

Sociological and Psychological Objections to Theism

(Note: In recent years, a number of social scientists, and evolutionary biologists have devised new theories on the origins of religion. Some are similar to those surveyed below. Others, e.g., Atran, Wilson, Boyer, Guthrie, Dennett and Dawkins) are far advanced beyond them. Here is a link to a site that lists some of these authors and a few of their books.)

http://scienceblogs.com/evolvingthoughts/2007/03/god_and_the_natural_history_of.php

All of these objections are attempts to undermine theism or to explain it away. Doing that is not the same as refuting theism. They are attempts to drastically weaken the inclination to believe theism by explaining theism's historical, social and psychological origins and by explaining the role it plays in social and psychological life. Religion can be understood as a type of natural social phenomenon alongside Art, Cooking, Agriculture, Music, etc. Like these, religion has a history. It originated from natural (biological, social, psychological) circumstances and developed in particular ways. Its present day forms are contingent on the factors that led to its origins and development. Had any of these been different, the present forms of religion would have been different.

Such naturalistic explanations of religion seem to be a promising way of explaining the existence of a large variety of religions. Unlike these other social phenomena, religions include world-views: a collection of doctrines that purport to contain the truth about many things that matter greatly to human beings.

What if these doctrines can be explained as beliefs that originated and developed from certain basic early human needs, feelings, emotions and desires? Would such naturalistic explanations of religious beliefs show that they are not reasonable for present-day educated, rational people? If not, what, if anything, is their value?

The following are brief sketches of some of the classic Sociological/Psychological theories of religion.

* Auguste Comte's theory of religion

Theism is a stage in the historical progression of human thought from superstitious beginnings to a fully mature stage represented by modern science. Comte maintained there were three major stages in this development: theological, metaphysical and scientific. The **theological** stage is the earliest, beginning with animism, polytheism and then monotheism. These gradually give way to the **metaphysical** stage in which more impersonal abstract explanations in terms of natural forces. In the **scientific** stage, explanations are carried out in the context of controlled experimental research and make no reference to supernatural or unobservable forces, powers or beings. Comte thought that religion is simply a relic of a primitive superstitious past, now irrelevant or even a hindrance to a correct understanding of things and to rational conduct. (See his *Course in Positive Philosophy*, 1830)

* Emil Durkheim's Theory

The essential feature of religion is a sense of awe in the presence of a higher power. This sense of awe is not caused by a deity but by the moral authority of one's society. Society's moral authority impresses itself so powerfully on children through its rituals, customs and taboos that children perceive it as something transcending the world. God is an imaginary, mythical being.

"He" is invented unconsciously in the process of social evolution. By thinking of this being as the source of all social authority, members of the society thereby strengthen the bonds of their society.

Some contemporary sociologists refrain from speaking of social structures and circumstances as causing religious beliefs the way Durkheim did. Instead they collect evidence for correlations between social circumstances like food shortages, natural disasters, etc. and religious beliefs and practices. This approach is, however, clearly intended by these sociologists to imply causal connections between these phenomena.

(See Durkheim's *Elementary forms of the Religious Life*, 1965. A recent attempt at explaining religion in a way that resembles Durkheim's approach has been offered by social anthropologist I. M. Lewis in his 1989 book *Ecstatic Religion*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.)

* Karl Marx's Theory of Religion

Based on his doctrine of **economic determinism**, Marx explicitly maintained that there were causal connections between social/economic circumstances of society and its religious beliefs. Indeed, Marx maintained that all human belief-systems and social forms are determined by their society's economic means of production and exchange. When these change, so do the belief-systems, including religious beliefs. Religion's belief in a transcendent power that promises security and happiness in the next life is a fiction invented because of the sense of alienation from life of those who work under the control of those who own the means of production. In this sense, religion is like a drug, such as opium, which serves the interests of the ruling classes by keeping the masses submissive to authority. Marx maintained that it is an enemy of the oppressed classes, to be abandoned in a socialistic, classless society liberated from economic oppression.

(see, for example *Theses on Feuerbach* and (with F. Engels) *The Communist Manifesto*.)

See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>

* Feuerbach's Theory of Religion

Marx patterned his theory of religion on a somewhat different, earlier theory of Feuerbach. Feuerbach maintained that religion, especially theism, is a psychological illusion, a projection of our own mental image of ourselves, an image of a human-like being vastly different from human beings: perfect, almighty, holy, eternal, etc. This is an illusion like those that often occur in the lives of children, an objectifying of infantile needs and wishes. These illusions are caused by the insecurities, fears, and disappointments of life. Such illusions began in prehistoric times and gradually became woven into the fabric of social tradition. (See, for example *The Essence of Christianity*, 1854. For a recent theory similar to Feuerbach's, see Stewart Guthrie's 1993 book, *Faces in the Clouds* [Oxford University Press] Guthrie updates Feuerbach's idea that anthropomorphic thinking is at the core of religious belief. Guthrie supports this idea with recent work in cultural Anthropology).

See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>

* Freud's Theory of Religion

Sigmund Freud's theory is also similar to Feuerbach's. According to Freud, the difficulties, mysteries and dangers of life in primitive societies of prehistoric times made people keenly aware of their weakness and vulnerability. Religion in its earliest forms is an attempt to deal with powers of nature that are beyond the understanding of prehistoric peoples. They did this by imagining these powers to be personal beings who, like human beings, plan and scheme and do evil things to one another. This idea leads people to try dealing with these powers by means of giving gifts, praise, bargaining with them, dedication to their service, etc.

Freud points out that many of the difficulties of life are caused not by nature but by the restrictions imposed by society on its members. Societies impose restrictions on what its members may do to obtain desired objects and pleasure and it requires that its members work in order to contribute to the wellbeing of others. Since human beings are by nature security-seeking, (sexual) pleasure-seeking, work-hating organisms, this results in great dissatisfaction with the conditions of life. This dissatisfaction is, however, the price of civilized life. The more complex civilized life becomes, the more frustrated human beings become. One way of dealing with this anxiety and frustration is violence. Another way is to channel one's sexual energy into such activities as art or science.

Religion, according to Freud, is another way of coping with frustration and anxiety. But, he argued, it is a very poor way of coping with these things. People imagine a human-like being based on their infantile experience of their own fathers, and attribute vastly greater characteristics to a divine father, a being who is imagined to always care about, protect and love them, thus providing a sense of safety and of being loved which, because of the greatness of the divine father, can be absolutely relied upon, at

least in the life to come. God is not a mental projection of society but of our own fathers. This is a mass delusion, a universal neurosis of humanity according to Freud. It is a condition that needs to be *cured* rather than rationally refuted. For one thing, the nature of work must be changed so that it can be a source of satisfaction rather than something to be dreaded. For another, some restrictions on sources of sexual satisfaction must be lifted and the guilt associated with them removed. (See, for example, *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and its Discontents*. For a recent attempt at a psychoanalytic theory of religious belief, see D. M. Faber, *The Psychological Roots of Religion*)