both directions. There’s nothing new there. Freud’s disappointment with his father was not exceptional and did not impede Freud from valuing his father highly. But Nicholi makes the teleological argument that Freud was an atheist because he was disappointed with his father. While such a reductive and formulaic ‘explanation’ may be a good place to begin an exploration, it falls flat as a definitive statement or conclusion. Nicholi is careful to point out that Lewis became an atheist at age 15 when his father became more distant but he makes no mention at all of the fact that Lewis found his way back to God at a very curious moment in his life – in 1929 - the year his father died. The reason Lewis didn’t become a hardened atheist in 1929 is because there were obviously other factors – other dynamics – involved.

For all the attention paid to Freud’s relationship with his father as a basis for Freud’s atheism, Nicholi didn’t address very deeply the scholarly investigation and well elaborated position taken by Freud to assert his atheism in Totem and Taboo, Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Moses and Monotheism in which Freud was coming to grips with the evolution of religious thinking in the human animal from ancestor worship and totemism to the proliferation of the gods to the unification of the gods in monotheism and finally to the withdrawal of the religious projections in the scientific world-view. While Freud dealt with the all-encompassing worldwide history of humanity’s propensity to project and create gods, Lewis and Nicholi seem to be focused on the theism of Christianity as though it were the only true object of belief.

Like many theists, Nicholi seems almost surprised to discover that Freud, the atheist, was not only not promiscuous but made little use of the sexual freedom he stood for. This is a common reflection of theists when considering atheism. It is as though a person without God would also not have a moral compass (a superego). But then Nicholi comments with additional surprise, “Freud proved to be an unusually conservative parent in overseeing the social life of his children” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 150). The example he uses is that in 1914 one of Freud’s disciples, Ernest Jones, expressed romantic interest in Freud’s daughter, Anna, and Freud ran interference seeing to it that nothing happened between the two. Nicholi calls this the behavior of “an unusually conservative parent”. Jones, only a year before, had ended a seven year relationship to a woman, Loe Kann, who had, secondary to her kidney condition, become a morphine addict. So in 1914 Dr. Ernest Jones was a 35-year-old psychiatrist on the emotional rebound, while Anna Freud was 18 years old and had just finished high school.

Nicholi tells us Freud was “clinically depressed” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 68), treated himself with cocaine (Nicholi, 2002, p. 68, 109) and had “phobias – especially the fear of death” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 194). Was Freud’s character depressive? Yes, somewhat but his depression never seemed to interfere with his being able to raise six children; look after his mother, sisters, nieces, grandchildren, some of his adult children, colleagues and even some of his patients; have a great sense of humor; enjoy hiking in the mountains; work full time in his clinical practice; pursue his interest in collecting antiquities and write 23 volumes. Did he take cocaine? Yes, he did for a time, but he didn’t get it on the street corner from one of the local drug-dealers. He got it from the pharmaceutical company, Merck, shortly after it was first synthesized and made available for clinical trials. Freud did experiments with it, used it on himself and wrote scientifically about its effects before he abandoned its use entirely.

Nicholi tells us Freud’s life exhibits a pattern in friendships ending in serious conflict. There is some truth to this and Freud is the one that first pointed it out. In this regard we are commonly reminded of Breuer, Fleiss, Adler, Stekel, and Jung. In his own defense, however, Freud also noted that he maintained good relations with Abraham, Eitingon, Ferenczi, Rank, Brill, Sachs, van Emden, Reik and others. But Nicholi doesn’t buy it. He writes, “One wonders: if half of Freud’s children rejected him, would he point to the other half to prove he had good relations with his family?” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 181). Freud spent a lifetime in the warmth of enduring friendships with friends whose ideas and opinions differed greatly from his own. There are few in this world about whom we could say the same. Did Freud enter into serious conflict with some of his colleagues? Of course, he did. And what intellectual doesn’t? Did his psychology play a role in some of those conflicts? Sure it did. He was the one that first noticed it. But again, it did not preclude him from maintaining many long-lasting relationships even with friends with whom he differed on important ideas.

Then Nicholi tells us that when he went to visit Anna Freud, her maid told him that before Anna went to be interrogated by the Nazis in 1938, “her father gave her cyanide pills to take if the Nazis decided to torture her” (Nicholi, 2002, p. 193). Well, the maid might have said that but it’s not true. In the event of torture, which was a real

possibility during their interrogations by the Gestapo, Dr. Max Schur gave Anna Freud and her brother, Martin, Veronal, a strong barbiturate, with which to kill themselves. Schur gave them the Veronal without Freud's knowledge. Furthermore, at the time of the Anschluss when Jews were being carted off to concentration camps, tortured and executed, Anna Freud approached her father and asked if it wouldn't be better if they all just killed themselves. Freud replied, "Why? Because they would like us to?" (Schur, 1972, p. 499)

Nicholi invites us to think for ourselves about God and atheism and then refers to Freud's atheism as a "resistance to belief". Then, as a theist, Nicholi wonders, "Did Freud, at some level, feel that he, himself, had made a pact with the devil?" (Nicholi, 2002, pp. 208-209). Nicholi immediately tells us what we already know which is that, "for Freud it would make no sense to treat the devil as objectively real." So then, who is feeling that Freud made a pact with the devil? Perhaps it was someone whose religious world-view includes a devil.

Nicholi's The Question of God was a brilliant conception and offers much for the critical thinker to consider. Unfortunately I found his treatment of Freud's position lacking. Consequently, the book had the opposite effect of what I presumed Nicholi intended, which was to invite the reader to think about theism and atheism on his or her own terms with the points of view presented in an even handed fashion, unfortunately Nicholi was not even-handed.

FREUD'S LAST SESSION

After publication of Nicholi's The Question of God, Mark St. Germain had the interesting idea of transforming the book into a play, Freud's Last Session (2009), which won the Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Play in 2011. It has subsequently played in theaters across the country. The script was written as a dialogue between Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis in Freud's study at the beginning of the Second World War and just three weeks before Freud's death. It is an imaginary dialogue between two men who, in reality, never met. The idea is very creative and in many ways the script is very well written but I was a bit disappointed with it in some regards. There were some small factual errors that I found only distracting. Freud's maid, for example, was Paula, not Maria, and his dog, at that time, was Lun, not Jofi. But more importantly, Freud was not as personally aggressive as he was portrayed in the play. That said, I recognize that creative license was used in this regard to make it a more interesting play for the theater and hold the attention of the audience.

Now, as good fate would have it, Freud's Last Session came to Seattle in late March 2012 and played to sold-out audiences through the end of April. The production was presented at the Taproot Theatre with Nolan Palmer as Sigmund Freud and Matt Shimkus as C.S. Lewis. Scott Nolte was the director and in my opinion, he and the actors, and of course the rest of the company involved, succeeded where Nicholi failed. Nolte explained that, independent of his own views on the matter of theism and atheism, his intention was to create a theatrical experience in which the theatre becomes the community forum in which the individual members of the audience are invited to think

for themselves about theism and atheism, revisit their own points of view, challenge their biases and open their minds.

The Taproot Theatre production brought out the tension between Freud and Lewis and between atheism and theism to such a high pitch that the audience member was left with no choice but to wrestle with the persuasive arguments of the two opposing characters on stage. The actors were so outstanding, so engaging and so thoroughly believable that my attention alternated between the drama on stage and the drama it was stimulating in an internal dialogue. It was masterful. It was art. It was thought provoking. It was healing. It was community. It was real theater.

As I watched the interchange between Freud and Lewis on stage I found it to be a very creative idea to bring the two into this imaginary dialogue and that the Taproot Theatre production had handled it exceptionally well. But I also wondered why Nicholi and St. Germain didn't put Reverend Oscar Pfister in the place of Lewis. Pfister was not only a theist and a man of the cloth but also a close personal friend of Freud's and these two friends did not have an imaginary dialogue. They had a very real dialogue and one in which they discussed their differing views on theism and atheism over the course of 31 years. And their letters have been published (Meng and Freud, 1963). In the next part I will recall the friendship between Sigmund Freud and Reverend Oskar Pfister and their dialogue on theism and atheism. Following this are a few thoughts of my own on the clinical understanding and handling of religious issues in psychotherapy.

FREUD AND PFISTER

Sigmund Freud was deeply interested in religion even though he was not at all religious and playfully referred to himself as a "pagan" (Meng, 1963, p. 110) and a "godless Jew" (Meng, 1963, p. 63).

Freud saw the human infant as helpless in the world and looking to its parents as the emotional equivalents of personal gods who aid in feeding, comfort and basic survival. He recognized that early childhood experiences shape the structure of the adult personality and that the all-powerful figures of childhood leave their emotional impression on the psyche and get projected into our conceptions of God in adulthood. Thus, we are not surprised to recognize the parental qualities embedded in our various conceptions of God who creates, protects, soothes, fulfills wishes, establishes laws, consoles, punishes wrongdoers, heals, offers forgiveness, provides guidance and rewards righteousness.

For Freud, God is not a supreme being situated in one religion or another but rather is an illusion that we can come to terms with through the careful examination of psychological development and cultural evolution.

Just as the infant deals with its helplessness and gratification, and its hopes and fears in relation to its seemingly all powerful parents, so too does a culture come to terms with the terrors of illness, injury, suffering and death, and the pleasures of life and bounty, by creating spirits, totems, and gods. What started as the projection of early childhood prototypes based on the experience of parental figures, evolved, in cultural context, into

the abstractions of spirits, ancestor deities, totems, and the pantheon of the gods until God, as such, became a dematerialized, imageless, unified, ruling order and supreme being.

Freud discovered that early childhood experiences also get encoded in the structures of religion, myth and ritual. He wrote, "I believe that a large part of the mythological view of the world, which extends a long way into the most modern religions, is nothing but psychology projected into the external world" (Freud, 1901, p. 258).

Freud arrived at his atheism by taking just one step beyond the dematerialized, imageless and unitary God of Jewish monotheism. And that step was to withdraw the projection. Freud possessed a worldview, but he abstained from personifying it.

For Freud, religion was an illusion that is destined eventually to give way to logic and science in a distant future. Freud's main treatise on God and atheism is a small book, *The Future of an Illusion*, (1927) in which he stated, "...a store of ideas is created, born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race" (p. 18). "...[T]he primal father was the original image of God, the model on which later generations have shaped the figure of God" (p. 42).

Freud's ideas about God and religion and the denial of death were interesting and important to him in relation to individual development and cultural evolution, but he did not choose his friends based on theism or atheism. Furthermore, he never tied his psychoanalytic theory and technique to his atheism and there have been many psychoanalysts who have described themselves as religious and theistic.

The Reverend Oskar Pfister was a psychoanalyst, a Protestant Pastor in Switzerland and a close personal friend of Freud's from 1908 until Freud's death in 1939. And when Freud prepared to publish *The Future of an Illusion* (1927-1931) he wrote to Pfister:

In the next few weeks a pamphlet of mine [*The Future of an Illusion*] will be appearing which has a great deal to do with you. I had been wanting to write it for a long time, and postponed it out of regard for you, but the impulse became too strong. The subject-matter – as you will easily guess - is my completely negative attitude to religion, in any form and however attenuated, and, though there can be nothing new to you in this, I feared, and still fear, that such a public profession of my attitude will be painful to you. When you have read it you must let me know what measure of toleration and understanding you are able to preserve for the hopeless pagan. Always your cordially devoted Freud (Meng, 1963, pp. 109 -110 – Oct. 16, 1927).

At Freud's invitation Pfister wrote a lengthy rebuttal to *The Future of an Illusion* called *The Illusion of a Future* (1993). Pfister accepted Freud's description of the origins of the early primitive religions and naïve conceptions of God but reserved a different place for God in more elaborated philosophies. He recognized both the horrible things

that have been done in the name of religion but also the way religion has often been on the cutting edge of cultural advancement and has brought us our moral values and strengths, meaning in life, ethical concepts, and the spirit of love. He challenged Freud's worship of Logos, that is, reason. He wrote that the best of what religion has to offer would never be replaced, as Freud suggested, by science and dispassionate reason. He even asserted that at the core of many scientific concepts, including psychoanalytic concepts, there are anthropomorphisms, that is, personifications and projections of personal experience – and this was exactly the charge that Freud leveled against religion and the basis upon which he called it an illusion.

Freud and Pfister's differences were clear and unambiguous but so was their warm regard for each other. On October 9th 1918 Freud wrote to Pfister "...why was it that none of all the pious ever discovered psychoanalysis? Why did it have to wait for a completely godless Jew?" (Meng, 1963, p. 63)

And on October 29th 1918, Pfister replied:

"... you ask why psycho-analysis was not discovered by any of the pious, but by an atheist Jew. The answer obviously is that piety is not the same as genius for discovery and that most of the pious did not have it in them to make such discoveries. Moreover, ... you are not Godless, for he who lives the truth lives in God, and he who strives for the freeing of love 'dwelleth in God' (First Epistle of John, iv, 16). If you raised to your consciousness and fully felt your place in the great design, which to me is as necessary as the synthesis of the notes is to a Beethoven symphony, I should say of you: A better Christian there never was ..." (Meng, 1963, p. 63).

Pfister also wrote,

"Whoever has fought with such immense achievements for the truth as you and argued so bravely for the salvation of love, he especially, whether he wants it talked about or not, is a true servant of God according to Protestant standards. And he who through the creation of psychoanalysis has provided the instrument which freed suffering souls from their chains and opened the gates of their prisons, so that they could hasten into the sunny land of a life-giving faith, is not far from the kingdom of God" (Pfister, 1993, p. 559).

And finally, Pfister wrote: "Whoever would destroy religion would cut through the tap-root of great art, which discloses the deepest meaning and the greatest strengths of life" (Pfister, 1993, p. 575).

THEISM AND ATHEISM

When I invite my patients to speak in a free and uncensored fashion that includes my

openness to their religious thoughts and feelings, which are, in many places, forbidden topics of conversation. Religious themes carry with them many of my patients' deepest concerns, most tender vulnerabilities, old hurts and seemingly insurmountable conflicts. Religious or spiritual thoughts and feelings, to be sure, reflect personal psychology but they are also often a source of uncommon strength that serve our patients in times of great strife and offer solace in the face of terrible loss. Some, with great religious feeling, are able to accept their difficult fates with equanimity and meet the challenges of their lives as missions assigned by God. Many also find that God provides a point of reference from which to make meaning of life. In addition, I have found that my patient's favorite religious stories, told in their own words, are often of great psychotherapeutic value, as they contain many personality dynamics which are sometimes easier to approach in the form of religious metaphors. If one can honor religious feeling and belief on its own terms and also use it psychotherapeutically, patients are often most appreciative.

Atheism also reflects personal psychology. Some use atheism as a way of taking responsibility for their lives within the context of a finite existence. Facing mortality in a godless world presents them with the awe-inspiring miracle of being and becoming, and the challenge to make the most of life in the name of 'culture' – and culture is the only "life" they permit to carry on beyond their personal deaths. Under such circumstances, intrapsychic conflicts become projects for which they have a personal responsibility to manage and sublimate. Others, however, use their atheism to resist authority and ward off feelings of dependency. Atheism can be a fierce adolescent rebellion against the father, a life dedicated to rebuttal against the ruling order, a battle against strong emotions or a rational conclusion met with fatalism and/or irony. And, of course, discussions with patients on the themes of theism and/or atheism often carry a heavy transference subtext.

Neither theism nor atheism is a reason to take sides or speak dismissively of patients or anyone else. Atheism, theism, religion, science, art, politics, and philosophy all serve as screens for our personal psychologies, each of which has roots extending deep into early childhood experiences, conflicts, object relations, hopes and fears.

Albert Einstein once wrote, "The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses ..." (Ravitz, J., 2012) We could easily read this as a dismissive statement but a different reading recognizes that "human weaknesses" are first and foremost "human". We cannot help but project spirit into a moving object. The only way for a child to enjoy playing is to animate the toys, that is, project animas or souls into them. God is the extension of such projections onto the walls of the universe and the only things beyond God are increasingly abstract conceptions until they are no longer animated and projected.

For Freud, God is the projection of the parental introjects out into the world, and a rational approach to such projections demands the renunciation of such illusions. But Pfister tells us it is an illusion to think we can escape our projections. And indeed Freud's position and rational project almost denies the very existence of primary process thinking, which Freud formulated. It is easy to be a rational atheist in a safe, well-lit, temperature controlled environment. But sit for ten minutes alone in a dark old house or in the wilderness at night and in short order the mind makes demons, spirits, ghosts and

monsters out of extraneous sounds, shadows and vague impressions. The child animates the doll, the camper imagines the monster in the dark, the shaman connects with his animal spirit, the community turns the shaman's spirit into a totem and society turns the totem into a god. It's a straight shot from a child's doll to the Almighty. And while we can think rationally about our projections we can never completely escape our projections as they are easily activated in weakened mental states and, of course, under stress. As the aphorism goes, "There are no atheists in foxholes."

Richard Dawkins (2006) writes that God is a delusion but, like all rationalists arguing for atheism, he ignores the fact that secondary process thinking floats on an ocean of primary process thinking - delusional thinking - and that primary process thinking extends a long way into secondary process thinking and indeed has its value. The science vs. religion debate that goes on in modern society rarely touches psychology and the importance of primary and secondary process thinking. Dawkins telling the world that God is a delusion is naïve. Sure you could say God is an illusion – a useful illusion in a sea of confusion - a poetic way of speaking about the unspeakable. And if someone wants to reify God or concretize God or refute God, what business is it of the psychotherapist? Saying that it logically does not exist is of no use at all since it does exist emotionally and calls to be dealt with as such. But when theism or atheism get tied to ethics as they always do or to war as they sometimes do, that is another matter.

When God establishes the Thou shalt and the Thou shalt nots, He establishes taboos, guidelines, laws, ethics and morals as a protection for the individual and the group from the anarchy and violence of a lawless impulse ridden society. Can an atheist be an ethical, law-abiding citizen with a sense of morality and responsibility to society? Absolutely! But that moral and ethical compass is an internalized conscience or superego derived from parental and cultural experience. While the theist will tie his/her superego to the name of God and follow it, the atheist will tie it to culture and own it. Is one better than the other? I wouldn't say so.

In a Psychological Wednesday Society meeting

“Freud remarks that in metaphysics, we are dealing with a projection of so-called endopsychic perceptions. The explorer of nature, on the other hand, may, through practice, have sharpened his powers of observation to such an extent that he can apply them to the outside world. But the segment of the outside world which he can understand still remains relatively small. The rest, he “thinks,” will be as I am; that is, he becomes anthropomorphic in relation to the rest; the remainder, therefore, he replaces with the dim perception of his own psychic processes.” (Nunberg & Federn, 1962, p. 149).

This sounds to me like an argument in favor of Pfister's point. It is an illusion to think we can escape illusion. Secondary process thinking floats on a sea of primary process thinking. Our clear and unobscured apprehension of reality devoid of narcissism "remains small" and the rest is perceived anthropomorphically, saturated in primary

process thinking and "illusion".

Primary process thinking is the language of dreams, psychosis and the unconscious. It is a symbolic, emotionally tinged and yet concrete mode of thinking organized on the basis of displacement and condensation. It is aimed at the gratification of instinctual impulses – the pleasure principle. Secondary process thinking, on the other hand, is rational logical thinking and aimed at dealing with the reality principle and a shared understanding of reality. Secondary process thinking enables us to communicate rationally, plan, evaluate, and think logically and scientifically. Primary process thinking informs love and poetry, poignancy and symptomology, creativity and vision, humor and play, hallucination and madness, religion and inspiration.

A few typical points of view heard in clinical contexts.

“Everyone that was supposed to take care of me betrayed me and now I don't believe in God.”

“My mother says I do everything wrong and God always says I'm a sinner.”

“I can't trust my father and I can't trust God.”

“My mother is a good listener and so is God.”

“My father is never there when I need him and neither is God.”

“My mother left me to fend for myself and I always feel that God helps those that help themselves.”

“After my mother went into an institution and my father sent me to live with my aunt, I used to sit on the curb, look up at the sky and wonder where God was.”

But the spiritual life of the individual can also develop beyond the internal object relations of childhood. Freud and Pfister had their object relations from childhood but had other life experiences and intellectual work through which they elaborated their points of view. Object relations may also evolve in psychotherapy when we make the unconscious conscious. We become aware of how our object relations and defensive strategies distort and conceal various aspects of reality and how we can modify those defenses so as to live with fewer illusions. Object relations evolve when we recognize how the past is present and then find ways to let go of old enemies that no longer threaten us, retreat from old battlefields that offer us nothing and abandon old defenses no longer needed.

A world-view, whether it is religious, political, philosophical, scientific or otherwise, is, independent of its truth or utility, an expression of the psychology of the individual. Many treat theism and atheism as if they were sports teams that one has to root for. But they are not sports teams, they are ways of seeing the world, which have their value and have their limits.

As psychotherapists we don't need to agree, disagree or argue the religious or atheist metaphors within which our patients bring to us their deepest concerns. We need only to listen to them, respect them and interpret.

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