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a) Describe Psychological challenges to religious belief

There are two main contributors to the arguments posed against religious belief: Freud and Jung. They were both philosophers whose theories have grown to be famous this does not mean to say, however, that they agreed with each other.

Freud believed that religious belief was born from infantile obsession with a father figure. In Freud's opinion, people use religion to fulfil wishes deeply rooted in mankind such as the assurance that death is not the end and that there is someone watching over us and caring for us. Freud believed people seek comfort from personifying the elements and believing that they can influence them by the behaviour.

One of Freud's most memorable points was his belief that religious belief was a neurosis. In his famous book Totem and Taboo Freud gives a suggestion for the beginnings of religious belief. This story was founded closely on the works of Darwin. In his book, Freud describes how in the small tribes, (part of Darwin's theory that early man travelled around in small groups,) there would be a dominant male who had exclusive sexual rights to the women of the tribe and drove the sons away when they grew up. The sons resented the father and came together to murder and devour him. After doing so, they felt guilty and as a result developed a moral code as a commemoration of the terrible act they had committed. They still feared the father figure in death, thus giving more power than when he had lived. This powerful dead father figure, developed into the idea of God.

Freud believed that this creation is sustained out of the need for protection that we gain as we grow up and no longer have adults to care for and protect us as we did when we were children. We long for an omnipotent eternal father; God fulfilled this desire. In conclusion Freud believed religion beliefs sprung from psychological imbalances and people's deep-rooted insecurity, the "universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."

Jung agreed with most points, however, he also argued that some consider that the sense of moral obligation could have a divine source and therefore moral arguments are not ruled out. Apart from this they were in agreement with most of their arguments and worked closely together until they had a disagreement which led Jung to reject Freud's conclusions. He rejected Freud's conclusions that religion is a neurotic illness caused by sexual trauma and that it is a dangerous entity to be exposed and overthrown. Jung believed that religion springs from the structures of the mind which generate certain kinds of images (called archetypes). God given images are generated by the God archetype. However, in contrast to Freud Jung believed religion to be a positive thing that could help humans to maintain a healthy mindset and to become balanced individuals.

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b) To what extent have these challenges been answered successfully by religious believers

There are many grounds on which to criticise Freud's theory. The entire story he develops in Totem and Taboo is merely a creation of his imagination and has no proof that such an event ever occurred. The only factual part of the story is the idea that early man travelled around in large groups with an alpha male.

However, his idea that people use religion to fulfil wishes deeply rooted in mankind, such as the assurance that death is not the end and that there is someone watching over for us and caring for us does seem like a valid explanation that cannot be proved, but also cannot be proved otherwise. After all, there is still no solid, universally accepted proof of God's existence.

Although Jung may be less extreme, his ideas of fulfilling the 'God archetype' are also just a theory and cannot be proved. A religious believer might also question his theory that religion only flourishes still because it is healthy for the mindset and helps to balance a person. On the contrary a religious believer might argue that being a practicing Christian for example, does not lead to contentment. After all, if you know what the right thing is to do, and have a sense of obligation to do what is right, you will not always be able to do things that please yourself and must sometimes do things for others which may not give yourself immediate gratification.

In conclusion, both Freud and Jung put forward valid challenges to religious belief, however, neither of their theories can be proved. However, religious believers cannot prove their theories to be false and therefore we may say that their theories are successful in challenging religious belief but not in undermining it.