

Publishing his work over ninety years after the earliest work by Sigmund Freud and William James, Bruce Lincoln had the advantage of hindsight. It is for this reason that one may use his *Theses on Method* when analyzing works within the psychology of religion; it is this distance that makes it a useful, if somewhat unfair, lens through which we can analyze classic texts. It forces important questions surrounding context, authority, and scholarship that earlier authors did not always foreground. Applying Bruce Lincoln's *Theses on Method* to William James and Sigmund Freud shows broad compatibility but important granular differences; overall, Lincoln aligns more closely with Freud than with James. The comparison shows the strongest overlap between Lincoln and Freud around understanding one's own ideology, and the sharpest tension between Lincoln and James with regards to the use of testimony.

Aligning closely with Lincoln's language around understanding one's own system of ideology, within his work *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud does not let his beliefs around religion stop him from acknowledging his friend's intense feelings for religion. On page 60, Freud (1930) writes, "From my own experience, I could not convince myself of the primary nature of such a feeling. But this gives me no right to deny that it does in fact occur in other people." Here, Freud (1930) is commenting on his friend's "oceanic" (p. 60) feeling around religion. The friend insists that the innate feeling he gets is intimate and real (Freud, 1930, p. 60). Freud does not experience this, but it does not lead him to claim it to be false, however (Freud, 1930, p. 60). This is consistent with Lincoln's comments around critiquing and understanding one's own system of ideology (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Lincoln claims that it is imperative that care is taken when trying to understand one's own system of ideology as they themselves are a product of it. We see in Freud's example that he does not allow his own beliefs—namely that

religion is an illusion—to blind him to other potential systems of ideology—the “oceanic” feeling (Freud, 1930, p. 60).

Continuing with Freud, we see similarity in how he and Lincoln interpret claims from others. Still within *Civilization and its Discontents*, on page 67, Freud (1930) comments on another friend of his who through his practice of Yoga claims that he has reached an upper level of “coenaesthesia.” It seems Freud is dubious of this, however; he writes, “it would not be hard to find connections here with a number of obscure modifications of mental life... But I am moved to exclaim in the words of Schiller’s diver: ‘Es freue sich, Wer da atmet im rosigten Licht’” (Freud, 1930, p. 67). The quote in the latter half of the passage translates as ‘Let him rejoice who breathes, up here in the roseate light.’ Lincoln, similarly, provides the would-be scholar of religion a set of questions to ask when interpreting a body of work (Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). These questions are meant to dispel any hidden intentions or motives in the words one says or puts to paper. Freud, in a manner consistent with Lincoln, suggested the motives behind his friend’s advertisement of the Yoga practice. His Schiller quotation functioned as a deflationary move: rather than corroborating Yoga as some access to truth, he reframed it as an overreach—an attempt at profundity. In Lincoln’s terms, Freud effectively asked what is gained when Yoga is presented as higher knowledge: the practitioner (and the practice) gains authority and admiration.

Lincoln would perhaps object to Freud’s generalization of the culture of old—when religion was more popular—within Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*. On page 36, Freud claims that people were less happy and less moral in years past, years when religion was more popular (Freud, 1927). Freud is not claiming that religion caused this reduced happiness and morality, rather he is claiming that it did not prevent it, responding to an argument that religion increases the two (Freud, 1927, p. 36). Lincoln may object to this overbroad generalization evidenced by

his warning surrounding an idealized version of a culture that mistakes “the dominant fraction (sex, age group, class, and/or caste) of a given group for the group or ‘culture’ itself;” specifically, this dominant fraction would be less happy and less moral (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). If it even is the case that people were less happy and less moral, who is to say that there are not many people who were happier and more moral than we are today?

Lincoln and James may have less in common than Lincoln and Freud did, but one aspect they agreed upon was reason people believe: authority. Found in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James claims that the origin for belief lies in dominant unquestionable justifications, e.g. “origin in immediate intuition; origin in pontifical authority; origin in supernatural revelation” (James, 1902, p. 18). James continues by discrediting “dogmatists” that believe without challenge, treating religious traditions, not substance, as the reason for their belief (James, 1902, p. 18). This aligns well with Lincoln’s argument around reverence being “a religious, not a scholarly virtue” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Lincoln further substantiates this when he writes, “although critical inquiry has become commonplace in other disciplines, it still offends many students of religion” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 10).

That being said, throughout *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James treats first-person accounts as the primary data source for understanding the psychology of religion. For example, on page 137, James (1902) lets Stephen H. Bradley, someone he learns of from a “scarce American pamphlet,” speak directly to the reader. It is the opinion of the author that, through the lens of Lincoln’s *Theses on Method*, this is methodologically risky. Recall the aforementioned questions one ought to ask themselves when interpreting a body of text, which include “who speaks here,” “to what audience,” “with what interests,” and, if the speaker is attempting to persuade the reader, “who wins” and “who loses” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). Simply

put, James's use of Bradley's quote within his text goes against these questions which so heavily fall in the reader's best interest. Bradley may be innocent enough, but who is to say that another individual one invites into their work will not try to persuade the audience of something ill? These questions can be posed deeper still: why this witness (Bradley) and not another? What does James gain by selecting a dramatic conversation from a "scarce American pamphlet" (James, 1902, p. 137) and presenting it as psychological evidence? James gains a vivid case that supports his argument, while less compelling cases are conveniently left out of the conversation. In this sense, it is the opinion of the author that Lincoln would not only caution us about Bradley's testimony itself, but also about James's role as curator; the passage may be less data and more framing and testimony, something James (1902) discredits when he disparages "dogmatists" on page 18.

Over time, scientific fields grow, evolve, and learn from the past. We see this in action when viewing the works of Freud and James through the modern lens of Lincoln's *Theses on Method*. Overall, we see Freud's work is more compatible with Lincoln. Freud and Lincoln would likely agree on methodological approaches generally, despite granular differences in approaches to generalization. On the other hand, there is a clear structural difference between James and Lincoln that is much more apparent, seen in the use of Bradley's testimony in James's argument. Nevertheless, each author significantly contributed to their field of study; points of overlap do not necessarily indicate error, just difference in opinion: something so important in all fields.

References

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