

2 On Learning When Not to Refute Atheism

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud for devotional reading! The idea is strange, even weird. But our trio has at least one conspicuous advantage over the authors we more easily turn to for spiritual edification: Because they write in the language of psychology and sociology, it is easier to see that they are talking about real people in the real world.

But our trio has an even more conspicuous disadvantage. They are atheists. Worse, they are militant atheists. Worse yet, they are among the most influential and widely read atheists of our time. Few writers can claim to have contributed as deeply and decisively to the secular humanism that permeates the world we live in. It is "out there" shaping the way "they" think and act, and it is "in here" shaping the way we think and act, even in our battles with secular humanism. And they have contributed to the spread of this virus more than almost anyone else. How can we possibly come to think of them as God-given instruments of our own cleansing and renewal as individual Christians and as the church? How can we be enabled to recognize in the diatribes of these enemies of the faith the painful truth about ourselves?

I believe the final answer to this question is found in recognizing the profound parallel between the critique of religion in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and the critique of religion found in the Bible. Faith as fraud? Devotion as deception? These are strong charges, but modern atheism is not the first to make them. What about Amos, whose God cannot stand the music offered in his praise (Amos 5:23)? What about Isaiah (Second or Third), for whom "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6)? And what about Jesus, who considers the most pious people of his day "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27) and the temple run by the chief priests a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17)?

We need only recall Jesus' critique of the Pharisees, Paul's critique of works righteousness, James's critique of cheap grace, and the Old Testament prophetic critiques on which these are based to be reminded that biblical faith has built into it a powerful polemic against certain kinds of religion, even if they are practiced in the name of the one true God. These biblical diatribes against false religion are addressed to the covenant people of God in their worship (as they think) of the God of the covenant; indeed, in the case of James and Paul, these sharp critiques are addressed to the Christian church.¹ They cannot be neutralized by appeals either to metaphysical orthodoxy or to ritual rectitude and zeal or to the combination of sound doctrine and proper worship.

But perhaps the most frightening critique of instrumental religion in the Bible is the portrayal of Jesus' own disciples in the Gospel narratives. I am not referring here to the prayerlessness that made the power over evil spirits that Jesus gave them useless (Mark 9:14-29), the insensitivity with which they scolded parents who brought their children to Jesus (10:13-16), the overconfidence with which Peter denied that he would deny Jesus (14:27-31), the lethargy that made it possible for Peter, James, and John to sleep through Jesus' agony in Gethsemane (14:32-42), the cowardice they showed when "they all forsook him and fled" (14:50), or even the disloyalty with which Peter eventually denied even knowing the one he had confessed as Messiah (14:66-72).

These are all signs of weakness, evidence that the faith of the disciples had the awkward habit of running out of gas at crucial moments. But there is also evidence that their faith had a venal quality to it, that even when it was present it was corrupted by instrumental interests. We see this on the three occasions when Jesus tried to tell them of the suffering and death awaiting him in Jerusalem:

Mark 8:27-9:1 Immediately after Peter's dramatic confession, "You are the Christ," Jesus speaks of his suffering and death. Peter rebukes him, but Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." The subsequent episodes suggest that it is not cowardice but ambition that speaks here. If Jesus is the Messiah, Peter is in line for a top job in the new administration.

Mark 9:30-41 Again Jesus tries to tell the disciples what lies ahead, but they are unable to understand and afraid to ask about it.

1. See the fascinating suggestion by Juan Luis Segundo that James and Paul can be harmonized on the basis of their complementary critiques of religion. *Faith and Ideologies*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), pp. 120-30.

What do they find to talk about in the episode that Mark and Luke record next? They have a debate about which of them is the greatest. Who will have the most prestigious positions in the kingdom? And to keep the inner circle conveniently small, they try to silence a man who is casting out demons in Jesus' name, "because he was not following us."

Mark 10:32-45 Jesus tries again. James and John respond by coming forward with a painfully honest confession of what motivates their discipleship: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." The text does not say which of the two brothers wanted to be Secretary of State and which one Secretary of Defense, but it does tell us that the other ten disciples were very upset at this attempt to get an inside track on the spoils of victory.

It is in these texts that Jesus' profoundest teachings about the meaning of discipleship occur. He speaks of self-denial, cross-bearing, servanthood, losing one's life for the sake of the gospel, and giving one's life for others. The contrast between his understanding of what it means to be a bearer of the kingdom and the disciples' self-centered discipleship is as powerful a critique of instrumental religion as anything to be found in Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche.

But because their critique of religion is so deeply biblical, in spite of their own unbelief, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche can help us to recover the meaning of the biblical critique of religion if we will let them. The Spirit that speaks to the church also blows where it will. Is it possible that the Spirit would speak to the church through its worst enemies?

We can more clearly see the powerful parallel between Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, on the one hand, and Amos, Jeremiah, Jesus, James, and Paul, on the other, if we become more precise about the nature of the atheism being recommended for our devotional meditation. For it is not every form of modern atheism that I have in mind. To focus on Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud requires a simultaneous broadening and narrowing of the meaning of "atheism."

"Atheism" can be used of religious unbelief in a broad and inclusive sense. It thus includes both the atheist proper, who claims to know that God does not exist, and the agnostic, who, with a kind of Socratic ignorance, claims only that we do not or cannot know whether God exists. Further, atheism is no longer limited to the issue of God's mere existence, but also includes major claims about the nature and activity of God. Nor are its negations limited to the propositional content of the religious life. They extend from religious theory to religious practice with the claim that the liturgical, devotional, and ethical prac-

tices of the religious life are rationally impermissible or at best unwarranted, in either case irrational.

There is a narrowness, however, that corresponds to this broadness of usage. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud represent a type of atheism different from the atheism that has dominated European philosophy of religion from at least the time of Gaunilo through Hume and Kant and that continues to this day to hold center stage in Anglo-American discussion. This atheism we can call "evidential atheism." It is nowhere better summarized than in Bertrand Russell's account of what he would say to God if the two were ever to meet and if God were to ask him why he had not been a believer: "I'd say, 'Not enough evidence. God! Not enough evidence!'"²

By contrast, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have been called the masters of the school of suspicion.³ What unites them in spite of important and possibly irreconcilable differences is their joint practice of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behavior and our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown. While our trio develops and applies the hermeneutics of suspicion with primary emphasis, respectively, in the spheres of political economy, bourgeois morality, and psycho-sexual development, they also each subject the religion of Christendom to the critique of suspicion.

This suspicion is to be distinguished from skepticism, which gives rise to evidential atheism. Skepticism is directed toward the elusiveness of things, while suspicion is directed toward the evasiveness of consciousness.⁴ Skepticism seeks to overcome the opacity of facts, while suspicion seeks to uncover the duplicity of persons. Skepticism addresses itself directly to the propositions believed and asks whether there is sufficient evidence to make belief rational. Suspicion addresses itself to the persons who believe and only indirectly to the propositions believed. It seeks to discredit the believing soul by asking what motives

2. Quoted by Alvin Plantinga in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 17-18.

3. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32. This is without doubt the best book in English on Freud, but it is heavy going since it presupposes considerable knowledge of Freud and the philosophical tradition. Perhaps the best general introduction is Philip Rieff's. See below, p. 34 n. 5.

4. Cf. Ricoeur, p. 33.

lead people to belief and what functions their beliefs play, looking for precisely those motives and functions that love darkness rather than light and therefore hide themselves. Where Hume and Kant challenge the soundness of the arguments for the existence of God, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud seek to show how theistic belief functions both to mask and to fulfill forms of self-interest that cannot be acknowledged.

While skepticism (along with evidential atheism) has its origins in Platonic-Cartesian doubt, suspicion arises from Francis Bacon's critique of the Idols of the Tribe and Cave. "The human understanding is no dry light," writes Bacon, "but receives an infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called '*sciences as one would.*' For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes." With reference to impatience, hope, superstition, arrogance, and pride, Bacon comments, "Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections colour and infect the understanding." This leads to the advice that every seeker of truth adopt the rule "that *whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is to be held in suspicion.* . . ."⁵

The style is different, to be sure, but Schopenhauer clearly makes the same point when he says that by will he does not mean a power guided by knowledge and under the direction of reason. Instead, he says, we should think of the will by analogy with blind instinct, which uses reason as its instrument. Reason gives fictitious accounts of our behavior for the sake of moral appearances, or, even better, under the guidance of the will becomes entirely unable to notice unwelcome facts about the self. In short, the will is substance and master, the intellect only accident and servant.⁶

In his masterful book on Freud, Paul Ricoeur makes the point with similar generality. Suspicion is necessary to keep before us "the nonautonomy of knowledge, its rootedness in existence, the latter being understood as desire and effort," that is, as the will and affections of which Bacon and Schopenhauer speak. "Thereby is discovered not only the unsurpassable nature of life, but the interference of desire with intentionality, upon which desire inflicts an invincible obscurity, an ineluctable partiality."⁷

5. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, XLIX, LVIII, emphasis added.

6. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), I, 111, 114, 292, 368-69; II, 126-28.

7. This corruptibility of knowledge means that "representation obeys not

As we shall see in more detail, Freud sees dreams and neurotic symptoms as the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes. He then suggests that religious beliefs are like dreams and religious practices like neurotic symptoms. In both cases the claim is that we can neither understand nor properly evaluate the belief or behavior in question until we discover the hidden drives and motives that shape them. In other words, suspicion easily transfers its critique from beliefs to practices.

The resulting evaluation of the religious life is as a whole devastating for at least two reasons. First, to an even somewhat impartial observer the critique seems all too true all too much of the time. The prominence of various self-serving motives in our piety, or at least in that of others, is all too easy to notice. Who can fail, for example, to see the self-deception in the Afrikaner attempt to portray apartheid as a divine mandate or in the "white man's burden," "manifest destiny," and "anti-Communist" theologies that have shaped the colonial domination and even extermination of indigenous populations in North, Central, and South America? Or who can fail to notice the instrumental character of the piety of the politicians, especially at election time? Do they serve God for nought (Job 1:9)?

Second, by its nature suspicion discredits the believer and the believing community even if their beliefs should turn out to be true and their practices in themselves good. Even orthodoxy becomes idolatrous when belief in the triune God serves to sanctify the flaunting of his purposes in the world. The God of the Bible repudiates metaphysical compliments, however orthodox, ritual tributes, however splendid, and moral rectitude, however rigorous, when they are set in the context of instrumental religion, offered to a god we hope to domesticate.

So it is not surprising that almost invariably our first reaction to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is to seek to refute or discredit them. It is comforting to think (though at this reference to comfortable thoughts suspicion begins to get suspicious) that Marx can be blamed for the Soviets, that Nietzsche can be blamed for the Nazis, and that American (scientific) psychology treats Freud as beyond the pale.

only a law of intentionality, which makes it the expression of some object, but also another law, which makes it the manifestation of . . . desire. It is because of the interference of the latter expressive function that representation can be distorted." This interference and this distortion are what call for the hermeneutics of suspicion, "an exegesis of the desires that lie hidden in that intentionality." Ricoeur, pp. 457-58.

While this temptation is largely a defensive reaction to the exposé suspicion is likely to generate, it gains the appearance of legitimacy from a failure to distinguish the two kinds of atheism. No doubt the proper response of Christian thinkers to evidential atheism is to seek to refute it. This can be done by trying to show that there is, in fact, sufficient evidence to warrant religious beliefs and practices rationally. Or it can be done by challenging the way in which the evidentialist demands evidence.

I shall not discuss the relative merits of these strategies here.⁸ My thesis here is that an entirely different response is called for by the atheism of suspicion. The first task of Christian thinkers as they face the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is not to refute or discredit them. It is to acknowledge⁹ that their critique is all too true all too much of the time and to seek to discover just where the shoe fits, not "them" but ourselves.

In short, I am calling on the philosophers, theologians, and above all the pastors and lay teachers of the Christian community (1) to be the prophetic voices that challenge the church to take seriously the critique of religion generated by suspicion and (2) to lead the way in using it as an aid to personal and corporate self-examination. The emphasis of Christian spirituality on personal self-examination and the emphasis of Hebrew prophecy on corporate self-examination make it possible to speak of the *religious uses of modern atheism* when we speak of the atheism of suspicion.

8. I am willing to predict, however, that the recent challenge of "Reformed" epistemology to evidentialism as such is likely to be as central to the discussion of evidential atheism for the foreseeable future as discussion of invisible gardeners was a few decades ago. A clear and powerful version of this challenge is to be found in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*. On the problems posed for "Reformed" epistemology by the hermeneutics of suspicion, see my essay "Sin as an Epistemological Category," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 200-226.

9. Since the hermeneutics of suspicion is concerned with the processes by which we manage not to notice things of which we are by no means unaware, questions of knowledge can never be separated from questions of acknowledgment. Thus Mike Martin defines self-deception as "the purposeful or intentional [but not deliberate] evasion of fully acknowledging something to oneself." *Self-Deception and Morality* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 6. Cf. p. 13, where Martin links acknowledging with admitting or confessing. With similar voluntarist overtones, Karl Barth relates faith not as opinion in relation to knowledge (*epistēmē/Wissenschaft*) but as acknowledgment in relation to knowledge. Because revelation comes to us from without and beyond our capacities, "Knowledge in this case means acknowledgment. And the utterance or expression of this knowledge is termed confession." *Church Dogmatics* I/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), pp. 172-73.

When we have eliminated the logs of self-deception from the theory and practice of our own piety, then we can seek to correct the specks of error in the theories of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Matt. 7:1-5).¹⁰ Perhaps, we may hope, there will no longer be the need to do so, our lives having already refuted them more effectively than our arguments ever could.

10. Our tendency to admit that we are not without fault while insisting that their errors are surely greater and more dangerous than our own identifies us as the hypocrites to whom Jesus addresses these words.

the concepts of rights and justice but a broad spectrum of our moral concepts that can be labeled moral fictions. Although MacIntyre does not use the concept of irony in this connection, we will best understand him if we think of moral fictions as concepts whose use is ironical but is not known to be so by those who use them. Irony in its simplest form involves a discrepancy between the purported (official, manifest) meaning and the actual (operative, latent) use of discourse. The refrain from Mark Antony's funeral oration is a familiar example: "Brutus is an honorable man."⁸ In its "official" meaning the statement praises Brutus, but it actually functions to raise doubts and eventually to accuse.

Similarly, according to MacIntyre, key concepts in contemporary moral discourse often claim to offer objective and impersonal criteria while their actual use is that of rhetorical manipulation in the service of unavowed interests. In the modern world, moral causes typically "offer a rhetoric that serves to conceal behind the masks of morality what are in fact the preferences of arbitrary will and desire. . . ."⁹ Thus the rhetoric of revolution is often the venting of hatred and resentment, the rhetoric of property rights is often a thinly veiled defense of economic privilege, and the rhetoric of family is often an ironic expression of racism or homophobia.

The difference between this irony and that of Mark Antony is that Antony's is fully conscious and intentional, while the former conceals the truth from those who speak ironically (and possibly from no one else, as in the case of Mabel and Frederic). MacIntyre thus comes down clearly on the "un-" side of Dworkin's "consciously or unconsciously" and the "or not" side of Dworkin's "whether they recognize it or not." *Moral fictions are, to repeat, concepts whose use is ironical but is not known to be so by those who use them.*

8. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act III, scene ii.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 69. See chapters 6 and 9 for the full discussion. MacIntyre's thesis "that all rational vindications of morality manifestly fail and that therefore belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalisations" (p. 111, emphasis added) suggests that suspicion comes to the fore and moral fictions are more easily unmasked where confidence in demonstrable objective truth is in decline. But if, as sometimes seems the case, he also wants to suggest that periods of skepticism and epistemological relativism are what give rise to the false consciousness that suspicion seeks to expose, this is doubtful. Belief in truth that is at once objective and discoverable provides fertile soil for rationalization. See my essay "Orthodoxy and Inattention," *Reformed Journal* 30/1 (January 1980), pp. 13-15.

4 Religious Fictions Too?

The lesson that Mabel's sisters and moral philosophy seek to teach us is that our morality can easily do less to expose our faults than to blind us to them. But our theme is religion rather than morality. Are there religious fictions as well as moral fictions? Is Martin Buber right when he says, in agreement with Luther and Barth, that just as "there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can" so also "religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God"?¹

That there are such religious fictions is precisely what Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud claim. They are not the first, however, to direct the critique of suspicion toward religion. Their claim to fame in the present context is not the originality of their ideas but the impact they have given to those ideas. A brief look at an earlier version of their project will provide the final preparation for our exploration of the religious uses of their modern atheism.

David Hume is best known for his philosophical skepticism, and this is true in his philosophy of religion as well. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and in sections X and XI of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he asks the familiar questions about whether there is sufficient evidence to provide rational support for belief in God and miracles. His skeptical answers to these questions, along with Kant's more comprehensive but similar project, shook the foundations of both the deists, who wanted to find a religion within the limits of reason alone, and the orthodox, who wanted to establish as much as possible on the basis of general revelation, understood as rational proof, and leave as little as possible dependent upon faith in biblical special revelation.

1. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 18.

But in his lesser-known *The Natural History of Religion* Hume turns from skepticism to suspicion. There he distinguishes the questions "concerning [religion's] foundation in reason" from those "concerning its origin in human nature."² He gives skeptical answers to the questions about the foundation of religion in reason in his most familiar writings on religion. But the questions concerning religion's origin in human nature give rise to the hermeneutics of suspicion in the *Natural History*.

Questions of origin turn out to be, in the first instance, questions of motive. Belief in an "invisible intelligent power" to whom prayers and sacrifices could be directed does not arise from "speculative curiosity" or "the pure love of truth." To lead people's attention beyond the immediacy of the here and now, "they must be actuated by some passion, which prompts their thought and reflection; some motive, which urges their first inquiry." Such motives include "the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, and appetite for food and other necessities."³ In short, the originating motive for the religious life is the hopes and fears of ordinary life, especially the fears.

The hopes and fears that come to our attention in this way are not, at least not primarily, those that have been fashioned in the school of moral ideals. They are rather the hopes and fears of more or less immediate self-interest. Hume sees the "selfish view" they express at the heart of "idolatry or polytheism."⁴ But since the negative effects that Hume sees stemming from this "selfish view" belong to popular religion as such and are not limited to polytheism, it appears that Hume is working toward a definition of idolatry or superstition — he uses the terms interchangeably — that depends more on the motivation of the believing soul than on the propositional content of belief. For him idolatry resides more in the heart than in the head.

Hume calls our attention to the structure of instrumental religion, the piety that is primarily motivated by the believing soul's self-interest. Like Luther and Barth he describes it as idolatry, superstition, and polytheism, and like Barth he refuses to exclude the practice of

2. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 21. For a contemporary account of origin as precisely what raises suspicions rather than providing hoped-for legitimation, see Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 76-100.

3. Hume, pp. 27-28, 31.

4. Hume, p. 47.

metaphysically and liturgically orthodox Christianity from these descriptions.⁵

The first mark of instrumental religion, on Hume's account, is flattery. Where our relation to someone of superior power is primarily based on our hopes and fears concerning what we might get out of the relationship, the temptation to resort to flattery is all but unavoidable. The believing soul will naturally speak of adoration, but Hume's suspicion detects adulation. The difference is subtle but profound. Real adoration is extraordinarily difficult and rare, because it involves a self-forgetful transcendence of normal self-preoccupation.⁶ Words and deeds of adulation may be externally indistinguishable from those of genuine adoration, but they are in fact exactly the opposite, for in them self-seeking knows nothing about self-forgetfulness. They are religious fictions, ironical hymns, creeds, and rites.

To the degree that Hume's suspicion is well founded on this point, the relation between believer and deity shows itself to be dishonest, founded on the falsehoods of flattery.⁷ Naturally, if the believer is not utterly shameless and cynical, it will be necessary to hide this dishonesty not only from the deity but also from the believing soul. Piety becomes inseparable from self-deception.

The second mark of instrumental religion to which Hume calls our attention reveals that this dishonesty and self-deception are not restricted to the relation between believer and deity. My neighbor becomes its victim as well. Hume notes that idolatrous worship is "liable to this great inconvenience, that any practice or opinion, however barbarous or corrupted, may be *authorized by it*" and that "the greatest crimes have been found in many instances, *compatible with* a superstitious piety and devotion." At the conclusion of his study he finds

5. John Stuart Mill similarly notes that content does not render any doctrine immune from abuse. "But is utility the only creed which is able to furnish us with excuses for evil-doing and means of cheating our own conscience? They are afforded in abundance by all doctrines which recognize as a fact in morals the existence of conflicting considerations, which all doctrines do that have been believed by sane persons." *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), p. 25.

6. No one has shown this more clearly than Gabriel Marcel. He describes a writer for whom admiration was "a humiliating state which he resisted with all his force." In this attitude Marcel detects "a burning preoccupation with self" that would best express itself by asking "but what about me, what becomes of me in that case?" *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964), pp. 48-49. I have argued that true religion involves a "useless self-transcendence" that is the exact opposite of this posture. See *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), chapter 8.

7. Hume, pp. 43, 65-67.

himself forced to ask, "What so pure as some of the morals, included in some theological systems? What so corrupt as some of the practices, to which these systems *give rise*?" And he immediately identifies such systems as "comfortable views."⁸

It is no accident that idolatrous and superstitious religion gives rise to crimes and corrupt practices. For the essence of instrumental religion on Hume's account is the self-seeking that makes the sacred a means to its own ends. Once again it looks as if he is giving a contextual definition of idolatry and superstition as the comfortable views that provide moral and religious legitimation for the barbarous and criminal behaviors which self-interest often generates.

Hume has intolerance and persecution particularly in mind. But the issue is obviously more general than crusades, inquisitions, and pogroms, dramatic as these examples may be. It concerns the origin of religion in human nature. To ask about this origin is at first to ask about the motives of the religious life, and thus about the inwardness of the believing soul. But it is also to ask about the function of the religious life, and thus about the public practices to which religion "gives rise."

Hume's suspicion of religion culminates in this question about the function of faith. Before Marx and Weber he insists that we notice religion's role in legitimizing social practices. On his view the philosophy of religion can be neither serious nor complete until this question is asked: What practices (life-styles, institutions, laws, customs) do these beliefs in fact (that is, in real life) serve to legitimate? And he calls our attention to the fact that religion gives rise to or legitimates social practices either actively, by authorizing them, or passively, merely by being compatible with them. Religion can give rise to anti-Semitism, apartheid, imperialistic nationalism, and revolutionary or counter-revolutionary terrorism either by giving explicit justifications for such practices, or, more subtly, by silent compatibility. In the latter case all that is necessary to legitimate the practices is an understanding that one can be, for example, a good Christian while engaging in them.

The question of the *origin* of religion in human nature is thus a question about both the *wishes* that lead to piety and the *work* that piety does for the faithful. But the question of function is not a second question in addition to the question about motive. For in a context where self-deception is all too real a possibility, function is often the best and sometimes the only clue to motive. We do not discover the real motives that direct our lives by looking to see what seems to be motivating us.

8. Hume, pp. 48, 72, 76, emphasis added.

For wherever there are grounds for suspicion those apparent motives will be false motives; they will be part of the rationalization by which we manage not to notice what is really going on. (Remember Frederic and Mabel!) Only when we find out what role our beliefs actually play in our lives will we discover what our really operative motives are. As Paul Roazen writes with reference to Freud, "It is a basic psychoanalytic rule that the result of an action, whatever the conscious motive, sheds light on the underlying intention; 'in human affairs the effect of an action frequently betrays the motivation of that action.' If religion has led to intolerance and aggression, may it not be that these were the very forces underlying religion in the first place?"⁹

No doubt most of us need help in distinguishing our apparent motives from our operative motives by careful attention to the actual role religion plays in our personal and public lives, thereby identifying the superstitious and idolatrous elements in our piety. Strange as it may still seem, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud may offer us more help for this task of self-examination than almost anyone else.

9. Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 131. The internal quotation is from Kurt Eissler. A good example is found in one of Freud's most famous case studies. The "Rat Man" was faced with a "conflict as to whether he should remain faithful to the lady he loved in spite of her poverty, or whether he should follow in his father's footsteps and marry the lovely, rich, and well-connected girl who had been assigned to him . . . [a conflict] between his love and the persisting influence of his father's wishes." In order to avoid this difficult choice, he fell ill with the obsessional neurosis Freud was treating. "The proof that this view was correct lies in the fact that the chief result of his illness was an obstinate incapacity for work, which allowed him to postpone his education for years. But the results of such an illness are never unintentional; what appears to be the consequence of the illness is in reality the cause or motive of falling ill" (10:198-99, first two sections of italics added, last three Freud's). References to Freud are given in the text by volume and page number in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 24 vols.

5 Freud's Pessimism

Freud believes that religion is false. We will explore this belief briefly in the next chapter. But his best-known discussion of religion is not entitled "The Future of an Error," but *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). With this title he designates suspicion rather than skepticism as his primary mode of critique. Though his positivism entails that religion is without evidential warrant, his focus is on motive and function rather than evidence.¹ His account of the motives that lead to religion and the function it plays in believers' lives revolves around a single concept: consolation. It is his understanding of the nature and urgency of the need for consolation that I refer to in speaking of Freud's pessimism.

The categories developed by Robert Brustein in *The Theatre of Revolt* for interpreting much of modern drama can be helpful in locating that pessimism. Brustein distinguishes three kinds of revolt. "*Messianic revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against God and tries to take His place. . . . *Social revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of the social organism. . . . *Existential revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence."² What distinguishes existential revolt from the other two and makes it a helpful concept for understanding Freud is precisely its pessimism. Where messianic revolt is defiant, existential revolt is resigned. Where social revolt is hopeful, existential revolt is despairing. Resigned despair permeates Freud's thinking.

Thus we cannot disagree with Erik Erikson's suggestion that

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 26, 33, 234-35.

2. Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 16.

Freud's view of life is essentially tragic.³ We should think of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman and Chekhov's three sisters rather than Oedipus and Antigone. For the hero of existential revolt is the antihero, and in spite of the Oedipus complex, we probably gain more insight from Freud into Dostoyevsky's Underground Man than into Oedipus.⁴

Philip Rieff relates Freudian bleakness to the issue of religion. "The permanence of conflict is Freud's leading theme, and part of his hostility to religion stems from an awareness that religion somewhere assumes a fixed point . . . at which conflict is resolved. In contrast, Freud maintains an intractable dualism; self and world remain antagonists, and every form of reconciliation must fail. Indeed, nothing so well represents Freud's own irreligion as his feeling for the irreconcilable."⁵ Thus emerges the distinction between the consolations offered by religious illusions and the resignation implied by scientific truth.⁶

The world that is intractably antagonistic to the self is the dual world of nature and of culture, and religion is to be understood as rooted in the need for help in dealing with these powers (21:21).⁷ Unlike civilization, nature "does not demand any restrictions of instinct from us, she would let us do as we liked; but she has her own particularly effective method of restricting us. She destroys us — coldly, cruelly, relentlessly, as it seems to us, and possibly through the very things that occasioned our satisfaction." After showing herself to us as earthquakes, floods, storms, and diseases, she finally appears as "the painful riddle of death," earning for herself the name of Fate (21:15-16; cf. 29, 72).

Civilization comes on the scene as our ally against the overwhelming and indifferent power of nature. Perhaps it is with Freud in mind that Peter Berger writes, "Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death."⁸ But civilization is as indifferent to the individual's happiness as nature (21:140), and we pay a high price for its assistance. At every turn it demands renunciation

3. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.; New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 280.

4. Brustein, pp. 28-29.

5. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 292.

6. Rieff, pp. 326-27. Cf. Freud, 21:32-33, 145. For references to Freud, see p. 29 n. 9.

7. See previous note.

8. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 52. A similar motif, developed in much greater detail and with explicit reference to psychoanalysis, is found in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

of instincts, and it never hesitates to support its demands with coercion (21:5-11, 95). It demands that we channel large portions of our energy into work, and its primary taboos, those against incest and murder, are signs of the more general restrictions it places on our desire for satisfaction of our sexual and aggressive instincts (21:11-13, 101-15): "Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security" (21:115).

Not only does civilization demand that we negate our aggression by sublimating sexual energy into the aim-inhibited form of friendship and even the irrational and impossible form of universal neighbor love (21:109-11, 143), it also seeks to enforce its demands with the guilt that it helps to shape and that punishes the wish even when the act does not follow. In this way civilization brings about "permanent internal unhappiness" (21:123-28). Thus "guilt is the most important problem in the development of civilization and . . . the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening sense of guilt" (21:134).⁹

Nature and culture are thus the devil and the deep blue sea, the rock and the hard place between which our longings for happiness are caught. But the reference to guilt indicates that the story is not quite as simple as is suggested by the picture of the self over against the worlds of nature and culture. For in guilt culture takes up internal residence to resist and restrict my pursuit of happiness, and it turns out that nature is also as much an internal as an external problem.

Freud develops this more complex and complete account in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933). There he portrays the "poor ego," the I, the self, as serving "three tyrannical masters . . . [:] the external world, the super-ego and the id." The ego, that which I think of as I myself, is "driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, [and] repulsed by [external] reality. . . . If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety — realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id" (22:77-78; cf. 19:56).

We have already noted nature's threats of disaster and death and culture's demands for renunciation of instincts. We need now to look

9. These statements about guilt come from *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), emphasizing a theme Freud says was insufficiently developed in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Freud's formula for civilization's constraints on sex and aggression is the following: "When an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms, and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt" (21:139).

at the ways in which nature and culture become internal threats as id and superego respectively.

✱The id is nature as instinct or drive. With Plato, Freud distinguishes ego and id as reason and passions, and with Hume he notes that reason is the slave of the passions.¹⁰ Thus he pictures the ego as a weak rider on a powerful horse, the id. The energy comes from the horse, the guidance from the rider (22:76-77; 19:25). Or so we would like it to be. Frequently, however, "a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were his own" (19:25). It is with reference to this impotence of the ego that Freud approvingly refers to Groddeck's claim that "we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces" (19:23).¹¹

So dominant is the id and so subordinate the other parts of the self that Freud even speaks of the id as "the whole person" (22:105; cf. 19:24-25). As early as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), before Freud developed the language of id, ego, and superego, he saw instinctual drives as primary and the processes that would direct or restrain them as a secondary overlay (5:603-4).

If the id is nature internalized as instinct or drive, the superego is culture internalized as conscience. As the voice of culture, which can be thoroughly unreasonable, conscience is not to be identified with either the voice of reason or the voice of God. It is rather the voice of violence, and Freud goes out of his way to stress its "extraordinary harshness and severity towards the ego" (19:53).

The cruelty of the superego is especially manifest in the intense feelings of guilt that are so fundamental to obsessional neurosis and melancholia (depression). In the latter case

we find that the excessively strong super-ego . . . rages against the ego with merciless violence, as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person concerned. Following

10. Hume writes, "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 415. Freud accepts the description but does not agree that this is as it ought to be. Like Plato, he sees it as our task to increase the power of reason vis-à-vis the passions. It is his unwillingness to identify reason and the superego that permits him to be as critical of Plato as of Hume.

11. Freud borrows the term "id" from Groddeck and adds in a footnote, "Groddeck himself no doubt followed the example of Nietzsche, who habitually used this grammatical term [*das Es*, the it] for whatever in our nature is impersonal and, so to speak, subject to natural law" (19:23).

our view of sadism we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego. What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death, if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania. (19:53; cf. 22:60-61)

Of course, not everyone experiences suicidal depression. But each of us is, on Freud's view, an ego seeking to preside over an utterly unruly assembly, or, to change the metaphor, trying to mediate negotiations between implacable enemies, the demands of instinctive nature on the one hand and the external pressures of social requirements along with the internal pangs of guilt on the other. Whether we simply think in terms of the self confronting the worlds of nature and culture, or use the more complex model of the ego threatened by external reality (natural and cultural), the id, and the superego, the result is the same. The chances for human happiness are dim.

Freud identifies happiness with pleasure and finds the purpose of life in the pleasure principle. But the program of the pleasure principle "is at loggerheads with the whole world. . . . There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it. One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation'" (21:76).

This pessimism is not quite as absolute as it seems. Freud acknowledges a "reduced sense" in which happiness is possible and thus a problem or task for the ego (21:83). The goal of therapy, in fact, is to give the patient's ego greater freedom, to enable it to move, "from perceiving instincts to controlling them, from obeying instincts to inhibiting them. . . . Psycho-analysis is an instrument to enable the ego to achieve a progressive conquest of the id" (19:50n.1, 55-56). Hence the watchword of therapy: "Where id was, there ego shall be" (22:80).

We must not forget, however, that the happiness of the therapeutically empowered ego is a "reduced" happiness, not at all the fulfillment of the pleasure principle. It is a bad situation made a little better, as if slaves were no longer to be whipped or prisoners were to get better food. But there is no talk of emancipation or pardon. Thus Freud never really moves beyond the very early formulation in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), addressed to patients wondering about the efficacy of therapy: "But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness" (2:351).

6 Freud's Scientism

If Freud is the existential rebel who reacts to this human condition with resignation and despair, the believing soul seeks in religion a far deeper consolation. Freud is content to seek the minor ameliorations of the slave who is no longer whipped, though still a slave, or the prisoner who gets better food, while still in prison. But the religion of the "common man" is a

system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the other, assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and will compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he suffers here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father. Only such a being can understand the needs of the children of men and be softened by their prayers and placated by the signs of their remorse. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life. (21:74)

Of course, religion is not the only human strategy for dealing with the human predicament described in the previous chapter:

Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures. 'We cannot do without auxiliary constructions,' as Theodor Fontane tells us. There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and

intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable. (21:75; cf. 16:372)

Actually Freud proceeds to identify seven "auxiliary constructions" in wide use: (1) chemical intoxicants, which serve as a "drowner of cares," (2) yoga techniques to kill off the instincts, (3) work as a displacement or sublimation of aggressive and sexual energy, (4) the illusions of art, which provide temporary escape to another world, (5) delusional negation of reality as in paranoia or religion, (6) unconstrained pursuit of sexual satisfaction, and (7) escape into neurotic illness (21:78-84).¹

It is far from clear how this list of seven maps onto the earlier list of three, but that is hardly important. Freud's view is that all of these painkillers have serious limitations (no emancipation or pardon here), but that for each of us some will work better than others. "There is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved" (21:83).

Actually, Freud is not the latitudinarian that he presents himself as here. In very early personal correspondence he expresses an utterly aristocratic contempt for the "mob," the "common people" who try the first and sixth of the strategies just listed.² But in his mature published writings, it is religion alone to which his personal hostility is directed. Philip Rieff opens his discussion of Freud on religion with the following perceptive paragraph:

It is on the subject of religion that the judicious clinician grows vehement and disputatious. Against no other stronghold of repressive culture are the reductive weapons of psychoanalysis deployed

1. Freud's listing of religion and chemical pain killing as alternative strategies for dealing with the same problem (cf. 21:49) calls to mind Marx's oft-quoted identification of religion with the opium of the masses. We will look at that text later on in its context. Here it is worth noting that Nietzsche sees things the same way. Speaking of Germany he writes that "nowhere have the two great European narcotics, alcohol and Christianity, been abused more dissolutely." *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 507. Cf. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 147.

2. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, one-volume edition by Lionel Trilling and Stephen Marcus (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 122-23. Freud's identification of the "common man" with the "poor" in this letter makes it clear that he has in mind a hierarchy as much economic as cultural. On the positive side, he seems to favor the third and fourth strategies: work — especially his kind of work, science — and art. He quotes Goethe: "He who possesses science and art also has religion; but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion" (21:74n.1).

in such open hostility. Freud's customary detachment fails him here. Confronting religion, psychoanalysis shows itself for what it is: the last great formulation of nineteenth-century secularism, complete with substitute doctrine and cult. . . . What first impresses the student of Freud's psychology of religion is its polemical edge. Here and here alone, the grand Freudian animus, otherwise concealed behind the immediacies of case histories and the emergencies of practical therapeutics, breaks out.³

No doubt there are biographical factors at work here, including the Christian anti-Semitism that Freud experienced from boyhood on. Furthermore, Freud's tolerance extends only to strategies that are themselves tolerant of other strategies, and he does not find this in religion. In the paragraph immediately following his announcement that we must each find our own path to salvation, he writes, "Religion restricts this play of choice and adaptation, since it imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering" (21:84).

But Freud has little to say on either of these points. The brief against belief that he develops at considerable length is rather summarized in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter. There he repudiates the consolations of religion because belief in the Heavenly Father is "so patently infantile, so foreign to reality. . . ." We need to explore these two critiques, which, as we shall see, are quite distinct from each other. The former expresses Freudian suspicion, the latter Freudian skepticism. As I argued in chapter 2, these two types of intellectual assault on religion call for entirely different responses.

It is on epistemological grounds that Freud finds religion "so foreign to reality." His skepticism takes the form of scientism or positivism or empirical verificationism. Geography teaches that "Constance lies on the Bodensee," and a student song continues: "If you don't believe it, go and see" (21:25). Religious beliefs cannot be confirmed in this way. Freud formulates the general point as follows: "But scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves. It is once again merely an illusion to expect anything from intuition and introspection; they can give us nothing but particulars about our own mental life, which are hard to interpret, never any information about the questions which religious doctrine finds it so easy to answer," for ex-

3. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 281.

ample, questions concerning God and immortality (21:31-32). In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) Freud specifically asks whether psychoanalysis entails any specific *Weltanschauung*. No, he says, "as a specialist science . . . it is quite unfit to construct a *Weltanschauung* of its own: it must accept the scientific one. . . . It asserts that there are no sources of knowledge of the universe other than the intellectual working-over of carefully scrutinized observations — in other words, what we call research — and alongside of it no knowledge derived from revelation, intuition or divination" (22:158-59).

Religion is distinguished from the other auxiliary constructions to be picked on by Freud because religion alone makes unwarranted truth claims in the search for happiness. These truth claims are the basis for religion's attempt to prescribe a single path for all and for the deeper ground of "the grand Freudian animus." Thus art, religion, and philosophy may seek to contribute to human happiness in ways that make them rivals of science. But of the "three powers which may dispute the basic position of science, religion alone is to be taken seriously as an enemy" (22:160). For art is content to be illusion and makes no truth claims, while philosophy either restricts itself to the scientific *Weltanschauung* and becomes positivism or makes pretensions to supra-scientific truths but has no significant impact on the great mass of the people.

In the concluding chapter of *The Future of an Illusion* Freud formulates the following objection against his project: "That sounds splendid! A race of men who have renounced all illusions and have thus become capable of making their existence of earth tolerable! I, however, cannot share your expectations. . . . We seem now to have exchanged rôles: you emerge as an enthusiast who allows himself to be carried away by illusions. . . ." (21:51). In reply, Freud seeks to defend his faith in science. "Our God *Λόγος*" is not illusory, he claims. "We believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means of which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life. If this belief is an illusion then we are in the same position as you. But science has given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion" (21:54-55).

Many contemporary philosophers of science have raised questions about the claim that science gives us "knowledge about the reality of the world."⁴ But for the moment we can put such doubts aside. There

4. I have in mind the work of Duhem, Poincaré, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Hanson, and Foucault, among others.

can in any case be no question that scientific "knowledge" increases our power. What Freud fails to notice is that even if science is indeed not an illusion, scientism is another matter entirely. Freud has not given us the logic by which "Science gives us knowledge of reality" becomes "*Nothing but science gives us knowledge of reality.*" It would not make much of a school ditty, but if we append "if you don't believe it, go and see" to either of the formulations of Freudian positivism given three paragraphs before this one, the result is embarrassing for Freud: It is far from clear where one would look for empirical, scientific verification of his claim about science, which turns out itself to be no scientific claim and hence, on Freud's own terms, to give us no knowledge about reality. Freud lacks the sophistication of later positivists who acknowledged that their own dogmatic⁵ formulations were useful nonsense or merely recommendations of policy.⁶

This self-referential refutation of scientism is as familiar as it is forceful. Neither nineteenth-century positivism of truth nor twentieth-century positivism of meaning (logical positivism) has offered a cogent defense against it. My own favorite formulation of the point comes from William James's famous essay "The Will to Believe." He writes that "*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*" A few pages earlier James identifies such a view as "an insane logic."⁷

5. I use "dogmatic" here in two senses. On the one hand it connotes an uncritical acceptance of belief, while on the other it suggests that a belief functions like a religious doctrine. Freud's scientific *Weltanschauung* is the framework for what Rieff refers to as his "substitute doctrine." See p. 40 n. 3 above.

6. See Carl Hempel, "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," in Leonard Linsky, ed., *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952).

7. William James, *Essays on Faith and Morals*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Cleveland: World, 1962), pp. 59, 56.

7 Freud's Suspicion I: *Dreams and Wish Fulfillment*

It is because of Freud's positivism that he finds belief in Providence "so foreign to reality." Insofar as his atheism rests on his scientism it can be classified as skeptical or evidential atheism. As such it deserves to be refuted, and I believe it is best refuted by noting with James what an "insane logic" it practices, what an "irrational rule" it represents. It says, in effect, "Anything my net doesn't catch isn't a fish,"¹ and thereby ends up revealing both its dogmatism and its incoherence.

It is quite a different story when Freud finds belief in a heavenly father to be "so patently infantile." Here we encounter the dimension of Freud's atheism that particularly concerns us, his suspicion. In keeping with the suggestion that we treat suspicious unbelief differently from skeptical unbelief, I will devote much more attention to Freudian suspicion than to Freudian skepticism. The aim of this attention will not be to refute Freud, but to learn to take him seriously.

As "foreign to reality," religion is an error; as "so patently infantile," it is an illusion. We move, therefore, from an epistemological category to a psychological category. Since illusion will be defined in terms of wish fulfillment, and since wish fulfillment is at the heart of Freud's theory of dreams, we can say not only that "*interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind*" in general, but also that it provides the path to understanding Freud's critique of religion in particular (5:608). We must turn our attention briefly to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and to the popular summary of the dream theory in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916-17).

Freud introduces the notion of wish fulfillment while exploring

1. I am indebted to John E. Smith for this helpful formulation.

by his wish in this error is very clear." Indo-Germanic racial superiority and the asexuality of children are also illusions (21:30-31).

Freud is careful to distinguish illusions, in this technical sense of the term, from delusions.

What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions. But they differ from them, too, apart from the more complicated structure of delusions. In the case of delusions, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. Illusions need not necessarily be false. . . . For instance, a middle-class girl may have the illusion that a prince will come and marry her; and a few such cases have occurred. That the Messiah will come and found a golden age is much less likely. . . . To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present enquiry. It is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions. (21:31, 33)

Paul Ricoeur underscores this truth neutrality of the illusion label: "The essential characteristic of illusions is not their similarity to error in the epistemological sense of the word but their relationship with other fantasies and their inclusion within the semantics of desire." This is why "what is involved is *not the truth* of the foundation of religious ideas *but their function* in balancing the renunciations and satisfactions through which man tries to make his harsh life tolerable."⁶

It will not be long before Freud seems to forget this distinction. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, just three years later, he simply identifies religious beliefs with delusions (21:81-85). But, given his careful definition of illusion, we can recognize that he can do so only by combining the suspicion that identifies religious beliefs as illusions with the skepticism that identifies them as errors.⁷ But that skepticism rests on Freud's scientism, his elevation of science from a practice to a *Weltanschauung*. Having already noticed the self-referential contradiction of claiming truth for the unscientific proposition that "Science is the only way to truth," the believing soul is likely at this point to find the temptation to refute Freud all but irresistible once again.

6. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 234-35, emphasis added.

7. Thus when Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo* that "it would be another matter if demons really existed. But we know that, like gods, they are creatures of the human mind . . ." this is a premise and not a conclusion of his psychoanalytic analysis (13:24).

9 On Remembering When Not to Refute Atheism

But once again this temptation should be resisted, though Freud is not invulnerable to critique. Two objections can be raised against his treatment of religious beliefs as illusions.

The first concerns its logic. Freud's critique is an *ad hominem* critique, directed against the believer's believing, not against the believer's belief. He is careful to point out that an illusion is not necessarily an error and may in fact be true. By doing this he avoids the genetic fallacy of discrediting a belief because of the way it comes to be held. "My mother told me so" may not be a very reliable epistemological principle, but many of the things our mothers have told us are in fact true. Up to this point all is in order.

But when Freud suddenly (in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) forgets all about his own carefully drawn distinction between illusions and delusions, he falls prey to the *ad hominem* and genetic fallacies, illegitimately suggesting that we should reject religious beliefs because of some flaw in the believing soul. For the sake of the truth and for the protection of the logically unsophisticated, the believing soul may be more than happy to point out this carelessness on Freud's part and to remind Freud that without his (indefensible) scientism, his suspicion cannot show religious beliefs to be delusory, that is, false.

This objection is well founded. Kant serves as a helpful example. He seeks to free his own moral ideals from precisely this pseudo-refutation, which goes by the name of "realism" in ethics. Those who teach ethics to today's young people will surely have discovered how important and difficult it is to preserve ethical norms from the ultimate put-down, which is: "But people don't really act that way." As if, for example, the sexual revolution had rendered the seventh commandment obsolete. Kant was keenly aware of the problem. We have already

seen (in chapter 3) that his suspicion in the moral realm is much like that of Mabel's sisters. But while he insists that one need not be an "enemy of virtue" but only a "cool observer" to notice that "we everywhere come upon the dear self" trying to put the facade of morality on its egoistic deeds and motives, he insists that the strict imperatives of duty are not in the least bit discredited by this fact. Rather, "reason unrelentingly commands actions of which the world has perhaps hitherto never provided an example and whose feasibility might well be doubted by one who bases everything upon experience; for instance, even though there might never yet have been a sincere friend, still pure sincerity in friendship is nonetheless required of every man. . . ."¹

Just as the validity of moral norms is not affected by the immorality of those who espouse them, so the truth of beliefs is not affected by the irrationality of those who believe them. Ricoeur makes clear the implication of the distinction between illusions and delusions in this regard. He assumes

that psychoanalysis is necessarily iconoclastic, regardless of the faith or nonfaith of the psychoanalyst, and that this "destruction" of religion can be the counterpart of a faith purified of all idolatry. Psychoanalysis as such cannot go beyond the necessity of iconoclasm. This necessity is open to a double possibility, that of faith and that of nonfaith, but the decision about these two possibilities does not rest with psychoanalysis. . . . The question remains open for every man whether the destruction of idols is without remainder; this question no longer falls within the competency of psychoanalysis.²

It is in the very next sentence that Ricoeur makes the point, cited above in chapter 8, that psychoanalysis involves the function rather than the truth of religious beliefs. The suspicion that brings to light the role of wish fulfillment in holding religious beliefs cannot settle the question of their truth value.³

1. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 407.

2. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 230, 235. Cf. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 144-45, 190, 440. Erik Erikson agrees: "Clinical knowledge, then, like any knowledge, is but a tool in the hands of a faith or a weapon in the service of a superstition." Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.; New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 417.

3. Of course, it does not follow that religious beliefs are true just because

The second objection to Freud's talk of religious belief as illusion is psychological. We can call it the *tu quoque* strategy for discrediting Freud, the Latin phrase meaning, in most straightforward terms, "it takes one to know one." Again it may be helpful to begin with an example from ethics rather than with the critique of religion. Suppose a conservative like F. A. Hayek is tired of hearing about justice when he wants to talk about liberty and would like to use suspicion to discredit egalitarian appeals for fairer distribution of society's wealth and other advantages. To this end he first quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., "I have no respect for the passion for equality, which seems to me merely idealizing envy." Then he adds his own commentary: "When we inquire into the justification of these demands, we find that they rest on the discontent that the success of some people often produces in those that are less successful, or, to put it bluntly, on envy. The modern tendency to gratify this passion and to disguise it in the respectable garment of social justice is developing into a serious threat to freedom. . . . It is probably one of the essential conditions for the preservation of [a free] society that we do not countenance envy, not sanction its demands by camouflaging it as social justice. . . ."⁴

In this attempt to unmask the envy that masquerades as justice we recognize the cunning of Mabel's sisters. It is not easy to deny the presence of envy or even, as Nietzsche will suggest, the spirit of revenge in the cries of the wretched of the earth. But it is very easy to turn the tables on Holmes and Hayek. Is it not obvious that all this noise about liberty is but a mask for the greed of those most highly favored by the natural and social lotteries that have distributed both the abilities to do what our society most generously rewards and the rewards themselves, not always without violence? Is it not probably one of the essential conditions for the preservation of a just society that we do not countenance greed, not sanction its demands by camouflaging it as love of liberty?

It is just as easy to play this tit for tat game with Freud. He considers theistic belief to be infantile wish fulfillment, an illusion derived from our sense of helplessness before the indifference of both nature and culture to our happiness. In our helplessness, he believes, we say to

Freud or someone else cannot prove them false. And Freud rightly protests against the notion that we have a right to believe whatever we would like to be true, so long as no one can prove such beliefs false (21:32).

4. F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 85, 93.

ourselves: Wouldn't it be nice if there were a loving heavenly father to take care of us. This is the origin, in the Humean sense, of the biblical God.

But there are very powerful forces at work within us that lead in exactly the opposite direction. God, if there were such a being, would be a power we would envy and an authority we would resent. Wouldn't it be nice, we say to ourselves, if there were no God. We could be in charge without any unsolicited divine interference. Ironically, Freud calls attention to 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 this phenomenon is virtually universal, portraying parents as resented rivals of children, whose death wishes toward their parents are one of the first texts of psychic life to be censored and thereby rendered unconscious.⁵

It begins to look as if *The Future of an Illusion* is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. If the theism of the believing soul is, in psychoanalytic perspective, infantile wish fulfillment, is not Freud's own unbelief equally infantile (Oedipal) wish fulfillment superimposed on adolescent rebellion against all authority? As Dostoyevsky has pointed out, the psychological argument does indeed cut both ways.⁶

It is unquestionably possible to score points against Freud and his atheism of suspicion using either or both of these two strategies. But the title of this chapter and its first eight words suggest that this is a temptation for the believing soul to resist. Why, since it has been conceded that in each case the point is well taken? Because if one's first and primary response to Freud is to try to discredit him, one risks winning the battle and losing the war. Or, to use another military metaphor, one risks winning only Pyrrhic victories in this manner, ending up dead right, which is just as dead as dead wrong.⁷

Consider the setting of the story of the Good Samaritan. It grows out of an exchange between Jesus and a lawyer about eternal life. The

5. For fascinating biographical details and a fuller analysis of Freud's account of children's resentment toward their parents, see my discussion in *God, Guilt, and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), section 3B.

6. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, book XII, chapter X.

7. My mother used to cite the following poetic gem (on occasions that seemed appropriate to her, but never to me):

Here lie the remains of Jonathan Jay,
Killed in maintaining his right of way.
He was right, dead right, as he sped along,
But he's just as dead as if he were wrong.

lawyer, a Pharisee, is able to give the same magnificent twofold summary of the law that Jesus himself gives on another occasion. But when Jesus tells him simply to do this and he will live, he gets defensive. "But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" In itself this is a perfectly legitimate question, and in fact anyone seriously interested in the command of neighbor love is bound to ask it. But in the four simple words "desiring to justify himself" the narrative levels a devastating critique at the Pharisee.⁸

We open ourselves to precisely this same critique when our first response to Freud (or Marx or Nietzsche) is to try to score points against them by either of the two strategies just discussed. With reference to the first I spoke of the believing soul eager to discredit Freud "for the sake of the truth and for the protection of the logically unsophisticated," but the suspicion unavoidably arises that it is more a matter of the desire to justify oneself.

Both objections raise points worthy of being noted. But in the circumstances we discredit ourselves more than our trio of unbelieving brothers by raising these points. For we stand accused by their critique of being Pharisees, of practicing a self-serving religion that is idolatrous by our own standards. And this critique may be true even if (1) our own beliefs are true, and (2) the unbelief of the critics is of suspicious origin with regard to its own motives. If our first response is to defend ourselves by attacking them, we invite the impartial observer to say, "But they, desiring to justify themselves, began to talk about *ad hominem* and genetic fallacies and to turn suspicion against the suspicious."

We can put the same point a little differently. Peter Homans has asked: "Has theology's preoccupation with philosophy in effect obscured its capacity to engage those contemporary modes of thought and experience that are predominantly psychological in character?"⁹ The question is not as innocent as it seems. For it suggests the further question whether theology's preoccupation with apologetics and questions of truth is self-deceptive and defensive, a repression of awkward questions about motive and function. When the believing soul's immediate response to Freud is to insist either that religious beliefs may nevertheless be true or that Freud cannot establish the truth of his own atheism, the suspicion is naturally aroused that this response is not the expression of a disinterested love of truth.

8. Luke 10:29. It is Matthew 22:35 that identifies the lawyer as a Pharisee.

9. Peter Homans, *Theology After Freud* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. x. Cf. pp. xii-xiii.

Just as Jesus taught us, on pain of being hypocrites, to attend to the speck in our neighbor's eye only *after* removing the log from our own, so there will be plenty of time to make the points that need to be made against the atheism of suspicion *after* we have taken its critique seriously.¹⁰ Already we have allowed the exploration of these two objections to distract us from feeling the full force of Freud's theory of illusions, the analogy between dreams and religious beliefs. For while we have been talking about wish fulfillment, we have not been talking about distortion.

10. See above, p. 17 n. 10.

10 *Freud's Suspicion III: Doctrines and Distortion*

From what has been said so far it might seem that Freud develops an analogy between religious beliefs as illusions and daydreams or children's dreams as relatively transparent wish fulfillments. The element of distortion implied by the definition of a dream as a *disguised* fulfillment of a *repressed* wish has not come to the fore. But in Freud's eyes distortion is the very heart of the matter. For he believes that religious beliefs as well are the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes.

In dreams we represent the world to ourselves, not as we have good reason to believe it to be, but simply as our egoistic or erotic desires would like it to be. Then, since we are not proud either of the driving motives or of our willingness to play fast and loose with evidence and truth in the service of those motives, we do our best to hide from ourselves what we have done.

Irma is to blame, Otto is to blame, R. is a simpleton, and N. is a criminal. This is Freud's dream belief (see above, chapter 7) in spite of the fact that he knows (1) that resistance is a normal part of therapy, (2) that he has no reason at all to suspect Otto of using a contaminated syringe, (3) that R. is anything but a simpleton, and (4) that N. has been cleared of the charges brought against him. He is willing to invent and believe slanders against his friends in order to satisfy his own ego. No, I am not to blame. Yes, I will get the appointment.

Freud was closer to being thoroughly shameless in the case of Irma's injection, leaving his shifting of the blame pretty much on the surface. But in his dream about the uncle with a yellow beard we see the distortion involved in repression and disguise. First, Freud distorts reality to make it more to his liking; then, because he is ashamed of this, he distorts the representation that performs this function so as not to notice what he has done. By disguising the wish fulfillment in the

been subordinated to colonial and neo-colonial domination. We are reminded of Freud's own comments on "pious America" as "God's own Country" (21:19). In ironic reversals by which the persecuted become the persecutors, South African blacks and Palestinians are made to suffer today for the cause of Afrikaner culture and the Jewish state, respectively.⁵ There are the many varieties of Islamic Jihad, which bring to mind Hiroshima and Nagasaki (not to mention the current super-power willingness to sacrifice millions of civilians on the altar of national security).⁶ The list goes on and on.

No wonder Bob Dylan writes, "If God's on our side, we'll start the next war."⁷ For in each of these cases, many, if not all, of those willing to make others into nothing but means to their own tribal ends have justified their behavior as that which is required by a sacred cause. In fact, they have followed the Schreber recipe to a T. They have come to see themselves first as threatened by a demonic enemy and then as the specially chosen vehicles of a divine purpose that suspends normal morality and justifies whatever they feel inclined to do. The question is why, if Schreber is plainly paranoid, these other cases are not also seen as paradigms of psychosis.

5. Against the background of these two tragic cases, Nicholas Wolterstorff poses some probing questions about nationalism in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), chapter 5.

6. A passionate analysis of the idolatrous character of this willingness is to be found in Dale Aukerman, *Darkening Valley: A Biblical Perspective on Nuclear War* (New York: Seabury, 1981), especially Part II.

7. As sung by Joan Baez in "Joan Baez: The First Ten Years," two-record set from Vanguard, VSD 6560/1.

13 *The Atheist Dr. Freud as Theologian of Original Sin*

The masters of the school of suspicion are the great secular theologians of original sin. Whether they give prominence to nature (Freud, Nietzsche) or to nurture (Marx), to instinct or to institutions, they vividly portray the deep divergence between human behavior and the moral ideals of Judeo-Christian theism. What is more, they show how deeply entrenched are human cruelty, greed, and the other manifestations of that unlimited self-assertion that, under the name of pride, has been seen by theologians as the heart of all human darkness, the one original sin. In doing this they accomplish what few theologians even attempt: (1) They bring to light the workings of what theologians call sin in the full concreteness of everyday life, and (2) they show how even religious life gets drawn into the service of the sin whose enemy it is supposed to be.

Freud is fully conscious that he plays this role and loves to highlight the agreement between psychoanalysis and religion that we are all miserable sinners (13:72; 9:123).¹ This feature of Freud's thought comes to the foreground as we turn from his analysis of religious beliefs (construed as the analogues of dreams) to his analysis of religious practices (construed as the analogues of neurotic symptoms).² For from

1. Norman O. Brown sees it as the task of psychoanalysis to be "the science of original sin." It is "equipped to study the mystery of the human heart, and must recognize religion to be the heart of the mystery." *Life Against Death* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), pp. 13-14.

2. Ricoeur calls attention to this double structure of Freud's theory of religion in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 231-36. Since Freud's clinical work on neuroses preceded his theory of dreams, and since his first essay on religion developed the parallel between religious and neurotic ceremonials rather than between religious

his earliest essay on religion, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907),³ where he first introduces the crucial concept of "an unconscious sense of guilt" (9:123),⁴ he treats religious behavior, both ritual and moral, as a set of defenses against such guilt and the anxiety that can scarcely be distinguished from it. In order to understand fully Freud's critique of religious rites and righteousness, we need to have before us his own understanding of human sinfulness.

Freud views our innermost self as a "positive Hell" (15:143). Although "little children do not like it" when there is talk of the inborn human inclination to 'badness,' to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well, it is better "that the truth should be told by psychologists rather than that the task should be left to cynics" (21:120; 15:206). That each of us is "a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien" is a truth toward which we will "bow humbly" if we reflect on the atrocities stretching from the invasions of the Huns and the Mongols, through the Crusades, and right up to "the horrors of the recent World War" (21:112). Freud insists that

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to

doctrines and dreams, it might seem that we are working backwards. But it makes sense to look at Freud's account of religious beliefs first, as we have, (1) since for Freud himself, *"The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind"* (5:608; his italics), (2) since in his most comprehensive presentation of psychoanalysis, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, he presents his theory of dreams first, and only then his theory of neurotic symptoms, and (3) since *The Future of an Illusion* is his most widely known discussion of religion.

3. Important elements of the theory that comes to light in this essay are already found in the 1896 essay "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defense." These include (1) the claim that religious anxiety is at work in some obsessional practices, (2) the description of obsessive practices as "ceremonials," and (3) the description of these burdensome ceremonials as "penitential measures" (3:171-74). But the analogy between neurotic and religious ceremonials does not become the thematic focus of attention until the 1907 essay.

4. This concept plays an important role in *The Ego and the Id*, especially at the end of the second and the beginning of the fifth chapter.

humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? (21:111)

If we continue to downplay "the evil in the constitution of human beings," Freud has more questions for us.

But do your own experiences justify your [resistance]? I will not discuss how you may appear to yourselves; but have you found so much benevolence among your superiors and competitors, so much chivalry among your enemies and so little envy in your social surroundings that you feel it your duty to protest against egoistic evil having a share in human nature? Are you not aware of how uncontrolled and untrustworthy the average person is in everything to do with sexual life? Or do you not know that all the transgressions and excesses of which we dream at night are daily committed in real life by waking men? What does psychoanalysis do here but confirm Plato's old saying that the good are those who are content to dream of what the others, the bad, really do? (15:146)

It is important to notice this distinction between overt behavior and inner disposition, for like the theologian, Freud locates original sin in our inmost self. What theologians call the heart, he calls the id. This "cauldron full of seething excitations . . . knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality" (22:73-74). Against psychological environmentalists like Rousseau, Marx, and Skinner, who would argue that the "primary mutual hostility of human beings" is due to bad social institutions such as private property, Freud insists that it is instinctual and for that reason an "indestructible feature of human nature" (21:112-14; cf. 120-22).

We can be confident that Freud did not develop this unflattering account of human nature from a sympathetic reading of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Augustine's *Confessions*,⁵ or Calvin's *Institutes*. Nor, when with reference to the id he writes that "we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces," does this come from a careful study of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. Where does it come from? Most prominently from his interpretation of dreams.

The Interpretation of Dreams is the record, as it were, of Freud's

5. In his insistence that aggression "already shows itself in the nursery" (21:113), however, Freud sounds a lot like Augustine in accounting for why we think of infants as innocent. Compare 15:210-11 with *Confessions* I, 6-7. See also the discussion of infantile evil with the "Rat Man" (10:185-86).

conversion to a secular theology of original sin. From the dreams of his patients, but especially from his own, he was led to the conclusion that "dreams are completely egoistical" and that "no dream is prompted by motives other than egoistic ones" (4:322-23; 5:440; cf. 4:270n.2). The appearance of altruism in a dream is just that, appearance, the product of a distorting censorship seeking to block the return of the repressed (4:267). The wishes that "are censored and given a distorted expression in dreams, are first and foremost manifestations of an unbridled and ruthless egoism" (15:142). Freud's dreams, in particular, are the expression of a "thirst for grandeur" that amounts to a "pathological ambition" and an "absurd megalomania" (4:192, 215-18).

The dreams about Irma's injection and the uncle with a yellow beard, discussed above in chapter 7, are good examples of what Freud has in mind. He calls our attention, in the first instance, not only to his desire to justify himself in the matter at hand, but also to his willingness to avenge himself on Irma, Dr. M., and especially Otto in the process (4:115-19). In the second case he is "uneasy over the light-heartedness with which I had degraded two of my respected colleagues in order to keep open my own path to a professorship." The reference is to the "well-designed slander" by which in his dream he had reduced R. and N., respectively, to a simpleton and a criminal (4:139-41).

Censorship, the coin whose two sides are repression and resistance, is evoked by the presence within us, in desire if not in act, of what is "reprehensible" and "repulsive" (15:142). Just as daydreams are undisguised fulfillments of "ambitious and erotic wishes which are well known to us" (15:130), so adult dreams have to distort two types of immoral impulse, erotic and non-erotic. On the one hand, there are "the demands of sexual desire," including those that "contradict all the requirements of moral restraint." Here we are dealing with a "desire for pleasure," known as libido, that "chooses its objects without inhibition, and by preference, indeed, the forbidden ones: not only other men's wives, but above all incestuous objects." On the other hand, "hatred, too, rages without restraint. Wishes for revenge and death directed against those who are nearest and dearest in waking life, against the dreamer's parents, brothers and sisters, husband or wife, and his own children, are nothing unusual. These censored wishes appear to rise up out of a positive Hell; after they have been interpreted when we are awake, no censorship of them seems to us too severe" (15:142-43; cf. 203-9).

If the religiously sanctioned moral standards before which humans appear as "miserable sinners" have both an ascetic and an

altruistic component, the "unbridled and ruthless egoism" to which Freud points has both an erotic and an aggressive dimension, though the two are not always easy to separate. In spite of his reputation for being preoccupied with sex, Freud's "Confessions" are a powerfully concrete expression of the Augustinian understanding of sin as essentially pride. In fact, Freud's secular theology (like that of Thomas Hobbes) belongs to the anti-Platonic tradition that stretches from Augustine to Kierkegaard and Niebuhr in making pride more fundamental than lust. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* this is partly due to his understandable reluctance to go into too much detail about the sexual meaning of his own dreams, with the result that he comes across as a megalomaniac rather than a sex maniac. But by the time we get to the final chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* the primacy given to the problem of aggression and the impossibility of altruism is no longer accidental. Instead, these issues are seen as defining the most basic human task.

As we have regularly noticed, the Freudian self is not only utterly egocentric. It is also dishonest about its egocentricity, primarily to itself. Because we are conscience as well as concupiscence, superego as well as id, we do not approve of ourselves. We are guilty and ashamed of the darkness in our heart, or we would be if it were allowed to come fully to light. That is where censorship comes in. Repression and its correlate, resistance, have as their task to spare us the pain of seeing ourselves as we really are. In Augustinian language, it was "you Lord . . . who took me from behind my own back, which was where I had put myself during the time when I did not want to be observed by myself, and you set me in front of my own face so that I could see how foul a sight I was — crooked, filthy, spotted, and ulcerous . . . forcing me to look into my own face, so that I might see my sin and hate it. I did know it, but I pretended that I did not. I had been pushing the whole idea away from me and forgetting it."⁶

So it is that we end up self-deceived, not just about the degree

6. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), VIII, 7. In the Pine-Coffin translation we read that Augustine "had turned a blind eye" on himself (*Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961]). Freud says that in therapy "what happens is that the patient, who has hitherto turned his eyes away in terror from his own pathological productions, begins to attend to them and obtains a clearer and more detailed view of them" (10:223). In another place he writes, "The fact is that you must catch your thief before you can hang him, and that it requires some expenditure of labour to get securely hold of the pathological structures at the destruction of which the treatment is aimed" (10:124).

to which wish fulfillment shapes our beliefs, but about the character of our deepest self. Just as political censorship drives the opposition underground, so repression and resistance combine to produce an unconscious sense of guilt. For censorship is powerless either to make us good or to exterminate guilt. All it can do is drive guilt underground, helping us not to notice what would be all too painful to our self-esteem if we looked it (ourselves) in the face. In Freud's view, religious behavior must be understood as an attempt to deal with this situation.

It may seem strange for Freud to portray the believing soul as having an *unconscious* sense of guilt. Has he not himself called our attention to the believer's confession of being a "miserable sinner"? Yes, indeed. But he reminds us of the believer's awareness of being a "miserable sinner" in the paragraph immediately following the one that introduces the notion of an unconscious sense of guilt (9:123), and he has provided a conceptual framework in which there is no conflict between the two. Given his account of repression, our *conscious* sense of sin is likely to be quantitative, comparative, and occasional, in short, manageable. It will make sense for us to weigh our good deeds against our bad deeds, and to preserve our self-esteem by finding others whose evil is greater than ours, quantitatively and qualitatively, which is to say that their sins are either more frequent than ours or of a more serious sort, or both. Thus respectable citizens will abhor bank robbery, while bank robbers will abhor self-righteous hypocrisy. We will be conscious of (at least some of) our sins. But the sin of which they are the expression, the fundamental project of self-assertion, erotic and otherwise, without constraint, and the guilt that corresponds to this sin, we are likely to censor before looking at ourselves in the mirror.

The result of all this, as Freud sees it, is that the religious activities designed to deal with a guilt which is only partially and superficially allowed to see the light of day will themselves take place in a kind of spiritual black market, only partially and superficially available to consciousness. We will need to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to religious behavior as well as to religious belief.

14 *Ceremonial as Defense*

Freud begins his first attempt to psychoanalyze religion with these words:

I am certainly not the first person to have been struck by the resemblance between what are called obsessive actions in sufferers from nervous affections and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their piety. The term 'ceremonial', which has been applied to some of these obsessive actions, is evidence of this. The resemblance, however, seems to me to be more than a superficial one, so that an insight into the origin of neurotic ceremonial may embolden us to draw inferences by analogy about the psychological processes of religious life. (9:117)

The strength of this analogy in Freud's mind is due, as we shall see, to its multifaceted character. There are at least four points on which he finds religious and neurotic ceremonial to be alike. One of two significant *differences* he sees is that neurotic ceremonials have a "private nature as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances," making the former "a travesty, half comic and half tragic, of a private religion." Thus Freud's central (hypo)thesis is that

one might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. The most essential similarity would reside in the underlying renunciation of the activation of instincts that are constitutionally present; and the [other] chief difference would lie in the nature of those instincts, which in the neurosis are exclusively sexual in their origin, while in religion they spring from egoistic sources. (9:119, 126-27)

20 Feuerbach's Bourgeois Atheism

Religion is, according to Marxian atheism, "the opium of the people" (SW 64; OR 42).¹ This verdict is as central to Marx's view of religion as it is familiar. The degree to which we understand it will be the degree to which we understand his critique. But the meaning of the metaphor is not self-evident, especially in a time when it is possible to speak of the recreational use of drugs. For Marx, religion and opium are painkillers² that are not only addictive but even worse, since they treat symptoms rather than diseases. While there may be medically hopeless situations in which narcotics play a useful role, religion invariably distracts attention from a social disease that *can* be treated and cured.³ Rather than a desperate response to genuine hopelessness, it is the diabolical creation of *unnecessary* hopelessness concerning the human social order.

The essay in which Marx calls religion the opium of the people

1. Citations from Marx and Engels in the text use the following abbreviations:

- CA Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967).
- LT David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
- OR Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964; reprinted Atlanta: Scholars, 1982; introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr).
- PS *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
- SW *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Quotations from this volume appear by permission of Oxford University Press.

2. See above, p. 39 n. 1.

3. At least in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution.

begins with these words: "As far as Germany is concerned, the criticism of religion is complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism. . . . The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man" (SW 63). These last words are a paraphrase of Ludwig Feuerbach's statement: "Man first unconsciously and involuntarily creates God in his own image, and after this God consciously and voluntarily creates man in his own image" (EC 118).⁴

Marx's atheism is built on Feuerbach's, and it is indeed to Feuerbach that Marx refers when he says that in Germany the criticism of religion is complete. But this is a strange statement, since it stands at the beginning of seven paragraphs (about a page and a half in the German edition) in which the thesis is that any critique of the type offered by Feuerbach is radically and essentially incomplete.⁵ In the following year Marx would call Feuerbach and the other intellectual terrorists known as "Young Hegelians" sheep in wolves' clothing (SW 160), implying that their atheism was more the product of bourgeois Christendom than its enemy. This stance of the youthful Marx becomes a permanent part of his own critique of religion. Still, since Marx incorporates Feuerbach into his own quite different atheism, we must begin with Feuerbach's version.

In 1842 Feuerbach published a brief essay entitled "Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy"⁶ that had an enormous impact on the young Marx. Its opening words are, "The secret of theology is anthropology . . ." (FB 153). This claim succinctly summarizes Feuerbach's earlier and most famous book, *The Essence of Christianity*. This idea that what seems to be said about God is actually about humankind is implicit in the notion that we first create God in our own image before we are created in God's image.

4. Citations from Feuerbach will use the following abbreviations:

EC *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957).

EF *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, trans. Melvin Chernoff (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

ER *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

FB *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

5. The opium metaphor occurs in the fourth of these paragraphs.

6. The words "theses" and "reform" may very well be intended to suggest that Feuerbach will be for philosophy what Luther was for theology.

Feuerbach speaks of projection in this context. "Man cannot get beyond his true nature. He may indeed by means of the imagination conceive individuals of another so-called higher kind, but . . . the positive final predicates which he gives to these other individuals are always determinations or qualities drawn from his own nature — qualities in which he in truth only images and projects himself" (EC 11). For Feuerbach the mystery of religion is simply this: "Man . . . projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object of this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject" (EC 29f.).

This theory of projection, like Freud's, is a theory of false consciousness. Cognitively speaking, we know not what we do.⁷ But only a moment's reflection will reveal a major difference from Freud. As we learned from the case of the hapless Dr. Schreber, Freudian projection is a mechanism for getting rid of some affect, such as lust or hostility, that we cannot acknowledge without shame. For Feuerbach, by contrast, in religion we project only "that which is worthy of adoration" (EC 12). "What man praises and approves, that is God to him. . . . Religion is a *judgment*. The most essential condition in religion — in the idea of the divine being — is accordingly the discrimination of the praiseworthy from the blameworthy, of the perfect from the imperfect" (EC 97).

I want to suggest that there are three layers of meaning in Feuerbach's theory of religion as projective false consciousness. There are Hegelian⁸ and Freudian layers that, while quite distinct, are both clearly visible. Then there is a Marxian layer that is only hinted at and never quite in focus. It is by making this last layer fully explicit that Marx radicalizes the Feuerbachian critique of religion.

There are two themes in the Hegelian stratum of *The Essence of Christianity*. The first is found in the thesis that "God is the idea of the species as an individual" (EC 153). Feuerbach repeatedly insists that while the perfections we represent to ourselves as divine are really human, they belong not to the individual but to the species. While it would be not merely vain but ludicrous for the individual to view his or her perfections or excellences as infinite, this does not apply to the species. To say, for example, that there is no greater beauty than human beauty is quite different from saying that there is no beauty greater than

7. Thus, while God is represented as consciously and voluntarily creating humankind, the first creation, that of God in our image, is represented as unconscious and involuntary.

8. No need to panic. What follows does not presuppose any prior familiarity with Hegel on the part of the reader.

mine (EC 6-7). "The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective — i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being" (EC 14; cf. 35, 42).

This motif in Feuerbach continues the Hegelian strategy of affirming the religious sense of transcendence but reinterpreting it as the transcendence of the human spirit in some collective sense to the religious consciousness of the individual.⁹ What distinguishes Feuerbach from Hegel on this point is that he neither presents himself as a Christian philosopher nor seeks to deny that his theory is atheistic in the usual sense of the word.

The other Hegelian theme in *The Essence of Christianity* concerns the relation of consciousness to self-consciousness.¹⁰ Because in religion the human subject is aware of its own true nature, of its own spirit (Hegel) or species (Feuerbach), "consciousness of the object and self-consciousness coincide. . . . Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge" (EC 12; cf. 1f.). But it belongs to the religious stage of experience that the believing soul does not know this (having unconsciously and involuntarily created God in the image of his or her own species) and takes God to be something quite beyond everything human. Thus

when religion — consciousness of God — is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the peculiar nature of religion. To preclude this misconception, it is better to say, religion is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge. Hence, religion everywhere precedes philosophy, as in the history of the race, so also in that of the individual. Man first of all sees his nature as if *out of himself*, before he finds it in himself. . . . Religion is the childlike condition of humanity. . . . Hence the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective is now recognized as subjective. . . . And it is our task to show that the antithesis of divine and human is alto-

9. I have developed this aspect of Hegel's thought in chapter 7 of *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979 and 1990), suggesting that Durkheim's theory in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is a helpful guide to reading Hegel.

10. Hegel and Feuerbach are sufficiently Cartesian and Kantian to retain the belief that the problem of knowledge can be solved only if the object of knowledge and its subject turn out somehow to be the same.

gether illusory, that it is nothing else than the antithesis between the human nature in general and the human individual. (EC 13f.)

Religion is false consciousness, or, to use a term of which Feuerbach is as fond as Freud, it is an illusion (EC xxxviii-xl, 13, 16, 127). And yet, in this Hegelian dimension of the text, religion is as natural as childhood. As a necessary stage in the path of self-discovery, it is nothing to be ashamed of, even if it is something to grow out of. The transition from (theistic) religion to (atheistic) philosophy is simply the developmental discovery of the projective character of religious knowledge, the realization that consciousness is self-consciousness, that God is humankind. This discovery is not entirely unlike the discovery of the true ontological status of Santa Claus, who turns out to be but the personification of the human spirit of giving.

I have already mentioned that, while for Freud projection is a means for dealing with what cannot be acknowledged without shame, for Feuerbach we project in religion what is *best* about humankind. In spite of this important difference, Feuerbach's understanding of religion also contains a Freudian stratum. It is when Feuerbach moves from the language of illusion (unrecognized projection) to the language of dream that it begins to appear. "Religion is a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences, beings out of ourselves" (EC 204). At first it looks as if this is merely another way of generating the comfortable Hegelian thesis that this is the natural course of human development, phylogenetically and ontogenetically: "And so in revelation man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself!" (EC 207).

But between these two texts a disruptive idea emerges, that of wish fulfillment. "A fact, I repeat, is a conception about the truth of which there is no doubt, because it is no object of theory, but of feeling, which desires that what it wishes, what it believes, should be true. . . . A fact is every wish that projects itself on reality" (EC 205-6). Earlier Feuerbach gives an even more fully explicitly "Freudian" reading of dreams as wish-fulfilling illusions: "The fundamental dogmas of Christianity are realized wishes of the heart. . . . Religion [is] the dream of waking consciousness: dreaming is the key to the mysteries of religion" (EC 140f.).

The Hegelian and Freudian strata in Feuerbach's text are joined by the agreement that religion is projective, illusory, false consciousness. But if we ask why all this occurs, we get two quite different answers. According to the first, projection is the path providence has ordained

to bring us to maturity. According to the second, projection is the unrealistic attempt to compensate for unfulfilled desires. What was incipient self-knowledge for the Hegelian Feuerbach becomes wishful thinking for the Freudian Feuerbach.¹¹

This would not be so bad if the desires and wishes were simply for something to adore, to approve, and to admire. But in the Freudian stratum of the text Feuerbach portrays those desires as utterly egoistic and crassly utilitarian.

The earliest hint that religious projection may be in the service of desires that need to be hidden does not arise in connection with religion in general. It comes, rather, in relation to extreme journeys along the *via negativa* that culminate in "the proposition that God is unknowable or undefinable" (EC 14f.). One who says this "denies God practically by his conduct, — the world has possession of all his thoughts and inclinations, — but he does not deny him theoretically, he does not attack his existence; he lets that rest. *But this existence does not affect or incommode him.* . . . The alleged religious horror of limiting God by positive predicates is only the *irreligious wish* to know nothing more of God, to banish God from the mind" (EC 15, emphasis added). Here we are in the Freudian world of the God who is only seemingly stern, the world of "self-flattering wishes," in which the believing soul "drops what is disagreeable in a fact, and holds fast alone what is agreeable" (EC 136f.).

Beginning with chapter 10 of *The Essence of Christianity*, on the doctrines of providence and creation *ex nihilo*, Feuerbach applies this analysis to positive affirmations about God and to belief in immortality as well. Thus in the doctrine of creation man "makes Nature the abject vassal of his selfish interest, of his practical egoism," and the doctrines of special providence and miracles only extend this process (EC 113). The will of God is but the thinly disguised will to power of human finitude fully given over "to utilism [*utilismus*], to egoism" (EC 115-17). This is where we read that we first create God in our own image before we are created in God's image (EC 118). Our creative act may be unconscious, but it is anything but disinterested. In the chapter on prayer we read, "God is the Love that satisfied our wishes, our emotional wants; he is himself the realized wish of the heart" (EC 121). As this

11. Robert Tucker has suggested that for Feuerbach metaphysics turns out to be "esoteric psychology, or more accurately psychopathology." *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 85. If the first description fits the Hegelian stratum, the second identifies the Freudian stratum quite succinctly.

analysis goes on and on, Feuerbach constantly emphasizes the egoism at the heart of worship, the instrumental character of religious belief. Then, as if he has failed to make the point clearly enough in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), he devotes another essay to it, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther* (1844).¹²

But this is the Freudian Feuerbach and not yet Marx.

12. A hint of the argument there can be found in the following sentences: "But the object of faith is the inviolable holiness of self-love. Love is the heart which beats for others, but faith is the heart which only beats for itself. . . . Over love stands faith; that is, over the lover of others stands love of oneself" (EF 100). Marx will give a distinctly social sense to this point, as the following summary nicely shows. With reference to the Christian ideal of love, Marx claims that "those who talk most about charity and love of one's neighbour, have more often than not used those fine words as a hypocritical excuse for perpetuating a social system whose law is the opposite of love: permanent violence against the worker and the perversion, by the very law of the régime, of all human feelings. . . ." Roger Garaudy, *Marxism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. René Hague (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 135.

21 Feuerbach's Radical Atheism

In search of the meaning of the Marxian claim that religion is "the opium of the people," we have turned to the theoretical roots of his atheism. The Freudian stratum in Feuerbach's text is closer to Marx than is the Hegelian stratum. For with Freud religious consciousness is, to use a Hegelian expression, essentially unhappy consciousness. The presence of religion is the sign of a deeply unacceptable situation. As Marx himself will shortly say, religion is "at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering" (SW 64).

Moreover, for this reason religion is instrumental. While religion in the Hegelian stratum is celebrative, in the Freudian stratum it is more nearly calculative. Human beings always want more power in the face of nature (and the death that is its final fact); and they always want freedom from guilt in the face of culture (EC 141).

The problem, from the Marxian perspective, is this "always." The Freudian Feuerbach simply identifies the "deeply unacceptable situation" mentioned above with the human condition. The universality of these needs renders them metaphysical rather than political, while their necessity renders them essential rather than historical. As Marx wrote to his friend Arnold Ruge, with reference to Feuerbach's "Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy," "I approve of Feuerbach's aphorisms, except for one point: he directs himself too much to nature and too little to politics."¹ By distracting attention from the political and historical dimensions of needs that come to expression in religion, Feuerbach provides the same kind of intellectual support for the current forms of social domination as is provided

1. Quoted in Schlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 10.

by the political economy that he ignores and the religion that he criticizes.

All three, Feuerbach, religion, and the political economy, foster an ahistorical perspective that treats present social structures as natural and inevitable. Questions about changing the world do not need to be answered because they are not even allowed to arise. It is with reference to Feuerbach that Marx complains, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (SW 158). Since Marxian suspicion evaluates theories in terms of their function rather than in terms of their content, the difference between religious (idealistic) interpretations of the world and antireligious (materialistic) interpretations of the world like Feuerbach's does not amount to much. Both bodies of belief serve to buttress the social status quo. This is what it means to speak of Feuerbach's atheism as "bourgeois."

It would appear, then, that the critique of religion is anything but complete with Feuerbach. Marx will seek to give the critique an active character; its goal will be to change behavior and not just belief, to change the world rather than just to reinterpret it. There are hints of such a move in Feuerbach's own text, though its political possibilities remain peripheral at best.

As we seek to move from Feuerbach's bourgeois atheism to the radical elements buried within it, we will find our attention decisively redirected from the first to the second mark of instrumental religion as analyzed by Hume (see pp. 27-28 above). The first, it will be recalled, is flattery. Like irony, flattery is a mode of speech whose apparent (professed) purpose is at odds with its real (operative) purpose. Purporting to be a mode of giving, it is in fact an attempt to get. Freud has deepened our understanding of the potential in religious beliefs and practices, liturgical and moral, for flattery, for hustling God while giving the appearance (to ourselves and others) of honoring him.

The second characteristic of what Hume calls idolatry or superstition is the manner in which it legitimizes cruel and barbaric social practices. If flattery corrupts love for God, here it is love for one's neighbor that gets short shrift. Like Hume, Marx has in mind institutional practices rather than the private practices of individuals, and his critique is directed at the way in which religion serves to legitimize these by authorizing them or simply by being compatible with them.

Our search for a radical stratum in Feuerbach can begin with the impoverishment motif. In theology, which denies the identity of the human and divine by making God transcendent, "the human, considered as such, is depreciated. . . . To enrich God, man must become

poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing" (EC 26). This is what Feuerbach means when he says, "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself . . . a differencing of man with his own nature" (EC 33).

In texts like these human impoverishment is regarded as universal and metaphysical. It is the result of religious projection. We can only attribute perfections to God that we have first taken from ourselves. But what would this motif look like if the poverty were economic rather than metaphysical and if it were the cause and not the result of religious projection? At times this is just how Feuerbach writes. "Only he who has no earthly parents needs heavenly ones. . . . The triune God has a substantial meaning only where there is an abstraction from the substance of real life. The more empty life is, the fuller, the more concrete is God. The impoverishing of the real world and the enriching of God is one act. Only the poor man has a rich God. God springs out of the feeling of a want; what man is in need of . . . that is God" (EC 73). Here it would seem that the difference between rich and poor has not been swallowed up in the human condition. This begins to sound like Marx.

Another text from the Marxian stratum in Feuerbach concerns the religion of ancient Israel. "To the Jew . . . Jehovah himself was nothing else than the self-consciousness of Israel made objective. . . ."

If we let fall the limits of nationality, we obtain — instead of the Israelite — *man*. As in Jehovah the Israelite personified his national existence, so in God the Christian personified his subjective human nature, freed from the limits of nationality. As Israel made the wants of his national existence the law of the world, as, under the dominance of these wants, he deified even his political vindictiveness; so the Christian made the requirements of human feeling the absolute powers and laws of the world. . . . The miracles of Christianity . . . have not the welfare of a nation for their object, but the welfare of man. (EC 120)

What is fascinating about this text is Feuerbach's flight from his own insight. Ancient Israel is by no means the proletariat, though the experience of slavery in Egypt had a formative influence on Hebrew religion. Still, Feuerbach sees Israel as a historically particular social group that creates its God in its own image, that is, in the service of its own desires. If this religion is to be understood, the sources of the "political vindictiveness" it expresses will have to be explored; the critique of religion will have to become social theory, for it will no longer be possible to appeal to timeless human nature.

Of course, Feuerbach does not do this. He is not Marx. Instead,

he suggests that Christianity's superiority to Judaism consists in the fact that it better conforms to the ahistorical and apolitical character his own theory usually assumes. But it is too late. His account of Judaism has already let a Marxist cat out of the bag.

In later texts similar themes arise, only to be similarly abandoned. In the essay on Luther, for example, we read:

If man were blessed . . . how could he imagine another being outside himself as a blessed being. . . . Only an imprisoned man considers a free man blessed. . . . But if I have what God has, nothing is lacking if God is lacking. . . . If . . . I am free, I am above all else free from God. The homage granted to God by a free person is at best only a protestation of courtesy, a gallantry, a compliment. Only in the needy, miserable, and deprived mouth does the word "God" have weight, earnestness, and meaning; but on the lips of religiously free men — on the politically free men's too, of course — the word "God" rings only of scorn. (EF 37-38)

Here poverty is economic rather than essential, and it is the cause of religion, not its result. Here the historical difference between political freedom and political domination plays a decisive role in the projection of the human onto the divine. But Feuerbach does not follow his argument as it leads from metaphysics to history.

Probably Feuerbach comes closest to Marx in a passage from his *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*:

Those human desires that are not imaginary and fantastic are fulfilled in the course of history, of the future. Many desires which today remain mere desires will someday be fulfilled; innumerable things which the presumptuous champions of present-day religious dogmas and institutions, present-day social and political conditions, regard as impossible, will one day be reality. . . . We must therefore modify our goals and exchange divinity, in which only man's groundless and gratuitous desires are fulfilled, for the human race or human nature, religion for education, the hereafter in heaven for the hereafter on earth, that is, the *historical future*, the future of mankind. (ER 281)

Perhaps by the time Feuerbach wrote this he had read the opening paragraphs of Marx's "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," and the teacher was learning from the student. In any case, it is time for us to turn to the text in which Marx seeks to formulate for himself the repressed but undeniably radical dimension of Feuerbach's atheism.

22 Marx's Radical Atheism

Our continued search for the meaning of the Marxian claim that religion is "the opium of the people" brings us to the text in which that phrase appears. Written in early 1844, it is one of the earliest of Marx's philosophical essays. While it is a key text of the "early" Marx, it represents a point of view presupposed by all of his subsequent writings. Marx apparently intended to revise and publish the detailed critique of Hegel's theory of the state, on which he had been working during much of 1843, but only this brief essay saw the light of day during his lifetime.¹ Its title, appropriately, is "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction."

I will give here the full text of each of Marx's seven opening paragraphs in turn, each followed by my comments.

[1] As far as Germany is concerned, the criticism of religion is essentially complete, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism.

This refers above all to Feuerbach. But the second clause of the statement refutes the first. As the point of departure or presupposition for a larger totality of criticism, the criticism of religion could not possibly be complete in itself. Just as the beginning of a story gets its meaning from the ending, or, to be more precise, from the story as a

1. The full text of this critique, discovered in 1922 and published in 1927, can be found in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Random House, 1975), and, with an excellent introduction by Joseph O'Malley, in *Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). The translation in these pages is from SW.

whole, so the beginning of criticism does not stand by itself but requires the rest of criticism for its completion.²

Marx's biographer, David McLellan, writes of the Young Hegelians, the circle of intellectual radicals among whom Marx's intellectual development took a decisive turn:³ "It was quite natural that [their] discussion should at first be theological: most members of the Hegelian school were interested in religion above all; and the attitude of the Prussian Government made politics an extremely dangerous subject for debate. Yet granted the Establishment of the Church in Germany and the close connection between religion and politics, it was inevitable that a movement of religious criticism would swiftly become secularized into one of political opposition" (LT 31).

Marx himself saw the move from religious critique to political critique as inevitable in the sense that it was required by the realities of the situation. Religion is essentially political. As he wrote to his friend Arnold Ruge, "... religion has no content of its own and lives not from heaven but from earth, and falls of itself with the dissolution of the inverted reality whose theory it is" (LT 58).⁴

But in another sense the move to political critique was anything but inevitable. Had not Feuerbach remained all but entirely unpolitical? And was not his atheism for the most part as bourgeois as the religion it attacked? Marx came to see it as his task to make the move to politics seem as inevitable as he believed it actually was. So when he says that in Germany the critique of religion is (in Feuerbach) "essentially complete,"

2. Like Hegel, Marx believes that the truth is the whole. This holism is diametrically opposed to foundationalism, which holds that the parts we begin with are meaningful and true in themselves and only externally related to the larger contexts to which they belong. For a sustained analysis of Hegelian holism, see Tom Rockmore, *Hegel's Circular Epistemology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

3. Marx describes his "conversion" to Hegelianism in a famous letter to his father: "A curtain had fallen, my holy of holies was rent asunder, and new gods had to be installed. I left behind the idealism which, by the way, I had nourished with that of Kant and Fichte, and came to seek the idea in the real itself. If the gods had before dwelt above the earth, they had now become its centre" (SW 8). It was this abandonment of the romantic-idealistic separation of "is" and "ought" that Marx sought to work out among the Young Hegelians and especially in his struggle with Feuerbach.

4. Early in *Capital* Marx reaffirms this position: "The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. . . . The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of every-day life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature" (CA 79).

he does not mean that it has reached its goal. Rather, he means that it has gone as far as it can go while concerning itself merely with religion. As the "presupposition of all criticism" it must now go on to play its proper role, not as the completion but as the beginning of critique.

[2] The profane existence of error is compromised as soon as its heavenly *oratio pro aris et focis* [prayer for hearth and home] is refuted. Man has found in the imaginary reality of heaven where he looked for a superman only the reflection of his own self. He will therefore no longer be inclined to find only the appearance of himself, the non-man, where he seeks and must seek his true reality.

And where would that be? Not in heaven but on earth. Not in eternity but in history. Not in self-consciousness but in social transformation. The second sentence of this paragraph is pure Feuerbach; the third seeks to give central importance to those hints of political radicality described in the previous chapter. To see through the projective character of religious consciousness must be not merely to lose faith in God but more importantly to lose faith in the ultimacy of the present human situation.

It is possible to read this as a metaphysical claim to the effect that faith in God necessarily and inevitably leads to faith in the ultimacy of the social status quo. Such a claim is fairly easy to refute, and it is therefore a temptation to any who wish to be done with Marx as quickly as possible to read him in this way. But he was a historical thinker more than a metaphysician, and his claim is both more interesting and more disturbing if taken as a historical claim, namely, that religion and social complacency are (in his historical present) and regularly have been (in the history of Europe), as a matter of historical fact, deeply linked.

Surely Marx is right that the disturbance of such religious faith will be politically disruptive. In spite of his Jewish roots, which were not very deep, he seems oblivious to the possibility that such a disturbance could itself be religiously motivated and to the historical fact that before there was Feuerbach there was Amos.

[3] The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-awareness of man who either has not yet attained to himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produces religion's inverted attitude toward the world because they are an inverted world themselves.

Religion is the general theory of the world [note how Marx virtually quotes here from his own letter to Ruge cited above], its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal basis for consolation and justification. It is the imaginary realization of the human essence, because the human essence possesses no true reality. Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

The pattern is by now familiar. The first two sentences are pure Feuerbach. The remainder of the paragraph is a political reading of Feuerbach's atheism.

We can distinguish a number of crucial claims here: (a) Human deprivation is prior to religious projection. It is the cause and not merely the effect of the process of creating gods.

(b) This deprivation is not metaphysically universal and necessary but historically specific and contingent. It is the condition of human beings in *this* society, under *this* state that gives rise to *this* religion. The character of any given society is reflected in the religion that serves as its "encyclopaedic compendium," its "logic in popular form," and its "spiritual aroma."

(c) But religion does more than mirror the society in which it occurs. It also functions to legitimize it. As society's self-celebratory "enthusiasm" and its "universal basis for consolation and justification," it is above all else society's "moral sanction."

(d) When we see religion's role in justifying the social institutions that dehumanize its members, we see that "the struggle against religion is indirectly [but consciously] the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma [i.e., deodorant] is religion." Thus the criticism of religion requires for its completion a criticism that is directly aimed at that world. This is the path from Feuerbach to the critique of social domination in *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*.

[4] Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.

Again several observations are in order: (a) Once more the relation of religion and society is twofold, and one of the relations is a mirroring one. Religious suffering expresses real, worldly suffering.

(b) But now the other function is protest rather than legitimation.

Religion has a socially disruptive possibility built into its mirroring, expressive character. Marx does little to explore the history of this dimension of religion,⁵ with the result that his account of religion historically has a noticeable one-sidedness to it.⁶ Marxian theory points powerfully to the role of religion in justifying slavery, segregation, and apartheid, but has little to say about the role of religion in abolitionist, civil-rights, and anti-apartheid movements. No doubt this is due in part to Marx's atheistic bias, but it is also due to the argument implicit in this paragraph, as follows.

(c) In spite of its protest character, religion is the opium of the people. How does protest become painkiller so quickly? Quite easily. If because of violent repression or political and economic hopelessness, protest cannot or does not take the form of social activism, its only alternative is escapism. We have only to think of the role played by drugs among the ghettoized underclass of our own society to see how a practice can be at once a protest and an escapist consolation. The next paragraph will express the unwillingness at the heart of Marxism to give up on social activism. But first a final point about religion as the opium of the people.

(d) From the setting of the opium metaphor in the context of suffering it is tempting to read "people" (*Volk*) as "masses." Religion is the opium of the oppressed, not needed by the power elites whose desires are served by the system. But the process of legitimizing domination is more complex than this, and Marx has already pointed to this complexity by calling religion not only the "consolation" offered to its victims by an "inverted world" but also that world's "moral sanction" and "justification." A social system that exploits its masses will get only minimal legitimation in their eyes from moral justifications to the effect that they are in their divinely appointed places in a divinely ordained hierarchy or that their suffering is the punishment for their sins (in this or a previous life). What they need is consolation, the hope that in a heavenly Beulah Land just over Jordan "all God's chillun got shoes."

If the masses need a painkiller to deal with the physical and emotional deprivations of poverty and powerlessness, their masters need a painkiller to assuage their guilty consciences. They will be able to enjoy their wealth, status, and power just to the degree that they can persuade themselves that God is in his heaven and all is right with the

5. Engels does more, as we shall see in what follows; but he stays within the limits of the analysis offered here by Marx.

6. Is religious history much less one-sided? Or has religion more frequently served to confirm than to challenge power and domination?

world (except for a few troublemakers here and there who are without moral standing). Thus it is the ruling classes who benefit most from moral arguments. Unless they can persuade themselves that their social role is essential to some moral cosmos, they will experience a painful cognitive dissonance between their belief that they are decent and their perception that the price of their privileges is the poverty and powerlessness of others. By providing consolation for some and justification for others, religion can function as the opium of *all* the people.⁷

[5] The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the vale of tears whose halo is religion.

Here the Freudian-Feuerbachian language of illusion appears. But now the task is to change the world, not just by making atheists out of believers but by making it a place of real happiness. Just to the degree that religion functions to legitimize various forms of social injustice, the Marxian analysis places the same demand upon believers. For, as we have learned from our study of Freud, this kind of critique discredits religion even if, contrary to Marxian assumptions, it should turn out to be metaphysically correct. Even if there is a God, or better, especially if there is a God like the one described in the Bible, when religion functions as Marx describes, killing the pains of injustice rather than challenging its right to exist, it deserves the diatribes he directs against it. At least that is what the prophet Amos would have said.

[6] Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may bear chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck the living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusiones man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man come to his senses; so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.

After repeating his challenge to change the world, Marx adds a *non sequitur*. Later in the same essay he writes, "The criticism of religion

7. Cognitive dissonance theory is the form experimental psychology gives to the hermeneutics of suspicion. See above, p. 85 n. 3.

ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised" (SW 69). In both passages he implies that atheistic humanism is the only premise for a humane world, that only if humankind deifies itself will it have reason to oppose oppression. This does not follow from anything Marx has said, and it stands as a dogmatic assertion. But it also stands as a challenge deserving serious attention from people of faith. For in any historical context where religion supports exploitation by giving its active or passive support to unjust social structures, it gives to atheistic humanism a plausibility it does not deserve.⁸

[7] It is therefore the task of history, now the truth is no longer in the beyond, to establish the truth of the here and now. The first task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, once the holy form of self-alienation has been discovered, is to discover self-alienation in its unholy forms. The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

In other words, only with the transformation of Feuerbach into Marx can the criticism of religion that began with Feuerbach be considered complete.

8. For a critical examination of the humane potential of atheistic humanism, see Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963).

23 Religion and the Christian State

Feuerbach is doubly important for understanding Marxian atheism. As a primary source of that atheism he helps us to see it as a version of the hermeneutics of suspicion; and, as an essentially ahistorical thinker, he helps us by means of contrast to focus attention on the social substance of Marxian suspicion. The latter has a Feuerbachian form, to be sure, but a content that introduces us to a very different world. We would be seriously misled by what we have said in the previous three chapters if we were to conclude that Marx can be accounted for by those occasional hints of radicality in Feuerbach. Marx did not become Marx just by reading Feuerbach.

While Feuerbach was writing *The Essence of Christianity*, Marx was writing his doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus. In its preface he declares his atheism:

As long as a single drop of blood pulses in her world-conquering and totally free heart philosophy will continually shout at her opponents the cry of Epicurus, "The profane man is not the one who destroys the gods of the multitude but the one who foists the multitude's doctrines onto the gods." Philosophy makes no secret of it. The proclamation of Prometheus — "in a word, I detest all the Gods" — is her own profession, her own slogan against all the gods of heaven and earth who do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity. . . . Prometheus is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar. (SW 12-13)¹

1. Marx gives the quotations from Epicurus and Prometheus in Greek. I have given only the English translations provided in SW. For a slightly different rendering, see OR 14-15.

This Promethean atheism is a far cry from positivism. At its heart is not the epistemological claim of evidentialism but the moral claim of humanism. In other words, it does not deny God for lack of evidence; it detests the gods for their treatment of humans. A friend would shortly write, "For Marx, at any rate, the Christian religion is one of the most immoral there is" (LT 42). So it is not surprising that in an appendix to his dissertation, Marx writes, "What else does this mean except that *God exists for the man to whom the world is non-rational and who is therefore non-rational himself? In other words, non-rationality is God's existence*" (PS 66).

Marx first worked out these ideas as a journalist. From early 1842 to early 1843 he wrote an article for a journal edited by his friend Ruge, the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, and a series of essays for a liberal (not radical) newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, whose editor he became in October 1842. Both of these periodicals were banned by the Prussian authorities, leading Marx to leave Germany for Paris. It is natural that these pieces were a sustained attack on the censorship policies of Kaiser Frederick William IV, but their ultimate target was the very idea of a Christian state that those policies sought to implement.

Marx wrote "Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction" for the *Deutsche Jahrbücher*. The new guidelines to censors on interpreting the censorship law of 1819 purported to support greater freedom of the press, but Marx sought to show (1) that they entailed greater restriction, (2) that they were in overt opposition to the law they were meant to interpret, and (3) that they were internally incoherent. While the 1819 edict stated that the purpose of the censorship was "to control whatever opposes the *fundamental principles* of religion *WITHOUT REGARD* to the opinions and doctrines of *particular* religious groups and sects permitted in the state," the new instructions abandoned this rather deistic stance: "Nothing will be tolerated which opposes *Christian* religion in general or a *particular doctrine* in a *frivolous* and *hostile manner*" (PS 75).

The idea of religion in general, which Marx pillories here as an irreligious idea, was a common Enlightenment response to religious wars and persecutions. Its defense in 1819 was meant "to oppose the fanatical injection of religious convictions into politics and the ensuing *intellectual confusion*" (PS 76). But what, Marx asks, "does fanatical injection of religious convictions into politics mean? It means that specific religious convictions can determine the state and that the *particular nature of religion* can become *the norm of the state*," which sounds to him like a good description of the Prussia envisaged by the new instructions (PS 76-77).

On the face of it Marx is opposing political power in the service of religious zeal. But he is suspicious that something even more sinister is at work here, religious power in the service of political zeal.

You should forbid that religion be drawn into politics — but you do not want to do that because you wish to base the state on faith rather than on free reason, with religion constituting for you the *general sanction of the positive*. Or you should permit the fanatical injection of religion into politics. Religion might be politically active in its own way, but you do not want that either. *For religion is to support secular matters without the latter's being subject to religion*. Once religion is drawn into politics, it becomes an insufferable, indeed an irreligious presumption to want to determine on secular grounds how religion has to operate within politics. If one allies himself with religion from religiosity, one must give religion the decisive voice in all matters. Or do you perhaps understand by religion the *cult of your own sovereignty and governmental wisdom*? (PS 77-78)²

Marx could scarcely be clearer. He sees Prussia as a "police state" (PS 91) that is seeking to deodorize itself with the "spiritual aroma" (see pp. 136-37 above, Marx's ¶13) of religion, to legitimize itself by making religion the sanction for its practices. Far from religious zeal being the operative motive, it is political power that here seduces religion into its own service with the perks that it can offer. The proof of this is that religion is allowed to say Yes but not No, for "*religion is to support secular matters without the latter's being subject to religion*." It is not surprising that when Marx returned to the subject of censorship a

2. I have omitted some of Marx's emphases in this citation, and added one of my own in order to highlight what I take to be the point of central interest for us. That Marx uses the term "positive" for historically particular de facto political practices and not just for those features of religious life that derive from "special revelation" is clear from "The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law" (PS 96ff.). In the present context it is clear that the "*general sanction of the positive*" refers to the legitimation of social structures.

That it is the function of religion "*to support secular matters without the latter's being subject to religion*" was the view of Bismarck. He was eager to present his social legislation as "applied Christianity," but the churches were to have no part in it and its central aim was to strengthen the state. "The church . . . was not to advise on public affairs nor could the individual Christian apply Christian principles to his political activities . . . since the plan of God was unknown to man, there were no universal Christian principles which a statesman could apply to politics. . . . Bismarck actually took the *raison d'état* as the guiding star of his policy." Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 290, 150-51.