

Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies



The Challenge of Secularism

'Society would be happier without religion because it is infantile, repressive and causes conflict.' Discuss.

Is religion dangerous and bad for us?

- AO1** God is an illusion and the result of wish fulfilment
- The views of Freud and Dawkins that society would be happier without Christianity as it is infantile, repressive and causes conflict
- AO2** whether or not there is evidence that Christianity is a major cause of personal and social problems

Religion as an illusion: Freud

Sigmund Freud is regarded as having contributed to the change in Western thinking about religion. He offered an explanation for the existence of religion that differs from the explanations found in theology, ethics and philosophy. His alternative account comes from the theories he developed about how the human mind works.

Freud denounced religion as a lie:

...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 majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life.

...the religions of mankind must be classed as among the mass delusions.

Although he was clearly fascinated with religion and its appeal, Freud believed that religion and modern religious belief are a delusion that exists to protect us from nature and fate. According to Freud, religion is a product of wish fulfilment. The experience of vulnerability and helplessness that humans experience as children is made more tolerable by the invented belief that there is a purpose to life, with a moral code advanced by a higher wisdom, and that any injustices in this life will be corrected in the next. Human beings personify the things they want to influence, so a deity or divine force is invented to replace the sense of uncertainty with something controllable.

Religion also represses human desires, particularly desires that are destructive to society such as sexual violence, theft and murder. The Commandments illustrate this with their emphasis on not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery and so on.

Life in this world serves a higher purpose; no doubt it is not easy to guess what that purpose is, but it certainly signifies a perfecting of man's nature. It is probably the spiritual part of man, the soul, which in the course of time has so slowly and unwillingly detached itself from the body, which is the object of this elevation and exaltation. Everything that happens in this world is an expression of the intentions of an intelligence superior to us, which in the end,

though its ways and byways are difficult to follow, orders everything for the best - that is, to make it enjoyable for us. Over each one of us there watches a benevolent Providence which is only seemingly stern and which will not suffer us to become a plaything of the over-mighty and pitiless forces of nature.

Death itself is not extinction, is not a return to inorganic lifelessness, but the beginning of a new kind of existence which lies on the path of development to something higher.

And, looking in the other direction, this view announces that the same moral laws which our civilizations have set up govern the whole universe as well, except that they are maintained by a supreme court of justice with incomparably more power and consistency. In the end all good is rewarded and all evil punished, if not actually in this form of life then in the later existences that begin after death. In this way all the terrors, the sufferings and the hardships of life are destined to be obliterated. Life after death, which continues life on earth just as the invisible part of the spectrum joins on to the visible part, brings us all the perfection that we may perhaps have missed here.

Freud

Freud argues that religious ideas are highly prized because they provide information that humans crave about things that cannot be discovered through a study of reality. This affects how religious people look on those who do not share their ideas:

Anyone who knows nothing of [religious ideas] is very ignorant; and anyone who has added them to his knowledge may consider himself much the richer

Freud

Religious beliefs and teachings demand to be believed because they were believed by our ancestors and passed down to us and, historically, societies severely punished those who challenged them. As a result, Freud argues that there are many problems with the claims made in the name of religion. He writes:

...the proofs they have left us are set down in writings which themselves bear every mark of untrustworthiness. They are full of contradictions, revisions and falsifications, and where they speak of factual confirmations they are themselves unconfirmed.

According to Freud, religion assuages infantile fears we have of things we cannot change, and represses negative human behaviours. Discarding theological, philosophical and ethical explanations of religion and observing it as part of his study of the human mind, Freud believed religion is unhealthy. It is a cultural carrier for much negative information, dividing people and causing conflict as non-believers, people who do not have the religious knowledge that believers have, are seen as inferior. Freud is also concerned about the psychological impact that religiously framed ideas have on the mind. He can see that religion

is produced by uncertainty and anxiety about things beyond our control, but it creates something unreliable and unhealthy.

Religion as something for children to escape from: Dawkins

Richard Dawkins is a scientist who has articulated a vociferous critique of religion, and his criticism draws on a range of social and cultural observations and interpretations of religion.

There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else (parents in the case of children, God in the case of adults has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point...Somebody else must be responsible for my well-being, and somebody else must be to blame if I am hurt. Is it a similar infantilism that really lies behind the 'need' for a God?

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

Dawkins thinks that life should be meaningful without reference to religion. The human need for God is infantile and an adult should be able to find meaning in life from sources other than religion. Religion is repressive, he suggests, identifying religious dress codes as an example of the way in which religion represses women. The burka not only ensures female submission, it is also a metaphor for the impact that religion has on reducing our ability to perceive and understand things. While religion narrows our perception, science widens it. And religion not only dims our view of the world, it is also the cause of conflict. Dawkins suggests that conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and those between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the Middle East exemplify, the problem.

Religion is something that everyone needs to escape from, but Dawkins is particularly concerned about the indoctrination of children by religion, as well as other harm that religion can bring upon children. He is concerned that in bringing children up as religious, by labelling them as religious, harm is being done. Dawkins cites instances in the nineteenth century of children of Jewish parents being kidnapped by priests and raised as Catholics (usually by Catholic nursemaids) after secret baptisms. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins uses these examples to illustrate 'the religious mind', a mind in which the sprinkling of water over the head of a baby can totally change that baby's life in a way that takes precedence over the consent and wishes of parents and children, and over everything that ordinary common sense and human feeling would see as important. Dawkins argues that the idea that an uncomprehending child can be regarded as Jewish or Christian is absurd, something that comes about when a mind is 'hijacked by religious faith'. He also refers to the sexual abuse of children by Christian ministers, and identifies the abuse and brutality of the Christian brothers in Ireland and the sadistic cruelty of nuns in many of Ireland's girls' schools.

However, Dawkins' concern is not just with specific examples such as these, but with the general practice of religious parents bringing up their children as religious, and the state's acquiescence in allowing children, who are not of the age of consent, to be considered religious (as they are in some school admissions processes). For Dawkins, bringing up a child as a Catholic is a form of long-term psychological abuse. He describes conversations with a

women who had been a victim of sexual abuse as a girl but found the abuse of the fear of going to hell was an even greater harm than the sexual violence.

The power of belief to abuse is far greater than the impact of physical abuse, Dawkins argues. He cites the example of a Hell House, devised by a pastor in Colorado, where children were scared witless by what might happen to them after they die. Actors played out the sins of abortion and homosexuality and then the sinners were tortured and punished in hell by a devil-like figure. This can leave profound scars on a person's psyche.

Dawkins argues that Christianity is replete with messages of these kinds of extremes, and he references Mark 9:43-44 which mentions the cutting off of offending hands, as an example. He quotes Nicholas Humphry's Amnesty Lecture of 1997:

I am talking about moral and religious education. And especially the education a child receives at home, where parents are allowed (even expected) to determine for their children what counts as truth and falsehood, right and wrong.

Children, I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas - no matter who these other people are.

Parents, correspondingly, have no God-given licence to enculturate their children in whatever ways they personally choose: no right to limit the horizons of their children's knowledge, to bring them up in an atmosphere of dogma and superstition, or to insist they follow the straight and narrow paths of their own faith.

In short, children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense, and we, as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.

Nicholas Humphrey, 'What Shall We Tell the Children?' Amnesty Lecture, 21. February 1997

Religion and belief as a source of well-being: Marchant

Freud and Dawkins both argue, in different ways, that religion and religious belief harm the human mind and that people would be happier without Christianity. As a consequence, they present arguments for restricting parental control over the upbringing of their children.

However, there are scientists who argue that some beliefs can be shown to be good for people. Jo Marchant, a science journalist, suggests there is compelling evidence for positive medical and psychological benefits arising from some beliefs. In *Cure: A Journey into the Science of Mind Over Body* (2016), she does not seek to defend religion but explores how a

range of practices and beliefs (many of which are found in religion and include social gatherings, belief in a loving God, time of prayerful stillness and silence, and being part of something bigger) bring about physiologically measurable benefits to the participants.

Marchant cites a scientist who studied loneliness and found that social connections and a belief in the transcendent were important features for living happier and longer lives, and that these features are prominent in religious believers. After interviewing scientists and doctors who provided compelling evidence, she concluded that belief has a positive effect on people's mental and spiritual well-being:

...feeling part of something bigger may help us not only to deal with life's daily hassles but to defuse our deepest source of angst: knowledge of our own mortality...There are powerful evolutionary forces driving us to believe in God, or in the remedies of sympathetic healers, or to believe that our prospects are more positive than they are. The irony is that although those beliefs might be false, they do sometimes work: they make us better.

Marchant is not necessarily disagreeing with Freud's analysis of the reason why people are religious, but the scientists she interviewed come to a radically different conclusion to the one that Freud reached.

Christianity can be seen as having a negative influence on society. It can be seen as patriarchal and sexist in the way in which it depicts women narrowly and limits their life chances. For example, traditionally, only men have been allowed to take on leadership roles within Christian Churches and women have been defined exclusively in terms of motherhood.

Christianity can encourage infantile and 'unscientific' views of the world. For example, Dawkins points to the role he says Christianity has played in the criminalisation of homosexuality (which was illegal in the UK until 1967). He points to the 'American Taliban' (evangelical Christians who say that Aids is God's punishment on homosexuals) as an illustration of how upsetting ideas can be developed through religion (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006, p. 237). The problem for society, he argues, is that an absolutist faith finds other belief systems and other ways of behaving incomprehensible, and exercises influence over the law to criminalise anything that differs from the moral absolutes it offers.

An absolutist faith also has a negative influence on society in the area of the sanctity of human life and the attempts to restrict or limit women's access to abortion, Dawkins suggests. He offers up the example of George W. Bush. While Governor of Texas, Bush oversaw more than a third of the executions that took place in the USA at the time, while simultaneously preventing medical research on embryonic life. Dawkins sees applying the death penalty on the one hand, while preventing scientific research that might alleviate suffering on the other, as an example of the damage religious absolutism causes to society. Dawkins notes that Mother Teresa of Calcutta said in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech that abortion is the greatest destroyer of peace, and he points to the distorted stories and untruths that anti-abortion campaigners use to persuade people to join their opposition to legal abortions.

The difficulty with the argument that Christianity is the major cause of religious and social problems is that multiple examples are used to

make a general point about Christianity, or religion more widely. And a wide range of alternative examples can be used to present the counter-argument. What about the examples of religious leaders who spearheaded social change?

- In the nineteenth century, Christian churches established schools for the poor in England.
- Anglican Bishops were instrumental in the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the 1960s, at a time when other parts of the British establishment resisted change.
- Many prominent civil rights activists who played a leading role in challenging segregation in the USA, such as Martin Luther King Jr, were religious.
- Many of the food banks run by volunteers throughout the UK today were set up and are now run by Christians and local churches.

Each example can be used to support Christianity or religion in general, but it is not clear how to judge which examples in tit-for-tat debate should be given most weight in order to help us come to a conclusion.

A further problem centres on how this debate frames the concept of religion and Christianity. It can be argued that one side draws on examples of what might be called 'bad religion' or 'bad Christianity', while the other side draws on examples of 'good religion' or 'good Christianity'. The proponents of one particular viewpoint choose the most extreme examples to support their argument. Perhaps this is because the kinds of examples that best represent the everyday behaviour of religion and the religious, Christianity and Christians, make the arguments less powerfully: members of local churches visiting the lonely or bringing them together in knitting groups or for harvest lunches; offering a mechanism for regular contact with others in a social setting and providing emotional support; giving time and resources to local charitable activities.

There is a difficulty in talking about 'what Christianity does'. Does this mean 'what (some) Christians do', or 'what (some) Christian institutions do', or 'the impact that (some) forms of Christian thought might have'? Making a link between people's actions, the rules and systems of institutional bodies, and the systems of thought within them can be difficult, especially when it refers to a movement, such as Christianity, that takes on multiple cultural forms around the world.