

# A Critique of Recent Criticisms of Freud on Religious Belief

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The paper is a critique of recent criticisms of Sigmund Freud's theory that religion is based on wishful thinking. The criticisms made by authors such as Alvin Plantinga, John Hick, William P. Alston, William Rowe, and Merol Westphal are critically examined. I defend Freud's critique of religion as a satisfaction of our deepest desires for a heavenly father showing inductively that those desires render religious belief as unlikely to be true.

*Keywords:* Wish Fulfillment, Unconscious Desires, Psychoanalysis, Illusion

## Introduction

Sigmund Freud famously attacked religious beliefs of all religions as forms of wish fulfillment. Religious beliefs are motivated by the wish to have a father figure in heaven to take care of us, and to protect us, just like an earthly father who protects us from harm and punishes us to keep us in line. I think that Freud, unlike careful, painstaking analytical philosophers today, directed a variety of salvos against religion. He was like a gunman shooting from the hip hoping that some of his shots would hit the target even though he realized some of his shots would miss. Freud was convinced that religion was somehow an illusion, and that it harmed human beings more than it benefits them. I tend to agree. I will develop some Freudian themes I think are plausible arguments against the truth of religious beliefs while ignoring much of what Freud says on the subject.

I do not intend to rehash Freud's theories against religious belief, since such expositions are more than amply provided in the literature (Palmer, 1997). Instead, I will concentrate on rebutting some of the critiques of Freudian arguments given by philosophers of religion of late. I do not profess to cover all of the criticisms in the literature.

## Discussion

A basic place to start is with Freud's assertion that religious belief is a fulfillment of our deepest wishes, therefore wishful thinking. Alvin Plantinga takes issue with Freud here by alleging that Freud fails to provide any evidence for this assertion. Plantinga argues that it is dubious that theistic belief arises from wishes because many people dislike the idea of a God monitoring their every thought, and judging them. Others like being autonomous and dislike the unfriendly comparison to a greater being that we must obey and worship. The obvious reply to this is that Plantinga is hardly describing the believer, and that such preferences do not seem to be incompatible with wishing there was a God on the part of theists. Plantinga is hardly describing a typical unthinking, uncritical believer.

Plantinga then asks where the evidence is for Freud's claim that theistic belief is wishful thinking. People do not report having such wishes. (Does Plantinga think we should

take a poll of believers? People surely do express their wishes in prayer and other exhortations to gods. Why should they be required to "report" them?) Plantinga then points out, correctly, that Freud postulates unconscious mechanisms that are responsible for such beliefs that are unreachable from first-person self-knowledge of one's beliefs. It is true that Freud famously thought that most people do not know all the reasons why they believe what they believe, and this has been borne out in recent psychology. Freud himself demonstrated this fact in his early work with subjects who were hypnotized. Religion is a lot like hypnotism. Plantinga goes on to say

"How would Freud...establish that the mechanisms whereby human beings come to believe in God...is not aimed at truth?... Freud offers no arguments or reasons at all...he simply takes it for granted that there is no God...then casts about for some kind of explanation of this...mistaken belief. Freud's... criticism really depends on his atheism: it isn't an independent criticism at all, and it won't...have any force on anyone who doesn't share that atheism" (Plantinga, 2000: p. 198).

A better point here is that Freud has an entire theory of the origin of religious belief. Philosophers of science have often pointed out that hypotheses can rarely be confirmed or disconfirmed in isolation, or one at a time. Theories are bunches of propositions, assumptions, or statements that are not subject to decisive falsification in isolation (Hempel, 1966). In light of this, I think Freud's theory of religious belief should be evaluated as a whole, and not as a single assertion.

Another consideration is that there is evidence in the literature by ardent theists who admit that religious beliefs are influenced by our wishes. Richard Taylor, for instance, begins his treatment of arguments for the existence of God by saying

"Belief in the gods seems to have its roots in human desires and fears, particularly those associated with self-preservation. Like all other creatures, human beings have a profound will to live, which is mainly what gives one's existence meaning...Human beings are capable of the full and terrible realization of their own inevitable decay...It is probably partly in response to fear that human beings turn to the gods, as those beings of such power that they can overturn this verdict of nature (Taylor, 1992)."

This seems to provide evidence and reason for thinking that

Freud is on to something in his theory about the roots or origins of theistic belief. Further evidence comes from sources on which religious belief is based. Faith is compatible with evidence and reason, but it is also compatible with no reasons or evidence. Faith without reasons or evidence is like hoping or wishing by the very concept of faith. If I have faith that my daughter will live to see her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, that amounts to hoping or wishing that it be so. Freud was aware of how we use religious language. Many philosophers of religion point out that religious belief is based on hope (Pojman, 2003).

There is further reason for supposing revelation, or revealed truths, on which the various and sundry holy books are based, has a great amount of wish fulfillment in it. This is not the place for an epistemological investigation of revelation as a source of information about God, but it can be pointed out that the alleged reliability of revelation as a source of knowledge is extremely dubious and fraught with controversy.

Although it is controversial, many philosophers and scientists have argued that the Bible and the Koran are filled with contradictions and inconsistencies, scientifically false pronouncements, immoral precepts, and confusions. The literature on this by philosophers and scientists is vast (Smythe, 2008; Burr, 1987). There is good and sufficient reason to believe the revelations on which the Bible is based are hopes and wishes. Revelation, I believe, is not, never was, and never will be a reliable source of knowledge or truth.

Consider, for example, the book by Richard Swinburne on revelation. He is constantly saying that both humans wrote the Bible, and that God is the ultimate author. For instance, he says "God inspired the human authors to see things which had quite a lot of truth in them; but what they wrote down, taken on its own, had quite a lot of falsity too. However, what they wrote down was ambiguous in the sense that a fuller context could give it a different meaning from what it would have been on its own. God did provide a later context...to express statements which were literally true (Swinburne, 1992: p. 197)." He also says whatever is clearly false is to be taken as metaphorical. The advocate of revelation as a source of truth clearly has his hands full, and it is just as clear that the burden of proof is on the theist. Swinburne continually cites the fact, that in the end, "the church" decides what is true in revelation, and what is metaphorical. Two pages later, with respect to the role of women in the church, Swinburne says some "passages must be regarded as ones...not fully open to divine inspiration and so..false." Or they could be historically true (but not now), or metaphorical (Swinburne, 1992: p. 199). My assertion that revelation is not a source of knowledge or reliable truths is quite plausible in the light of such glaring ambivalence. The burden is clearly on the believers, and there is precious little reason to believe that any enlightenment is ever going to be forthcoming. To think "the church" will ever have "the right interpretation of scripture" with the help of God is itself wishful thinking. Even if, per impossible, the church did reach such a consensus, it would not necessarily be by revelation. It would be plausible to regard such a consensus as a power struggle, and more authoritarianism.

Rachel B. Blass has noted that although Freud spoke of religion as an illusion, he was very much concerned with the truth value of religious beliefs. Freud distinguished between delusions and illusions. An example of a delusion is our thinking

there are snakes in the room, which is false. An example of an illusion is a young woman who believes she will someday marry a prince and be happy forever. She could marry a prince, but it is unlikely. The belief in the second coming is on a par with that. Freud said that religious belief is illusory (Blass, 2004).

Based on the foregoing we can give the following argument against the truth of religious belief:

- 1) Religious beliefs tend to be based on wishful thinking.
- 2) Wishful thinking is not conducive to true belief.
- 3) Therefore, religious belief is not conducive to true belief.

The argument is deductively valid via hypothetical syllogism. I think the first premise has good evidence from the foregoing considerations. The second premise is part of the concept of wishful thinking. There is good reason to believe that wishing something is the case has little or nothing to do with whether it is the case. Hence, the argument is a deductively sound argument. Religious belief is like astrology and reading tea leaves.

I will now treat some more critiques of Freud's theory. Some philosophers accuse Freud of committing some sort of genetic fallacy. Here is a popular passage from the philosopher of religion John Hick:

Perhaps the most interesting comment to be made upon Freud's theory is that in his work he may have uncovered one of the mechanisms by which God creates an idea of the deity in the human mind. For if the relation of a human father to his children is, as the Judaic-Christian tradition teaches, analogous to God's relationship to humanity, it is not surprising that human beings should think of God as their heavenly Father and should come to know God through the infant's experience of utter dependence and the growing child's experience of being loved, cared for, and disciplined within a family. Clearly, to the mind that is not committed in advance to a naturalistic explanation there may be a religious as well as a naturalistic interpretation of the psychological facts.

Again, then, it seems that the verdict must be "not proven"; ...the Freudian theory of religion *may* be true but has not been shown to be so (Hick, 1990: p. 35).

Many other philosophers of religion have pointed out that Freud's account of the psychological origins of religious beliefs are logically compatible with theistic belief, and that it has not been "proven" otherwise. Plantinga says "Perhaps God has designed us to know that he is present and loves us by way of creating us with strong desires for him, a desire that leads to the belief that he is in fact there (Plantinga, 2000: p. 198)."

William P. Alston says that Freudian theory hardly shows that "no rational grounds *could* be produced" for theistic belief, and that Freudian theory is not "logically incompatible with the truth, justifiability, and value of traditional religion (Alston, 1967)."

I reply that such considerations fail to appreciate the force of the Freudian theory of religion. If every scientific theory had to meet the standards of producing truth so that no other theory or alternative that was logically incompatible with it could possibly be true, then there would be no science. Science is not in the business of producing theories for which alternative explanations are logically impossible. These philosophers are setting too high a bar for Freudian explanations of religion; a standard they would never dream of setting for any normal scientific theory. This is why claims that Freud and others have not

“proven” that religious beliefs are false have to be taken with a grain of salt. What would count as a “proof”? Would there have to be a universal consensus? If so, practically no theory has ever been proven. Do we need a deductively sound argument in order to “prove” something? If so, we have given one above. Here is another one.

- 1) If God existed, people would not be so mediocre and ignorant.
- 2) Most human beings are mediocre and ignorant.
- 3) Therefore, God does not exist.

The argument is a straightforward application of *modus tollens*, thus is deductively valid. The second premise is based on sound observation. The first premise is plausible. If God created us in his image with free will so we would seek him, and choose to obey him then why do most people refuse to do so? There are plenty of people with pathological tendencies they cannot control, and the church calls us all “sinners” by our very nature. If the first premise is plausible, and we think it is, then this is a deductively sound argument. Without going into Freudian theory, we can say that the mediocrity and ignorance of most human beings is a Freudian theme. Here is one quote: “...it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all the difficult riddles of the universe (Freud, 1961: p. 53).” I submit that Freud had a low opinion of human beings, and that this kind of argument is in keeping with his views.

Adolf Grunbaum, a savant commentator on Freud, has provided another deductive argument that he says reconstructs the logical framework or argument Freud is likely to defend.

- 1) All archaic, evidentially ill-supported illusions are very probably false.
- 2) Anyone’s belief in theism is an archaic, evidentially ill-supported illusion.
- 3) Therefore, anyone’s belief in theism is very probably false (Grunbaum, 2003).

Grunbaum remarks that the argument is deductively valid, and that the first premise is justified because “the methods of the scientific enterprise...are the only means of choosing theoretical beliefs that allow observational evidence to override, sooner or later, the appeal to wish-fulfillment.” The second premise “seems to be the weak link.” But Grunbaum concludes his paper by saying: “Still, we can allow that all cases of belief in God may perhaps be inspired by conspicuous favoritism for consoling beliefs over ominous ones, combined with any repressed wishes...” (Grunbaum, 2003: p. 121) So, I take Grunbaum to be an ally by endorsing Freud.

I turn now to another feature of the Bible that Freudian theory illuminates for us. The fear of the Holy Father is like the small child’s fear of its father, and Freud’s conception of the death wish. The God of the Old Testament is threatening to kill people, and actually killing them, on almost every other page. This is true of Revelations as well. Fortunately for us, Freud contends that such a monster as the God of the Old Testament is an illusion, thus unlikely to exist. The Koran is full of similar passages. God punishes us and rewards us just like an earthly father in the holy texts of various religions. I think Freud gives a good account of why this is the case.

I am leaving out a lot of Freudian theory. The Oedipal Complex account of the origin of theistic belief is controversial. Freud’s contention that religion is the obsessional neurosis of

mankind is also being left out here (Alston, 2003). However, I do believe that Freud’s contention that believers often regress to the condition of a helpless child who is afraid of the forces of nature, and seeks the love of, and fears their father, has a significant role to play in the etiology of religious belief. I do think this takes the form of an unconscious wish for a heavenly father. I want to make it clear that wishful thinking is not the only cause of religious belief, nor do we think Freud is committed to that. There is reason to think that what people believe has to do in large part with their acculturation, such as their parents, their peers, their teachers, the churches, the media, politics, and the like. Wish fulfillment is compatible with these sources, and illuminates them.

I do not claim the Freud gives us “the” explanation of religious belief, or a “complete” account. Nor would we call it a “partial” account. I hold that Freud gives a good explanation of theistic belief that is more likely to be true than not. That he has not “proven” theism is false, or produced a consensus, is rather platitudinous. No one else has either. By induction, such a knock down, undisputable demonstration is impossible. But I think Freud has given us reason to believe that theism probably IS false.

I do not think that Freud has given both necessary and sufficient causal conditions for religious belief. It is arguable that such an achievement is impossible in the social sciences. Causation is a difficult topic in philosophy. I think Freud’s view is more like the claim that smoking causes lung cancer. It is a kind of statistical or probabilistic causation. It is more likely to be true than not. Pointing out that it is logically compatible with theism cuts very little ice. Logical compatibility with a theory by itself is not a reliable indicator of truth.

Many philosophers of religion are fond of pointing out that Freud does not address the theistic arguments for the existence of God, such as the ontological, cosmological, and design arguments. It is true that he does not try to refute the traditional arguments. However, we think that Freud’s views do have a bearing on them. If Freud is right that religious belief is wishful thinking, then there is good reason to be highly skeptical of any traditional attempts to prove the existence of God. They are likely to be attempts to rationalize what theists already wish to be true. Since anyone who has studied philosophy of religion knows that all the traditional proofs are highly controversial and often vexed, we have additional reason to be skeptical.

Attempts to show there is life after death, or the immortality of the soul, are equally suspicious. The fact that we fear death, and have a longing for existence beyond the grave, is additional reason to regard attempts to show we survive our deaths as wishful thinking. The conception of heaven as a place where all our wants are satisfied is arguably a desire for a second childhood and a return to the mother’s womb, where all our needs are met.

The philosopher William R. Rowe, in his writings on Freud and religion, says it is important to distinguish between the causation of a belief and the justification of belief. Rowe contends that religious believers who follow Freud’s line of thinking can agree that it is “unlikely” that religious beliefs are true, but can hold that “this is not sufficient reason for rejecting those beliefs.” Freud, Rowe says, has not “shown” that no one has good grounds for those beliefs, only that many who accept them do not. Freud’s arguments are “not compelling (Rowe,

2001: p. 120)."

Here again I would like to know what philosophers of religion would find compelling short of absolute Cartesian logical certainty. Freud "shows" that theistic beliefs are "unlikely" to be true, and that is sufficient in our eyes to "show" they are illusions in the probable sense of "show." (Can we "show" smoking causes lung cancer?)

The burden of proof rests solely with the theist. Faith, religious traditions, revelation, and religious authority have been called into serious question. Freud is saying we want to believe in God, and that is our only justification for doing so. THAT is an argument that our belief has no justification other than it is what we wish were true.

I shall now treat in some detail a reply to Freud in a book by Merold Westphal.

Westphal attempts to defend the religious believer against 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' that appears to offer a reply to Freud (Westphal, 1993). I will comment on it.

Westphal speaks of Freud's scientism, which I take to be the view that all and only scientific inquiry can reveal what is real, or what exists. Westphal rightly points out that rejection of this kind of view was later borne out in the philosophical literature on Logical Empiricism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such scientism, as defined above is untenable. I do not think Freud needs this assumption, which he clearly makes, to achieve his criticisms of religion (Freud, 1961). What Westphal neglects in Freud is that Freud realized that religion and science are in constant conflict. Freud says "in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable (Freud, 1961: p. 69)." I find this to be true, and a sound part of Freud's foray.

Westphal argues that Freud only succeeds in raising suspicion or doubts about religious beliefs, but that his arguments do not show that religious belief distorts reality. He points out that Freud's failure to make good the thesis of "obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of religion" thus making religion as a universal obsessional neurosis." I grant that Freud has not made good his hypothesis about religion being the obsessional neurosis of mankind, and that Westphal's criticisms on this topic are well taken.

Westphal points out the difficulties Freud has in Totem and Taboo in his speculations about the cultural and historical origins of religion. I grant this to Westphal as well. I think that Westphal is successful in criticizing Freud in failing to show that religious belief is a distortion using these hypotheses. However, what Westphal calls the suspicion of doubt that Freud raises is sufficient to make it likely that religious belief is, in fact, a distortion because it is only consoling. Pointing out that many people believe in God because they yearn for a benevolent guardian who watches over them, and provides them with rewards for good conduct, and punishments for misconduct, is exactly the kind of point that tends to undermine religious beliefs. If religious belief is based on illusion, then there is some good reason to believe it is probably a distortion of reality as well.

I agree with Westphal and others that the wish fulfillment critique by Freud does not entail the falsity of religious beliefs. It is quite compatible with there being such a benevolent deity. What it does explain is the origin of religious belief in such a way that does not require that God exists. This undermines any

temptation to think that the existence of widespread belief in God is an incontestable reason, or a good reason, to think there is a God. Freud's psychological explanation leaves us free to seek reasons for denying there is any such being, and renders the existence of such a being unlikely. Unlike Westphal, I think the wish fulfillment hypothesis itself is reason to believe that religious belief is false. Westphal muddies the waters by demanding that Freud show that religious beliefs are "distortions." Freud argues that they are illusions, and probably false. Westphal is making unreasonable demands for Freud.

Westphal seems to think that the wish fulfillment hypothesis needs to be supplemented by the hypothesis that religious beliefs are "the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes (Westphal, 1993)." I do not think that Freud needs to bring in his controversial theory of repression into the picture at all in order to show that religious beliefs are improbable, and likely to be false.

Westphal does have an interesting argument against Freud that I believe is a better argument than he gives himself credit for. It is a form of *tit for tat* or a *tu quoque* against Freud. Westphal argues, very interestingly, that Freud is telling us we think it would be very nice if there were a heavenly father to take care of us. Westphal then says

But there are very powerful forces at work within us that lead us in exactly the opposite direction. God...would be a power we would envy and an authority we would resent: Wouldn't it be nice...if there were no God. We could be in charge without any unsolicited divine interference, ...Freud calls attention to both these forces both biographically and theoretically. When he interpreted his own dreams in the years following his father's death, he discovered a powerful resentment and hatred of his father. And his theory of the Oedipus complex insists that the phenomenon is virtually universal, portraying parents as resented rivals of children, whose death wishes towards their parents are one of the first texts of psychic life to be censored and therefore rendered unconscious (Westphal, 1993: p. 68).

Freud's belief that there is no God is an equally infantile (Oedipal) wish fulfillment superimposed on adolescent rebellion against authority.

I think this is an ingenious argument. Westphal may have uncovered a reason for Freud's rejection of the father figure. But, and this is important, this is, again, logically compatible with there being no higher father. Freud could be pleased by the outcome because of his own rebellious view on authority without that in the least undermining his rejection of religious beliefs. What the objection does is explain his zeal in pursuing anti-religious themes in his work.

Freud was no doubt someone who was motivated to be open to arguments against God's existence because of his own personal psychology. Suppose this were a general condition amongst people. If so, it would be difficult to understand why disbelief is not cheerfully accepted by a wider section of humankind. Westphal's psychological explanation is wholly compatible with Freud's being right about religious belief, and its unlikelihood of being true.

It seems Westphal sets the bar too high for Freud by requiring that all aspects of his theory about religious belief be true. Westphal does show that a lot of the theory is problematic at best. I think a partial acceptance of Freud's writings on religion effectively undermines religious belief.

## Conclusion

Let me clarify what I am claiming in this paper. It is generally agreed that Freud was an atheist. He thought there is no god, and thought there remains a puzzle about why people believe. There is no similar puzzle about why people believe in the moon or Mars. I think Freud is saying: There is no god, and this is why people believe that there is. I can give a naturalistic explanation of that phenomenon. In that sense Freud's citing wish fulfillment is a sensible part of his overall view. This is strongly supported by the fact that what is believed in this case is the sort of thing human beings are likely to wish for—a strong father figure who is able to control the bad and the good that happens to us. We do not have a similar motive for believing in, say, UFOs. Given this, I maintain that his account is more likely to be true.

Why then do people challenge Freud? Westphal, Plantinga, Hick, Alston, and Taylor seem to be attacking that idea because it does no more than assume that there is no god. But wish fulfillment is logically compatible with the existence of God. I am maintaining that Freud's account casts a damaging blemish on the usual arguments for the existence of God that are so fraught with controversy. If Freud is right, and I think he is, it is more likely that there is no God, or heavenly father. Freud gives us good reason to doubt the claims of theists who opt for the existence of a personal, heavenly father. It does not follow that religion is not important, or that spirituality is not an inescapable part of human life (Compte-Sponville, 2007). But the personal father image conception of God in Western religions is seriously affected by Freudian criticisms.

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