

Atheism & Critiques of Religion

Examine key ideas in critiques of religious belief

Since organised religion began it has had its opponents, criticisms of religion come from many different sources including psychology, sociology and so-called inconsistencies in religious doctrine such as the problem of evil.

In this essay I will focus mainly on the critique of religious belief from psychology, and primarily on the original proponent of this – Freud. Freud’s ideas focus around the belief that religion is an illusion created by the mind to deal with human wishes. He says religion is a construction of the mind to help us deal with inner conflict, stress and our fear of natural dangers.

Freud’s first statement “*religion is an aid to overcome psychological conflict*”, deals with the idea that religion is the result of sexual difficulties. From his work with patients of hysteria Freud was well aware of the power of the subconscious, which can store memories we believe we have long since forgetting, if traumatic in nature these memories can later surface in the form of neurotic illnesses. Freud believed that it was human instinct to bury traumatic memories in this way, but that the method of repression is not always effective – which means the mind has to subconsciously struggle to keep these memories “below the surface”. This struggle is channelled out through neurotic symptoms, and according to Freud religion is one such symptom – “*the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind*”.

Central to most Freudian theories is sex – more specifically our sex drive, the libido. Freud maintains that the libido is our most basic, primal, “urge” – and therefore the one with the most psychological power. According to Freud religion is a form of neurosis which is caused by sexual trauma, usually in the form of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex is to do with the way in which we express our libido, as a child we suckle the mother however as we age our libido transfers to the sex organs, and the fact the mother cannot be used as a tool to express the libido anymore, the father figure becomes a figure of resentment. This causes deep inner confusion leaving the subject to repress the entire matter deep into the subconscious.

The second statement from Freud is that “*religion is an illusion to overcome the conflict between our natures and civilisation*”, by this Freud is talking about religion “as a reason to put up with society”. This is similar to many sociological theories about religion, such as that of Marx which calls religion a tool for social control,

however, Freud's twist is slightly different and again focuses on sexual trauma in the form of the Oedipus conflict.

Freud states that our ambivalence towards the father figure leads to urges to kill him; however, since religion makes us submit to laws such as "*thou shalt not kill*" we are able to escape the conflict by using religion. This allows us to express our libido through other non-destructive means (in a process known as sublimation).

Freud's final statement, "*religion as an illusion to help us overcome our fear of natural forces,*" works on the basis that in order to escape the isolation of fear we create a personal God – this God is acting with a greater good in mind, which reassures us that "*everything that happens in the world is an expression of the intentions of an intelligence superior to us, which in the end, though its ways and byways are difficult to follow, it orders everything for the best – that is, it makes it enjoyable for us.*"

Consider critically whether any of these ideas support the claim that there is no God

Freud's conclusion from his critique is that in the absence of any evidence to support the claim God exists, we should assume his ideas to be the explanation for God, and thus accept that God does not exist. Freud argues that just as the delusions of a neurotic patient have no factual basis, nor does the illusion of religion – for they are one and the same thing.

Freud provides more evidence for his case by likening the characteristics of neurosis with religious belief. We can see that both are based on compulsive obsession, these obsessions may contain specific meaning for the subject but appear completely meaningless to anyone else (for example, traditions such as prayer and the Eucharist), and with both neurosis and religious belief failure to comply with the set rules and obsessions results in inexplicable guilt.

However, there are three serious flaws in Freud's theories which question the very basis of his critique. Anthropological evidence regarding the way early societies behaved, as well as psychological evidence about the Oedipus complex has revealed that Freud's theories were severely flawed and have left the belief that sexual trauma leads to religious belief severely damaged.

A further criticism comes from Freud not being able to account for traditions with female Gods (since the Oedipus complex relies on God assuming the role of the resented father figure), as well as religions with no central deity (such as Buddhism).

Freud goes on from his theories to state that religion is not only meaningless, but detrimental to our society, however this claim is refuted by those of faith, who argue that religion is a necessary buffer from the mind to reality – and has a positive effect upon society. They say religion has just as much a claim to truth as does the scientific basis of belief Freud supported.

What has to be remembered here is that whilst we may be able to use Freud's theories to suggest an alternative source of religious belief, this does not lead us to rationally conclude that God does not exist. We can say that psychology offers an alternative theory as to the roots of religious belief (although even the validity of that claim is questionable given the weaknesses in Freud's theories) however to conclude that God does therefore not exist is an inductive leap as we cannot know that God does not exist purely because we can suggest an alternative for Him.