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Mad Men: The Relationship between Psychology and Religion in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*

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“I began to wonder how it was possible for the ideas of the Talmud and the thinking of Freud to live side by side within one person. It seemed to me that one or the other would have to give way.”

-Chaim Potok
The Chosen

After watching an episode from the first season of *Mad Men*, that cleverly juxtaposed the Catholic Sacrament of Confession and a session with a psychologist, I wondered: are religion and psychology really all that different? After reading Chaim Potok's 1967 novel *The Chosen*, I began to think that the perceived differences between these two disciplines were superficial. Psychology and religion both provide people with a valuable way of understanding their relationship to the world around them, in spite of the apparent differences between them. By examining Sigmund Freud and William James' attitudes toward both religion and psychology and applying these attitudes to the characters in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, it will be clear how similar these two disciplines are. Expert analysis of Freud and James' work in the fields of both psychology and religion will be applied to Potok's novel. By dispelling the illusion that science and religion are in conflict with one another we can come to a richer understanding of how they complement each other and how together, they can lead to a more well-rounded world-view.

Freud postulated that religion was the result of a primal urges that he described at length in his 1913 work, *Totem and Taboo* (Fuller 2008, 34). In this study, Freud created a narrative that simultaneously endorsed his conception of the Oedipus Complex and explained the emergence of religious behavior. Religion, according to Freud, is the development of the infant's need and desire for the father's protection into the adult's need and desire for divine fatherly protection (34). This divine protection neutralizes danger in a world that people cannot always understand or predict (34). Freud further hypothesized that a clan of brothers in ancient history killed and cannibalized their father in order to destroy his power over them and to imbibe that power (Fuller 2008, 43). However, after the death of their father, these sons began to feel sympathy and remorse for what they had done (Fuller 2008, 42). They attempted to revive him through totemistic religion, in which they honor an animal as a father figure and placed a taboo on killing the totem animal except within prescribed religious ritual (Fuller 2008, 42-3).

Freud's hypothetical creation narrative echoes similar myths around the world, from the Greek myth of *Kronos* and his children to Norse creation myths. However, Freud's version opposes traditional myths in a fundamental way. Unlike other creation myths, which form the foundation of religious belief, Freud's narrative condemns religion as a psychological disorder.

For Freud, religion was an illusion characterized by psychosis, delusion, and compulsion (Fuller 2008, 35).

Freud's myth indicates a fundamental tension between religion and psychology. The science of psychology struggles to accommodate a supernatural god or gods, because empirical, scientific means cannot prove or disprove the existence of such beings (Paloutizian 2005, 8). As a result, psychologists are often uncomfortable with the study of religion; they have no scientific framework within which to study it (Fuller 2008, 35). Instead, psychologists and other scientists have often been content to believe that reason can lead to a general understanding of religion, but they miss a fundamental aspect of belief (Byrnes 1984, 11). These scientists are unable to accept or explore the authority of revelation (Byrnes 1984, 11). Like Freud, many scientists are willing to concede religion's historical truth, but struggle to accept its material truth (Fuller 2008, 42). There is a proportion of scientists who cannot accept the possibility of a supernatural god and are thus ill equipped to fully understand the nature of religious experience.

Freud may have inadvertently drawn on his religious background to refine his theories of psychoanalysis, but he remained a staunch atheist. For him, it seems that psychoanalysis served as a replacement for religion. However, science and religion were not always at opposite ends of a spectrum of belief. During the Scientific Revolution of the 16th century, most scientists saw no conflict between the laws of science and belief in God (Argyle 2000, 1). Religion was the highest authority, with science taking on a subordinate position (1). Some scientists, including the deists, even went so far as to believe that in discovering scientific laws, they were uncovering the laws God set down to keep the world functioning (1). It was only later that conflict between science and religion emerged. As scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin promoted theories that were opposed to the traditional interpretation of Scripture, traditional solutions to the conflict between science and religion appeared (Argyle 2000, 2). One of the most enduring of these compromises limited the study of science to the physical world, while containing religion within the inner world of the individual (Argyle 2000, 6). The development of psychology challenged this solution in fundamental ways. Religion and science now dealt with both the inner workings of the individual and the physical realm (6). William James's solution to the tensions between science and religion claims that both are valid perspectives, but that they are like different languages that cannot be compared (Argyle 2000, 4). As David Malter points out, "Freud is not God in psychology" (Potok 1967, 159). Just as religions disagree about what can be known and how it can be known, psychologists disagree on what scientists can know and how they can prove it (Paloutizian 2005, 5).

Like many of his Jewish colleagues, Freud maintained his cultural Jewish history, even though he rejected the authority of Jewish religious revelation and remained an atheist until he died (Edmundson 2007, 23, 227). Despite this, Freud's understanding of the responsibility of a therapist bears a striking resemblance to the role of a rabbi in Jewish tradition, and specifically Chaim Potok's descriptions of the *tzaddik*. According to Potok, *tzaddik* is responsible for alleviating the suffering of his people. Reb Saunders explains the role of the *tzaddik* when he tells Reuven:

a *tzaddik* especially must know of pain. A *tzaddik* must know how to suffer for his people[...]He must take their pain from them and carry it on his own shoulders. He must carry it always...he must cry for the sufferings of his people...I have no more fear now. All his life [Danny] will be a *tzaddik*. He will be a *tzaddik* for the world. And the world needs a *tzaddik*. (Potok 1967, 285, 287)

According to Freud, therapists, and specifically psychoanalysts, take on the emotions and problems of their patient in order to defuse them (Byrnes 1984, 75). The therapist brings the patient's emotions to the surface and is the receptacle for these feelings. It is the responsibility of the therapist to handle them rationally (Byrnes 1984, 75). Like a *tzaddik*, a therapist must carry the burden of their patient. Danny's decision to abandon his role as a *tzaddik* to become a psychologist is not much of a stretch. Reb Saunders has acknowledged that the psychologist has the same responsibility to the world that the *tzaddik* has to their people. Reuven and Danny acknowledge the similarity between rabbis and psychologists when they discuss their chosen career paths:

"You mean you wouldn't become a rabbi if you had a choice?"

"I don't think so."

"What would you be?"

"I don't know. Probably a psychologist."

"A psychologist?...I'm not sure I know what it's about."

"It helps you understand what a person is really like..."

"I sort of feel I could be more useful to people as a rabbi. To our own people, I mean. You know, not everyone is religious like you or me. I could teach them, and help them when they're in trouble. I think I would get a lot of pleasure out of that." (Potok 1967, 69-70)

As the boys talk, it is clear that Danny's understanding of the term "psychologist" has more in common with Reuven's understanding of the term "rabbi." Andrew R. Fuller agrees that psychology and religion are more similar than people realize. However, David Malter's perspective on religious leadership echoes Freud's belief in the limited value of religion, and the superior value of culture, especially when he tells Reuven:

[Reb Saunders] carries the burden of many people on his shoulders. I do not care for his Hasidism very much, but it is not a simple task to be a leader of people...If he were not a *tzaddik* he could make a great contribution to the world. But he lives in his own world[...]It is a shame that a mind such as Danny's will be shut off from the world. (Potok 1967, 147)

David Malter displays his distaste for Hasidism, though he continues to respect Reb Saunders as a leader. It is telling that Malter, like Freud, favors cultural Judaism in his support for the creation of an Israeli state, a state that, according to Reb Saunders, cannot materialize until the arrival of the Messiah. After learning of the horrors of the Holocaust, David Malter says to Reuven, "We cannot wait for God. If there is an answer, we must make it ourselves[...]Six million of our people have been slaughtered...It is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning. We cannot wait for God" (Potok 1967, 191). For David Malter, religion is not something that provides solutions to real-world problems. Religion asks unseen powers to resolve issues instead, but for David, this is not enough; people must take action to solve their own problems. In contrast, Reb Saunders proclaims, "How the world drinks our blood[...]How the world makes us suffer. It is the will of God. We must accept the will of God" (Potok 1967, 190). Reb Saunders abdicates his peoples' ability to act in and impact the world. He tries to

comfort his people with the idea that there is a grand design, even if they cannot understand or see it.

While religions “accept forces outside the conscious mind that bring redemption to life,” Fuller argues that psychology does as well. It is in their definitions of what these forces are that they differ. Psychology accepts these forces as the subconscious; religion calls them God (Fuller 2008, 18). David Malter tells Reuven:

Each Hasidic community had its own *tzaddik*, and his people would go to him with all their problems, and he would give them advice. They followed these leaders blindly. The Hasidim believed that the *tzaddik* was a superhuman link between themselves and God...There are even Hasidic groups that believe their leaders should take upon themselves the sufferings of the Jewish people...They believe that their sufferings would be unendurable if their leaders did not somehow absorb these sufferings into themselves. (Potok 1967, 108)

The gulf that divides science and religion appears superficial. The leaders of psychology and religion both mediate between the individual and forces beyond the conscious mind: the psychologist acts as a link between people and their subconscious; the *tzaddik* is a bridge between people and God. Reuven articulates this theory when Danny says “‘I always thought logic and theology were like David and Saul,’ Danny said. ‘They are. But I might help them get better acquainted.’” (Potok 1967, 264)

In 1 Samuel, in the Tanakh, Saul is the king of Israel and David is one of his rivals and his son-in-law (1 Samuel 18:1-16). Danny and Reuven’s banter makes it clear that logic and theology are at odds for him, but it is the subtext of the story of Saul and David that Reuven draws on. Although Saul is jealous of David’s skill and authority, he also recognizes that David is an important component of his continued prosperity as king of Israel. Just as Saul could not be as strong without David, logic makes theology stronger. Reuven wants logic and theology to recognize their need for the each other. Similarly, Danny sees the way that science and religion can benefit from one another.

Religion deals with human behaviors and emotions, just as psychology does, but in Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen*, Danny Saunders must choose between these two ways of analyzing human problems (Paloutizian and Park 2005, 3). The character’s Hasidic upbringing, which condemns the reading of many modern scientists, and his admiration for Sigmund Freud, who was a self-proclaimed atheist, complicate the decision. The novel’s major conflict is about how Danny will choose between his own religious background and the insight he sees in Freud’s understanding of human nature and how he will tell his father what his choice is. However, there is more at stake for Danny than a career choice. What Danny must decide is how he will understand and sympathize with humanity.

Early in the novel, Potok links Danny to the work of Sigmund Freud, through Danny’s ongoing fascination with Freud’s work. This relationship continues throughout the novel. However, as he continues reading Freud, Danny becomes more and more disturbed by Freud’s perspective of humanity. Reuven Malter, Danny’s best friend’s father says:

it had become increasingly obvious to him that Freud had possessed an almost uncanny insight into the nature of man. And that was what Danny found upsetting. Freud’s picture of man’s nature was anything but complimentary, it

was anything but religious. It tore man from God, as Danny put it, and married him off to Satan. (Potok 1967, 195)

It is easy to see how Freud's theories may have been upsetting to Danny Saunders, a young Hasidic Jew. Freud's rejection of religion is devastating to Danny, a young man raised within a strict Jewish tradition. Further, the Hasidic tradition emphasized the importance of man's connection with God. In contrast, Freud dismisses God as part of an elaborate form of wish fulfillment.

In light of Freud's research, it is hard to place Danny within Freud's framework of the evolution of religious belief. In rejecting his birthright as his community's *tzaddik*, it appears that Danny has symbolically killed his father. Instead, Danny chooses to pursue Freud's approach to psychology, which places faith in the same category as psychological delusions. Danny then attempts to reconcile with his "murdered" father through his continued observance of the Commandments, as in Freud's creation myth. However, in revealing his intentions, Danny resolves his divided self and reconnects with his father rather than abandoning him altogether. Danny does not quite fit Freud's theory of human development, either. In a conversation with Danny, Reuven says:

"What about what my father said? Are you going to remain an Orthodox Jew?"
 "Whatever gave you the notion that I had any intention of not remaining an Orthodox Jew?"
 "What if your father asks about the beard, the caftan, the – "
 "He won't ask me."
 "What if he does?"
 "Can you see me practicing psychology and looking like a Hasid?" (Potok 1967, 272-3)

Danny cannot maintain his Hasidic appearance (an integral component of his faith) and become a psychologist. He must make a compromise. Although Danny at first appears to follow Freud's model of human maturation, by adopting scientific theory, he does not complete the Freud's cycle and reject religion (Fuller 2008, 31). He instead attempts to incorporate both religion and science into his world view. Danny simultaneously challenges and embodies Freud's claim that science has replaced religion. He embraces science, but is unwilling to let go of his religious heritage. Unlike Freud, Danny refuses to reject the material truth of religious belief, putting him in a precarious relationship with the theories of his mentor. Instead, Danny bears a striking intellectual resemblance to William James, a man who is never even mentioned in the novel.

William James, unlike Freud, had a sympathetic view of religion. He focused on personal spirituality with an emphasis on mysticism, while Freud based his theory that religion is a psychological phenomenon on his study of institutionalized religion for the masses (Fuller 2008, 35). Instead of classifying religion as a psychological delusion, James defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (Byrnes 1984, 13). His conception of belief was "the willingness to act irrevocably" (Fuller 2008, 2). Questions regarding the validity of science over religion were complicated for James. Like Danny Saunders, he was simultaneously loyal to his inherited religious culture – in this case Protestant Christianity – and sensitive to the demands of modern science (Hollinger 1996, 10).

In order to resolve this conflict, James asserted that religion dealt with meanings while science dealt with causal relations (Proudfoot 2004, 31). According to James, there should be no conflict between the two. However, James' body of work shows that despite his assertion that there should be no contradiction between science and religion, James continued to feel torn on the relationship between science and religion. He believed that science could never sufficiently understand religious belief, but the goal of much of his work was to explain religion to the satisfaction of both believers and scientists (Taves 2009, 50).

Both religion and science deal with the nature of truth and belief. For James, religion and science are two of an infinite number of ways in which people can evaluate reality. In this way, belief in the truth of science and religion may not only exist simultaneously in a single individual, but enhance that individual's perspective of the world (Fuller 2008, 6). In James' worldview, neither science nor religion provides a complete picture of the world on their own, but together, they can help create a more complete perception of reality (Fuller 2008, 7). It is on these grounds that James, unlike Freud, refuses to reject any science or religion.

Unlike many psychologists, who avoid the study of religion, James embraced the subject. His work dealt directly with the subjects of religion and spirituality. However, James was careful to distinguish between the two. For him, religion was the formal belief, group practice, and institutional parameters through which most people experience and practice religion. Spirituality, on the other hand, was a personal quest for universal truth that related the individual believer to the world (Paloutizian and Park 2005, 25). James privileged spirituality, or "firsthand" religious experience, which includes religious feelings, acts, and experiences, over institutional religion, or "secondhand" religious experience, which he characterized as the social activity that makes up most religious behavior (Byrnes 1984, 26).

However, in his attempt to deal with both religion and science, James claimed that science is not independent of religion. Instead, he argued that science is a religion of its own that serves the god of Scientific Truth. Both religion and science seek a discoverable truth because they want a truth to exist and they want their seeking to mean something (Fuller 2008, 3). Also like other world religions, science is exclusionary, dismissing other forms of belief as incorrect and irrelevant. According to James, science, like other exclusionary religions, provides an incomplete perspective on the nature of truth and reality (Fuller 2008, 8). Both science and religion confirm their beliefs because faith helps confirm belief. In James's world, there was no difference between science and religious belief. Potok agrees with James's perspective. After Danny meets with his psychology teacher, Professor Appleman, he and Reuven discuss the religious tendencies of scientists:

"What followers of geniuses *aren't* dogmatic, for heaven's sake? The Freudians have plenty to be dogmatic about. Freud was a genius."

"What do they do, make a *tzaddik* out of him? [...] If Freudians aren't willing to try testing their theories under laboratory conditions, then they *are* being dogmatic" (Potok 1967, 211)

Here, Potok points to the similarity of religious belief and scientific schools of thought. Just as religions may be dogmatic if they are unwilling to evaluate their beliefs, scientists who blindly follow a charismatic leader without evaluating their theories are likewise dogmatic.

Despite associating Danny Saunders with Freud throughout his novel, Potok actually places Danny within the framework of William James's theories instead. In the final

confrontation with his father, Danny acknowledges both his acceptance of science and his continued loyalty to Hasidism:

“Daniel,” Reb Saunders said, speaking almost in a whisper, “when you go away to study, you will shave off your beard and earlocks?”

Danny stared at his father. His eyes were wet. He nodded his head slowly.

Reb Saunders looked at him. “You will remain an observer of the Commandments?” he asked softly.

Danny nodded again. (Potok 1967, 287)

Unlike Freud, who was quick to dismiss religion as part of a psychological problem, Danny retains his religion. Like James, Danny challenges the positivist concept that science has replaced religion, and the claim that the problem of God can be resolved within the mind (Fuller 2008, 2). Danny is deeply invested in his religion and in his scientific interests. As James, Danny attempts to accommodate his faith in a world of science that frequently dismisses religious belief as antiquated. Psychology has grappled with the question of whether religion is unique among human behaviors or whether it can be analyzed like any other human activity (Taves 2009, 7). According to Freud, it would seem that religion is a kind of mental illness that must be treated and eliminated. Meanwhile, James would argue that religion is an important human experience that may be found in a wide variety of activities.

While psychology and religion appear very different, they both provide people with an important way of better understanding their relationship to the world around them. Religious belief in a supernatural god and psychological theory are based on assumptions that cannot be proven: religion asserts that a supernatural god exists, and psychology is based on unprovable presuppositions regarding human behavior (Fuller xi). Both psychology and religion deal with the nature of truth and reality, require acts of faith, and have leaders who dispel the suffering of their constituents. The primary way they differ is that while religion explores the meaning of life, psychology attributes meaning to individual lives.

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