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# Faith of the Fatherless

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATHEISM

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## 1. Intense Atheism

I WILL BEGIN by addressing the deep personal psychology of the great—or at least the passionate and influential—atheists. Of course, atheism has not simply been the expression of the personal psychology of important atheists: it has received much support from social, economic, and cultural forces. Nevertheless, atheism began in the personal lives of particular people, many of them the leading intellectuals of the modern period, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, and Jean-Paul Sartre. I propose that atheism of the strong or intense type is, to a substantial degree, generated by the peculiar psychological needs of its advocates.

But why should one study the psychology of atheists at all? Is there any reason to believe that there are consistent psychological patterns in their lives? Indeed, there is a coherent psychological origin to intense atheism. To begin, it should be noted that intense, self-avowed atheists tend to be found in a relatively narrow range of social and economic strata: in the university and intellectual world and in certain professions. Today, as a rule, they make up a significant part of the governing class. (By contrast, believers are found much more widely throughout the entire social spectrum.) Given the much smaller numbers of committed unbelievers and the more limited number of social settings in which they are found, there is certainly an a priori reason for expecting regularity in their psychology.

Nevertheless, the reader might ask if this is not unfair—even uncalled for. Why submit atheism to psychological analysis at all? Is this relevant to the issue of unbelief? Here we must remember that *it is atheists themselves who began the psychological approach to the question of belief*. Indeed, many atheists are famous for arguing that believers suffer from illusions, from unconscious and infantile needs, and from other psychological deficits. A significant part of the atheist position has been an aggressive interpretation of religious belief as arising from psychological factors, not the nature of reality. Furthermore, this interpretation has been widely influential. In short, the theory that God is a projection of our own needs is a familiar modern position and is, for example, presented in countless university courses. But the psychological concepts used so effectively to interpret religion by those who reject God are double-edged swords that can also, as we will see, be used to explain their unbelief.

Finally, a valid reason for exploring the psychology of atheism is to give us some understanding of why certain historical forces common in the modern period have so reliably promoted an atheistic attitude. By identifying psychological factors in the lives of prominent rejecters of God, we will observe how social and economic conditions that fostered a similar psychology also promoted the spread of atheism. By starting with the psychological, we will be able to see how the personal became political. In short, there has been a synchrony between the psychology and the sociology of atheism.

Before beginning, I wish to make two points bearing on the underlying assumptions of the present analysis. First, I assume that the major barriers to belief in God are not rational but can be called, in a general sense, psychological. I

am quite convinced that for every person strongly swayed by rational argument, there are countless others more affected by nonrational, psychological factors such as those I will discuss here. One of the earliest theorists of the unconscious, Saint Paul, wrote: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. . . . I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind" (Rom 7:18, 23). Hence, it seems to me sound psychology (as well as sound theology) to accept that psychological factors can be impediments to belief and that these factors are often unconscious. The human heart—no one can truly fathom it or know all its deceits, but it is the proper task of the psychologist at least to try. I propose, then, that irrational, often neurotic, psychological barriers to belief in God are of great importance.

Second, in spite of various difficulties, all of us still have a free choice to accept or reject God. This qualification is not a contradiction of the first. A little elaboration will make this clearer. As a consequence of particular past or present circumstances, some may find it much harder to believe in God. But presumably they can still choose to move toward God, to move away from God, or even to move against God. Likewise, those born without psychological barriers to belief can choose their path. Although the ultimate psychological issue is one of the will, it is nonetheless possible to investigate those psychological factors that predispose one to unbelief, that make the path toward God especially difficult.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For those who reject free will (for example, materialists, some hyper-Calvinists), this book can be read as a thesis on the way that atheism is psychologically determined.

## THE PROJECTION THEORY OF BELIEF IN GOD

As is generally known, Freud's criticism of belief in God is that such a belief is untrustworthy because of its psychological origins. That is, God is a projection of our own intense, unconscious desires.<sup>2</sup> He is a wish-fulfillment derived from childish needs for protection and security. Since these wishes are largely unconscious, any denial of such an interpretation is to be given little credence. It should be noted that in developing this kind of critique, Freud raises the ad hominem argument to a new importance. It is in *The Future of an Illusion* that Freud makes his position clearest: "Religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, religious beliefs are

<sup>2</sup>Besides the projection theory, there is another related interpretation of belief in God which Freud also developed, but, although this has a very modest psychoanalytic character, it is also really an adaptation of the Feuerbachian position. This interpretation is Freud's neglected use of the ego ideal. The super-ego, including the ego ideal is the "heir of the Oedipus complex", representing a projection of an idealized father—and presumably of God the Father. See Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), pp. 26–28, 38.

The difficulty here is that the ego ideal did not receive much attention or development within Freud's writings. Furthermore, the ego ideal is easily interpreted as an expression of Feuerbach's projection theory. Thus, we can conclude that psychoanalysis does not in actuality provide significant theoretical concepts for characterizing belief in God as neurotic. Freud either used Feuerbach's much older projection or illusion theory or incorporated Feuerbach in his notion of the ego ideal. Presumably, this is the reason why Freud acknowledged to Pfister that his *Illusion* with its case for projection was not a true part of psychoanalysis.

<sup>3</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 21.

illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father. . . . Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at this argument carefully, we see that in spite of its enthusiastic acceptance by so many, it is very weak. In the first passage, Freud fails to note, his own words notwithstanding, that his arguments against religious belief are equally valid against many of the achievements of civilization, including psychoanalysis itself.

In the second passage, Freud makes another strange claim, namely, that the oldest and most urgent wishes of mankind are for the loving protection and guidance of a powerful father. However, if these wishes were as strong as he claims, one would expect the religions that immediately preceded Christianity to have strongly emphasized God as a benevolent father. In general, this was not the case for the pagan religions of the Mediterranean world and is still not the case for such major religions as Buddhism and Hinduism. Indeed, Christians and the ancient Hebrews are in many respects *distinctive* in their emphasis on God as a loving Father. (This emphasis on the father is also characteristic of many of the most primitive religions.)

Let us set aside the preceding weaknesses and turn to another aspect of Freud's projection theory. It can be shown that his theory is not really a part of psychoanalysis—and hence cannot claim support from psychoanalytic theory. To put it differently, Freud's argument is essentially *autonomous*. His critical attitude toward and rejection of religion are rooted

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

in his personal predilections, and his interpretation of religion is a kind of meta-psychoanalysis, or framework, that is not supported by specifically clinical concepts. Indeed, the lack of theoretical connection of the projection theory to psychoanalysis probably accounts for its wide general influence outside the psychoanalytic world. There are two strong pieces of evidence for this interpretation of the projection theory.

First, Freud's theory had been clearly articulated many years earlier by Ludwig Feuerbach in his book *The Essence of Christianity*.<sup>5</sup> Feuerbach's interpretation was well known in European intellectual circles, and Freud, as a youth, read Feuerbach avidly.<sup>6</sup> Illustrative quotations from Feuerbach's work make his influence on Freud clear: "What man misses—whether this be articulate and therefore conscious, or an *unconscious* need—that is his God"; "Man *projects* his nature into the world outside himself before he finds it in himself"; "To live in *projected dream-images* is the essence of religion. Religion sacrifices reality to the *projected dream*."<sup>7</sup> Throughout the work, Feuerbach describes religion in "Freudian" terms such as "wish-fulfillment" and the like. What Freud did, years later, was to revive Feuerbach's position, articulate it more eloquently, and publish it at a time when the audience for such a theory was much larger. (Between 1841 and 1927, atheistic attitudes had made substantial headway in Western society.) And because Freud is the author, somehow the findings of psychoanalysis are

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, ed. E. G. Waring and F. W. Strothmann (New York: Ungar, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> H. Trosman, "Freud's Cultural Background", in *Freud: The Fusion of Science and Humanism*, ed. J. Gedo and G. Pollock (New York: International Universities Press, 1976), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, pp. 33, 11, and 49; emphasis added.

assumed to support the theory. The Feuerbachian character of Freud's position in *Illusion* is also revealed by his use of such key phrases as the "crushing superior force of nature" and the "terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood", which are not psychoanalytic, either in terminology or in meaning.

Second, Freud himself admits that his projection theory does not arise from psychoanalytic evidence. In a letter of 1927 to his friend Oskar Pfister (an early psychoanalyst and believing Protestant pastor), Freud wrote: "Let us be quite clear on the point that the views expressed in my book [*The Future of an Illusion*] form no part of analytic theory. They are my personal views."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Freud implies in *Illusion* that he is very familiar with the psychology of belief in God. This, however, is not the case. In fact, Freud had very little psychoanalytic experience with patients who believed in God or were genuinely religious.<sup>9</sup> None of his published cases deals with a patient who believed in God at the time of the psychoanalysis. That is, *nowhere did Freud publish a psychoanalysis of the belief in God based on clinical evidence provided by a believing patient*. He never presented publicly any serious psychological evidence for his projection theory or for his

<sup>8</sup> S. Freud and O. Pfister, *Psychoanalysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister*, ed. H. Meng and E. French, trans. E. Mosbacher (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> P. Swales reports that one patient of Freud, a "Herr E", was a believing Catholic. If so, this is the only known example of such a patient. According to Swales, "Herr E" was important to Freud's development of the Oedipus complex. Of course, one patient hardly makes Freud an expert on religion—and this patient's history was never published. Swales discussed "Herr E" in an unpublished lecture, "Freud, His Ur-Patient, and Their Descent into Pre-History: The Role of 'Herr E' in the Conception of Psychoanalysis" (National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, New York, New York, May 16, 1997).

other ideas about religion. Instead, Freud's peculiar personal obsession with religion is primarily focused on texts and issues drawn from anthropology, history, and literature—not from any cited psychoanalytic experience. In short, Freud's general projection theory is an interpretation of religion that stands on its own, unsupported by psychoanalytic theory or clinical evidence.

It is important to add that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic empirical evidence to support the thesis of childhood projection being the basis of belief in God. Indeed, the assumption that religious belief is neurotic and psychologically counterproductive has been substantially rejected. Instead, there is now much research showing that a serious religious life is associated with greater physical health and psychological well-being.<sup>10</sup>

#### FREUD'S UNACKNOWLEDGED THEORY OF UNBELIEF: OEDIPAL ATHEISM

Nevertheless, Freud is quite right to consider that a belief might be an illusion because it derives from powerful wishes or unconscious, childish needs. The irony is that he inadvertently provides a powerful new way to understand an illusion as the psychological basis for rejecting God—that is, a projection theory of atheism.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For relevant research, see A. E. Bergin, "Religiosity and Mental Health: A Critical Reevaluation and Meta-analysis", *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 14, no. 2 (1983): 170–84; D. B. Larson and S. S. Larson, "Religious Commitment and Health: Valuing the Relationship", *Second Opinion: Health, Faith & Ethics* 7, no. 1 (1991): 26–40.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed development of this position, see P. C. Vitz and J. Gartner, "Christianity and Psychoanalysis, Part 1: Jesus as the Anti-Oedipus",

The central concept in Freud's work, aside from the unconscious, is the well-known Oedipus complex. In the case of male personality development, the essential features of this complex are the following. Roughly at age three, the boy develops a strong sexual desire for his mother. At the same time, he develops an intense hatred and fear of his father and a desire to supplant him—a "craving for power". This hatred and fear is based on the boy's knowledge that his father, with his greater size and strength, stands in the way of his desire. The child's fear of his father may be explicitly a fear of castration by the father, but more typically it has a less specific character. The son does not really kill his father, of course, but patricide is assumed to be a common preoccupation of his unconscious fantasies and dreams. The "resolution" of the complex is supposed to occur through the boy's recognition that he cannot replace his father and through fear of castration, which eventually leads the boy to identify with his father—with the aggressor—and to repress the original frightening components of the complex. This resolution is normally completed by age five.

It is important to keep in mind that, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex is never truly resolved and is capable of activation at later periods—almost always, for example, at puberty. Thus, the powerful ingredients of murderous hate and of incestuous sexual desire within the family are never in fact removed; they are merely covered over and repressed. The adult continues to fear his now-internalized father, who has been incorporated into his super-ego. This

*Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12 (1984): 4–14; P. C. Vitz and J. Gartner, "Christianity and Psychoanalysis, Part 2: Jesus as Transformer of the Super-Ego", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12 (1984): 82–90. See especially also P. C. Vitz, *Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious* (New York: Guilford, 1988), chap. 4, 5.

fear and self-directed moral hostility are always ready to erupt from the unconscious. Freud explains the neurotic potential of the situation: "The Oedipus complex is the actual nucleus of neuroses. . . . What remains of the complex in the unconscious represents the disposition to the later development of neuroses in the adult."<sup>12</sup> In short, human neuroses derive from this complex. In many cases, this potential is not expressed in any seriously neurotic manner but shows up in critical attitudes toward God and authority, and also in slips of the tongue, transient irrationalities, and the like.

Aside from the personal dimensions of the Oedipus complex, Freud elaborated a cultural-historical model of this complex in *Totem and Taboo*.<sup>13</sup> In this work, Freud proposed an oedipal and totemic origin of religion. He begins by postulating that the earliest stage of society consisted of "a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up".<sup>14</sup> Freud proposed that such a primal horde, without real culture, was the initial human state. But "one day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually."<sup>15</sup> Freud explains the eating of the murdered father by assuming that

cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared, envied model of each one of the company of brothers; in the act

<sup>12</sup> S. Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works* (The Standard Edition), vol. 17, (London: Hogarth Press, 1919), p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.<sup>16</sup>

He concludes his argument with a reference to the Oedipus complex:

In order that these latter consequences may seem plausible, leaving their premises on one side, we need only suppose that the tumultuous mob of brothers were filled with the same contradictory feelings which we can see at work in the ambivalent father-complexes of our children and of our neurotic patients. They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, had satisfied their hatred and had put into effect their wish to identify themselves with him, the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse. A sense of guilt made its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group. The dead father became stronger than the living one had been.<sup>17</sup>

The development of this idea in *Totem and Taboo* closely parallels Freud's presentation of the Oedipus complex, for example, in *The Ego and the Id*,<sup>18</sup> but with one interesting difference. In his discussion of the origin of religion in *Totem*, Freud is more concerned with violence—with the son's

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. J. Riviere, ed. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

hatred of and rebellion against the father—while in his other oedipal writings he places heavier emphasis on the sexual relationship with the mother.

As a statement about the origins of religion, Freud's interpretation is thoroughly rejected by anthropologists, in part because there is simply no evidence that culture began with anything like Freud's "primal horde"—basic family units appear from the very start.<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt presents a simple but devastating critique of Freud's oedipal totemic theory about the origin of religion: First, there are many cultures which have not yet reached a totemic stage; nevertheless, these pre-totemic cultures have religion. Second, some rather advanced cultures do not appear to ever have had a totemic stage—yet, like all cultures, they have a religion.<sup>20</sup> No totemic theory—much less an oedipal one—can account for the origin of religion. Freud's theory of how religion arose is a kind of "just-so story".

Yet in postulating a universal Oedipus complex as the origin of all our neuroses, Freud inadvertently developed a straightforward rationale for understanding the wish-fulfilling origin of the rejection of God. After all, the Oedipus complex is unconscious, it is established in childhood, and above all its dominant motive is hatred of the father (God) and the desire for him not to exist, something represented by the boy's desire to overthrow or kill the father. Freud

<sup>19</sup> See B. Malinowski, *The Father in Primitive Psychology* (New York: Norton, 1927); Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1927); and especially W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, trans. H.J. Rose, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1935); A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1952); A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1952).

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, pp. 109–15.

regularly described God as a psychological equivalent to the father, and so a natural expression of oedipal motivation would be powerful, unconscious desires for the nonexistence of God. Therefore, in the Freudian framework, atheism is an illusion caused by the oedipal desire to kill the father (God) and replace him with oneself. To act as though God does not exist reveals a wish to kill him, much in the same way as in a dream the image of a parent going away or disappearing can represent such a wish. The claim by Nietzsche that "God is dead. . . . And we have killed him", therefore, is simply an oedipal wish-fulfillment—the sign of seriously unresolved unconscious motivation.<sup>21</sup>

It is certainly not hard to grasp the oedipal character of so much contemporary atheism. Those whose lives are characterized by promiscuity and atheism are, on Freud's analysis, living out the oedipal, primal rebellion. And of course, the oedipal dream is not only to kill the father and possess the mother or other women in the group, but also to displace the father. Modern atheism has attempted to accomplish this. Man, not God, is now the consciously specified ultimate source of goodness and power in the universe. Humanistic philosophies glorify him and his "potential" in much the same way religion glorifies the Creator. We have devolved from one God to many gods to everyone-a-god. Man, through his narcissism and oedipal wishes, has seated

<sup>21</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882, sec. 125. Quite some time after developing this hypothesis, I came across the work of the philosopher John MacMurray, who had similar thoughts along "Freudian" lines, when he wrote: "The wish to destroy the father and take his place is one of the common phantasies of childhood. Would it not be as good an argument as Freud's, then, if we were to conclude that adult atheism was a projection upon the universe of this phantasy?" (*Persons in Relation* [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1961], p. 155).



himself on the throne of God. Thanks to Freud, we may more easily understand the deeply illusory and thoroughly neurotic oedipal psychology of unbelief.

One interesting example of the oedipal motivation proposed here is that of Voltaire, a leading skeptic about all things religious, who denied the Christian concept of a personal God, of God as a Father. Voltaire was a deist who believed in a cosmic, depersonalized God of unknown character.<sup>22</sup> The psychologically important thing about Voltaire is that he strongly rejected his father—so much so that he repudiated his father's name (Arouet) and took the name "Voltaire". It is not certain where the new name came from.<sup>23</sup> When Voltaire was in his twenties (in 1718), he published a play entitled *Oedipe* (Oedipus), the first of his plays to be publicly performed. The play, which was a major success, recounts the classical legend, with heavy undertones of religious and political rebellion.<sup>24</sup>

Voltaire's rejection of his own father, his rejection of God as Father, and also (in his play) his political rejection of the king—an acknowledged father figure—are all reflections of the same basic need. Psychologically speaking, Voltaire's rebellion against his father and God are directly interpretable as unresolved oedipal wish-fulfillments derived from childhood. Voltaire's rejection of God is therefore a comforting illusion, and—following Freud's logic—is a belief unworthy of a mature mind.

Diderot, the great encyclopedist and avowed atheist—indeed he is one of the founding brothers of modern

<sup>22</sup> N. Torrey, "Voltaire", in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 264–65.

<sup>23</sup> A. D. Aldridge, *Voltaire and the Century of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–33.

atheism—had both oedipal preoccupation and insight. Freud approvingly cites Diderot's anticipatory observation: "If the little savage were left to himself, preserving all his foolishness and adding to the small sense of a child in the cradle the violent passions of a man of thirty, he would strangle his father and lie with his mother."<sup>25</sup>

### A NEW THEORY OF ATHEISM: THE DEFECTIVE FATHER HYPOTHESIS

In the subsequent biographical material, I will sometimes assume that with male atheists some of the preceding oedipal-based atheism is operating. It is commonly accepted by psychologists today that, although the Oedipus complex is valid for some, the theory is far from a universal explanation of unconscious motivation. Thus it can't account for the psychology of atheism in most cases. There is a need, therefore, for a wider understanding of atheism, especially of the intense kind. The psychology of the father needs to be enlarged or extended beyond the specific logic of the Oedipus complex. Since I know of no theoretical framework other than the oedipal one, I am forced to sketch something of a new model. But in fact I will develop an undeveloped thesis of Freud himself. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud remarks that "psychoanalysis, which has taught us the intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God, has shown us that the personal God is logically nothing but an exalted father, and daily demonstrates

<sup>25</sup> From *Rameau's Nephew*, quoted by Freud in Lecture XXI of his Introductory Lectures, 1916–1917, *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press), vol. 16, p. 338.

to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down."<sup>26</sup>

This interesting observation requires no assumptions about unconscious sexual desires for the mother, or even about presumed universal competitive hatred focused on the father. Instead, Freud makes the simple and easily understandable claim that once a child or youth is disappointed in or loses respect for his earthly father, belief in a heavenly father becomes impossible. That a child's psychological representation of his father is intimately connected to his understanding of God was assumed by Freud and has been rather well developed by a number of psychologists, especially psychoanalysts.<sup>27</sup> In other words, an atheist's disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies his rejection of God.

There are, let us recall, many ways a father can lose his authority or seriously disappoint his child: he can be absent through death or abandonment; he can be present but obviously weak, cowardly, and unworthy of respect, even if he is otherwise pleasant or "nice"; or he can be present but physically, sexually, or psychologically abusive. I will call these proposed determinants of atheism, taken together, the *defective father hypothesis*. Before presenting evidence for this hypothesis in the lives of prominent atheists, I will extend the defective father hypothesis by placing it in the context of relatively recent psychological theory.

<sup>26</sup> S. Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1947), p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> For example, A. M. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); J. W. Jones, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); M. H. Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); W. W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

## AN EXTENSION OF THE THEORY: THE ATTACHMENT INSECURITY HYPOTHESIS

Since the first edition of this book was initiated and more or less completed in the early 1990s, an important psychological theory has been applied to understanding religious belief and unbelief. The basic approach, well known as "attachment theory", was initiated by the English psychiatrist John Bowlby<sup>28</sup> and was first empirically measured and verified by the American psychologist Mary Ainsworth.<sup>29</sup> The theory identifies the foundational importance of the early attachment bond between the mother, or mother figure, and the child. This bond establishes the internal model of interpersonal relationships for the child—a model that influences a person throughout life, but that is especially important in understanding the psychology of children and young people. The centrality and importance of this early relationship—plus others that come soon after the mother-child bond, for example, bonds with the father and siblings—were demonstrated by Bowlby using much clinical and other descriptive evidence. It is important to keep in mind that father attachment security, though on average less important than mother attachment, is often nevertheless quite important and is commonly the focus of studies on the effects of fathers on the religious beliefs of their children.

<sup>28</sup> J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969/1982); Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 2, *Separation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 3, *Loss, Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> M. D. S. Ainsworth, "Infant-Mother Attachment", *American Psychologist* 34, no. 10 (1979): 932–37; Ainsworth, "Attachment beyond infancy", *American Psychologist* 44, no. 4 (1989): 709–16.

Ainsworth, a student of Bowlby, developed a test for measuring the kind, or style, of attachment between a mother and child. Her work, and the work of others, has established four basic styles of attachment. The first is *secure attachment*, which is the most common (at least in most populations), perhaps accounting for roughly 65% of mother-child bondings. A second style is called *insecure avoidant* or *dismissive*, referring to children who are quite insecure in their attachment to their mother (and others) and who, because of fear of abandonment or separation, withdraw from relationships, that is, they avoid relationships and dismiss them because of their anxiety. Such insecure individuals as adults are typically very dismissive of close relationships, including love, as not being important. A third style is *insecure ambivalent*; these children are also anxious about attachment but do not avoid relationships but rather seek them out in an anxious manner—that is, they are often clinging, insistent on attention and on being held. As adults, they often attempt to hold onto or control a relationship. This style is also called *preoccupied*. The fourth style, which is relatively uncommon, is called *disorganized* or *unresolved*; it refers to withdrawal, confusion, and a kind of emotional and behavioral hopelessness in relationships.<sup>30</sup> The insecure avoidant might be found in 20% of a population, the insecure ambivalent in 15%, and the preoccupied in possibly up to 5% of a population. These percentages are, of course, rough estimates and vary across populations and subpopulations, especially for the preoccupied style.

<sup>30</sup> M. D. S., Ainsworth, et al., *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978); M. Main and J. Solomon, "Discovery of an Insecure-Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Pattern", in *Affective Development in Infancy*, ed. T.B. Brazelton and M. W. Yogman (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1986), pp. 95–124.

After Ainsworth—with her focus on styles of attachment in children—came the development of questionnaires and interviews for measuring attachment style in adults (see Mary Main).<sup>31</sup> Once the three most common styles could be identified in adults, psychologists began investigating how secure and insecure attachments are related to different kinds of adult behavior.

Our concern here, however, is with the much more recent studies that have connected adult attachment style with religious belief. Although attachment theorists, as noted, have focused on the mother, research on attachment to God has shown the greater relevance of attachment to the father in that area. For example, Limke and Mayfield<sup>32</sup> report that attachment to fathers predicted attachment to God but attachment to mothers did not. Their study used a sample of 173 college students at a state university, the majority of whom were Christian.

### *Attachment and Religiousness*

The first to investigate attachment as related to religious belief were Kirkpatrick and Shaver.<sup>33</sup> (I was unaware of these

<sup>31</sup> M. Main, E. Hesse, and N. Kaplan, "Predictability of Attachment Behavior and Representational Processes at 1, 6 and 19 Years of Age: The Berkeley Longitudinal Study", in *Attachment from Infancy to Adulthood: The Major Longitudinal Studies*, ed. K. E. Grossman, K. Grossman, and E. Waters (New York: Guilford, 2005), pp. 254–304.

<sup>32</sup> A. Limke and P. B. Mayfield, "Attachment to God: Differentiating the Contributions of Fathers and Mothers Using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39 (2011): 122–29.

<sup>33</sup> L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 315–34; Kirkpatrick and Shaver,

studies for some years after they first came out.) Later, more extensive research on this important topic is due to Lee Kirkpatrick and to Pehr Granqvist.<sup>34</sup> For a review, see Granqvist, Mikulincer, and Shaver.<sup>35</sup> (In this section, I will summarize their basic relevant work, also drawing on valuable material from colleagues Peter Martin and Andrew Sodergren.)<sup>36</sup>

Kirkpatrick and Shaver reasoned that while qualitatively different from ordinary human relationships, one's relationship with God is nonetheless an interpersonal relationship and as such should be affected by the attachment system and by one's internal working models, i.e., internal patterns of attachment based on childhood and other early learned attachment relationships.<sup>37</sup> As will be often mentioned here, in the Judeo-Christian view, God can be understood as a

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"An Attachment Theoretical Approach to Romantic Love and Religious Belief", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18 (1992): 266–75.

<sup>34</sup> L. A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* (New York: Guilford, 2005); Pehr Granqvist, *Attachment and Religion: An Integrative Developmental Framework*, Comprehensive Summaries of Uppsala Dissertations from the Faculty of Social Sciences 116 (Uppsala: Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2002); P. Granqvist and L. A. Kirkpatrick, "Attachment and Religious Representations and Behavior", in *Handbook of Attachment*, ed. J. Cassidy and P. Shaver, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2008), pp. 906–33.

<sup>35</sup> P. Granqvist, M. Mikulincer, and P. R. Shaver, "Religion as Attachment: Normative Processes and Individual Differences", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14 (2010): 49–59.

<sup>36</sup> P. E. Martin, *Religious Conversion: A Critique of Current Major Social Science Models of Conversion and a Christian Anthropological Response* (Arlington, Va.: Institute for the Psychological Sciences, 2009), retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/858209388?pq-origsite=scholarlink> (accession order no. 858209388). A. J. Sodergren, *Attachment and Morality: A Catholic Perspective* (doctoral dissertation, Arlington, Va.: Institute for the Psychological Sciences, 2009), retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses, <http://search.proquest.com/pqdft/docview/911033394/fulltext/PDF/13E9988F55A471B4C94/1?accountid=27532> (accession order no. 3482775).

<sup>37</sup> Kirkpatrick and Shaver, "Attachment Theoretical Approach", *passim*.

perfect attachment figure: an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving personal Being, readily available throughout life to provide safety in times of distress and insecurity. Kirkpatrick and Shaver proposed two hypotheses relating one's attachment status to religious belief. The first, termed the *compensation hypothesis*, stated that individuals with an insecure attachment style are more apt to turn to God as a compensatory attachment figure, who will provide the safety and security they lack, shades of Freud's projection theory. They also proposed that this attachment insecurity would be related to sudden religious conversions. In addition, they also hypothesized a second *correspondence hypothesis*, which stated that one's relationship with God would correspond with or be a reflection of one's attachment status. In this case, individuals with secure attachment would have an easier time establishing a close relationship with God, and insecure individuals would have more difficulty and therefore would be less likely to be religious.

Which one of these rather contradictory hypotheses is correct? It seems that, to some extent, both are. Several studies have shown that persons reporting insecure forms of attachment are more likely to experience a sudden religious conversion (see Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, for a meta-analysis).<sup>38</sup> In some studies, (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver), insecure attachment was associated with higher levels of religiosity than secure attachment.<sup>39</sup> However, this was true only with individuals who reported low parental religiousness. In most studies, those reporting secure attachment frequently professed higher levels of religious commitment or

<sup>38</sup> P. Granqvist and L. A. Kirkpatrick, "Religious Conversion and Perceived Childhood Attachment: A Meta-analysis", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14, no. 4 (2004): 223–50.

<sup>39</sup> Kirkpatrick and Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion", *passim*.

involvement than the others in the study (Kirkpatrick and Shaver),<sup>40</sup> were more likely to profess a personal relationship with a loving God,<sup>41</sup> were more able to turn to God when distressed,<sup>42</sup> and experienced greater awareness of God.<sup>43</sup>

Granqvist and Hagekull clarified the situation by offering a revision to the correspondence hypothesis. They suggested that individuals with secure attachment histories and those with insecure histories arrive at their religiousness via different pathways. Citing research that suggests that secure attachment aids the transmission of parental values, they propose that in cases of high parental religiousness those with secure attachment histories will end up with higher levels of religiousness than those with insecure histories. On the other hand, in the case of low parental religiousness, individuals with secure attachments will end up with similarly low levels of religiousness, while those with insecure attachment histories will develop higher levels of religiousness. The underlying process by which secure individuals arrive at their level of religiousness is a gradual socialization. In contrast, the process for insecure individuals is more emotionally based. It is motivated by an unmet emotional need

<sup>40</sup> Kirkpatrick and Shaver, "Attachment Theoretical Approach", *passim*.

<sup>41</sup> L. A. Kirkpatrick, "God as a Substitute Attachment Figure: A Longitudinal Study of Adult Attachment Style and Religious Change in College Students", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 9 (1998): 961-73. P. Granqvist, and B. Hagekull, "Religiosity, Adult Attachment, and Why 'Singles' Are More Religious", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2000): 111-23.

<sup>42</sup> A. Birgegard and P. Granqvist, "The Correspondence between Attachment to Parents and God: Three Experiments Using Subliminal Cues", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30, no. 9 (2004): 1122-35.

<sup>43</sup> D. F. Reinert, "Spirituality, Self-Representations, and Attachments to Parents: A Longitudinal Study of Roman Catholic College Seminarians", *Counseling and Values* 49 (2005): 226-38.

for security and therefore is less stable and more likely to change suddenly.<sup>44</sup>

This clarification has proved useful and has held up in empirical findings. Studies have found that the religiousness of those reporting secure attachment is more stable over time and more likely to correspond to the religiousness of their parents. Conversely, the religiousness of those reporting insecure attachment are found to be more motivated by emotional needs, more unstable in both directions (conversion and apostasy), and is less well correlated with the religiousness of parents.<sup>45</sup>

While it seems that insecure attachment creates a stronger emotionally based need for connection with God, those with a secure attachment style are more emotionally satisfied by their relationship with God.<sup>46</sup> For instance, Kirkpatrick and Shaver found that subjects with a secure attachment to God reported less anxiety, depression, physical illness, and higher life satisfaction than those with insecure attachments to

<sup>44</sup> P. Granqvist and B. Hagekull, "Attachment: Profiling Socialized Correspondence and Emotional Compensation", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (1999): 254-73.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. See also P. Granqvist and B. Hagekull, "Seeking Security in the New Age: On Attachment and Emotional Compensation", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 3 (2001): 527-45; P. Granqvist, "Attachment and Religiosity in Adolescence: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Evaluations", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 2 (2002): 260-70; P. Granqvist, "Building a Bridge between Attachment and Religious Coping: Tests of Moderators and Mediators", *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2005): 35-47.

<sup>46</sup> W. C. Rowatt and L. A. Kirkpatrick, "Dimensions of Attachment to God and Their Relation to Affect, Religiosity, and Personality Constructs", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002): 637-51; Reinert, "Spirituality, Self-Representations, and Attachments", *passim*; R. Beck, "God as a Secure Base: Attachment to God and Theological Exploration", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 125-32.

God.<sup>47</sup> TenElshof and Furrow found that subjects reporting secure attachment style scored higher on faith maturity.<sup>48</sup> In an interesting study using the "Attachment to God Inventory", Beck found that secure attachment to God enabled individuals to engage in greater "theological exploration" and express greater tolerance for different religious groups.<sup>49</sup> While these individuals expressed greater openness and exploration in their spiritual journey than those with an insecure God-attachment, they also reported less anxiety and distress regarding their path. Furthermore, despite their greater openness and tolerance, these secure subjects were more likely than insecure individuals to endorse core Christian teachings, demonstrating greater orthodoxy.

In a somewhat related study, Granqvist and Hagekull found that New Age spirituality is primarily an emotionally based spirituality, and as such draws disproportionate numbers of persons with insecure attachments.<sup>50</sup> In this study, New Age spirituality was negatively related to attachment security. Elsewhere, Granqvist and Dickie report involvement in New Age spirituality was associated with disorganized (unresolved) states of mind on the Adult Attachment Inventory.<sup>51</sup> We now turn to a focus on the issue of attachment and unbelief.

<sup>47</sup> Kirkpatrick, and Shaver, "Attachment Theoretical Approach", *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> J. K. TenElshof and J. L. Furrow, "The Role of Secure Attachment in Predicting Spiritual Maturity of Students in a Conservative Seminary", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28 (2000): 99-108.

<sup>49</sup> Beck, "God as a Secure Base".

<sup>50</sup> Granqvist and Hagekull, "Seeking Security in the New Age".

<sup>51</sup> P. Granqvist and J. R. Dickie, "Attachment Theory and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence", in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, ed. P. L. Benson, et al. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2006), pp. 197-210. See also P. Granqvist and M. Fransson, "Prospective Links among Unresolved/Disorganized Attachment, Absorption, and

### *Attachment and Unbelief*

In a way, attachment theory, like the defective father hypothesis, predicts both those who will be believers and those who will be unbelievers. But there are some important distinctions. (For this material, I am indebted to Kirkpatrick and also to Granqvist.) Believers are commonly the securely attached children of believers. Unbelievers typically suffer from insecure attachment. However, a significant proportion of unbelievers convert to belief, commonly in a sudden or dramatic manner. The different attachment histories of these two types of believers is probably what William James discussed so thoroughly years ago when, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he described those who had always believed as "The Once Born" and those who had sudden conversions as "The Twice Born".<sup>52</sup> This linkage of prior attachment security or anxiety to the well-known Jamesian distinction is explicitly noted by Granqvist. Atheists with secure attachment should remain atheists, but there is the underlying problem that secure attachment comes from a secure loving parent, especially a father, and this models the Christian and Jewish God. In most cases, this is unlikely to lead to rejecting atheism, but it probably does set up a tolerance for theistic belief in others.

On the other hand, as pointed out to me by my colleague Peter Martin, children raised as atheists have a very high tendency to leave their atheist position as compared to children

New Age Spirituality" (paper presented at the 115th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 2007).

<sup>52</sup> W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902).

raised in other religions. There is research showing that of all "religious groups", atheists have the lowest retention rate, namely, 30%.<sup>53</sup> Other groups showed the following retention rates for children raised in the particular religious group: Congregationalist, 37%; Presbyterian, 41%; Methodist, 46%; Buddhist, 49%; Baptist, 60%; Catholic, 68%; Mormon, 70%; Muslim, 76%; and Hindu 84%. These results, no doubt, are related to various factors such as the social cohesion or coercion of the religious group, but perhaps also to the extent to which different groups have families that produce attachment security or attachment anxiety. The finding with respect to the low atheist retention rate suggests that atheist families are less stable and, on average, produce lower levels of attachment security. I also suspect that atheists are less likely to marry, and to have children if they do.<sup>54</sup>

I continue with our topic by quoting and summarizing from Kirkpatrick's treatment of the relation between atheism and the dismissive-avoidant attachment style. But first let us note that Kirkpatrick is not a believer. He appears to be something of an agnostic or skeptic. Nevertheless, he did an excellent job of summarizing how insecure attachment, implicitly a bad father relationship, relates to unbelief. He wrote:

People who classified themselves as secure were significantly more likely than those classified as avoidant to view God as more loving, less controlling, and less distant/

<sup>53</sup> This finding and related material is discussed by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate in "The Reverts: Catholics Who Left and Came Back" (blog), June 19, 2012, <http://nineteen sixty-four.blogspot.com/2012/06/reverts-catholics-who-left-and-came-back.html>. See also P.E. Martin, *Atheism Quantified: Empirical Findings from the Social Sciences* (ms. in preparation, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> These suggestions about atheist families and marriage rates are, of course, subject to empirical test.

inaccessible. Avoidant persons were significantly less religiously committed than secure persons, and were more likely to classify themselves as agnostic than other groups. . . . [R]esults were later replicated in two unpublished studies I conducted at the University of South Carolina.<sup>55</sup>

Other quite relevant information, again from Kirkpatrick, includes his reference to a study by Bradley Strahan, who replicated some of the above findings among students at a church-affiliated college in Australia. Strahan found avoidant respondents scored substantially lower than other groups on the item "I know for sure that God cares for me." In his study, the dismissive or avoidant group also scored the lowest on intrinsic religiousness—that is, genuine religious commitment—though in this sample this result was significant only among male students.<sup>56</sup> Thus, there is appreciable evidence for religious unbelief to be associated with a dismissive or avoidant type of response.

Kirkpatrick also cited a much earlier study by Vetter and Green,<sup>57</sup> who sampled 350 members of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, to examine possible causes and reasons for their anti-religious attitudes. Only 30 respondents were women, so the findings reported are for the 320 male respondents. Members of this group were disproportionately likely to describe having lost a parent during childhood or to have poor relations with one or both parents. It should also be added that the atheists reported very much higher rates of unhappy childhood and unhappy adolescence than college conservatives or even college

<sup>55</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*, p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> B. Strahan, *Parenting and Religiosity amongst SDA Tertiary Students: An Attachment Theory Approach* (unpublished manuscript, Avondale College, Australia, 1991), cited in *ibid*.

<sup>57</sup> G.B. Vetter and M. Green, "Personality and Group Factors in the Making of Atheists", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 27 (1932): 179–94.

reactionaries.<sup>58</sup> The latter two being probable categories of theistic believers. Kirkpatrick also noted a report by Bruder and a systematic investigation by Caplovitz and Sherrow, who found similar results about parents with respect to apostasy or loss of religious faith in adulthood.<sup>59</sup> The preceding studies did not have direct measures of attachment, but it seems reasonable to assume that losing a parent or having a bad relationship with one or both parents are reliably associated with insecure attachment. Likewise, on average, we assume unhappy childhood and unhappy adolescence are related to bad relationships with parents.

Kirkpatrick goes on to say:

As we saw in a previous chapter, people reporting avoidant adult attachment relationships tend disproportionately to describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, consistent with the notion that people lacking a secure mental model of attachment relationships would be unlikely to (contemporaneously) hold such a model of God or other deities. As an alternative to unbelief, New Age beliefs represent a manifestation of supernatural thinking that does not require such a mental model.<sup>60</sup>

In short, the defective father and insecure attachment hypotheses taken together postulate that whatever might weaken or harm the relationship of a child with his father or parents will in general predispose the child in adulthood to atheism or unbelief or to spiritualist beliefs without a personal God.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>59</sup> E. E. Bruder, "Some Considerations of the Loss of Faith", *Journal of Clinical and Pastoral Work* 1 (1947): 1-10; D. Caplovitz and D. Sherrow, *The Religious Drop-Outs: Apostasy among College Graduates* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), cited in Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*, p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*, p. 133.