

C.S. Lewis on Freud and Marx

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

One of the questions that atheists have to address is: If atheism is true, then how do you account for the universality of religion in all cultures and throughout all ages? It would seem that religion is either a response to something real or an invention of the human psyche fashioned in order to meet our psychological needs. Atheists choose the latter answer.



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C.S. Lewis lays out these two options in *The Abolition of Man*, where he says:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the "wisdom" of earlier ages. For the men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique.

The choice is to conform the soul to reality or to conform reality to our wishes. In other words, we can either conform desire to truth or truth to desire. C.S. Lewis suggests elsewhere that atheists have chosen the latter option. They desire that God not exist and create "truth" accordingly. This obviously turns the tables on atheists who suggest that religion is a "crutch" created by people for comfort in the face of a cold world. Lewis argues in effect that atheism is "wish-fulfillment" (against Freud) or an "opiate" (against Marx). Let's look at the background of this debate and how C.S. Lewis argues against this psychological charge about belief in God.

Background

German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) had a great influence on both Freud and Marx. Feuerbach argued in his book *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) that God is a projection of human consciousness

and that "Theology is anthropology." According to Feuerbach, religion tells us a lot about mankind and tells us nothing about God. Karl Marx (1818-1883) was fascinated by this thesis and took it a step further, applying it to social reform. According to Marx, religion is invented by the ruling classes in order to keep the masses content with their unjust work situations. Only if they remain content with their plight and not rock the boat are they promised a "pie in the sky"—heavenly reward. Marx believed that religion was the "opium of the people," dulling their pain so they could endure more pain. Religion thus needed to be smashed in order that workers would rebel against their oppressors.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) took Feuerbach's critique further in the psychological direction. He argued that belief in God was an illusion arising out of "wish-fulfillment."

C.S. Lewis's Response

In his earlier life, C.S. Lewis was an atheist. Not until age thirty-three—and already a tutor at Oxford—did he become a believer. His previous beliefs had certainly been influenced by Freud and Marx. In fact, *Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis's first apologetic work written only two years after his conversion, repeatedly pokes holes in this psychological argument of "wish-fulfillment." *Pilgrim's Regress*, like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, involves a quest or journey embarked on by a seeker, John. However, unlike Bunyan's main character, Christian, John does not encounter generic temptations that could divert him from life in Christ; rather, he is faced with the challenges of specific people common to the intellectual life of then-modern culture.

In the story, John is seeking a beautiful island that he has seen in a vision. He has left his home in Puritania and has begun to reject his belief in the Landlord (God), his card of rules (Law), and the "black hole" (Hell). Along the way he encounters Sigismund Enlightenment (Freud's birth name, which he later changed to Sigmund).

Sigismund (S) speaks persuasively to John (J):

S—*It may save you trouble if I tell you at once the best reason for not trying to escape: namely, that there is nowhere to escape to.*

J—*How do you know that there is no such place as my island?*

S—*Do you wish very much that there was?*

J—*I do.*

S—*Have you ever imagined anything to be true because you greatly wished for it?*

John thought for a while and then he said, "Yes."

S—*And your island is like an imagination – isn't it?*

J—*I suppose so.*

S—*It's just the sort of thing you would imagine merely through wanting it – the whole thing is very suspicious.*

It is certainly the case that wishing for something does not make it real or true. On the other hand, wishing for something does not prove the unreality or falsity of that for which you wish. If you are hungry, you may wish for food; food is a reality that corresponds to your desire. If you are thirsty, you may desire drink; drink is a reality that corresponds to your desire. Similarly, there is sleep that corresponds to your desire for rest, and sex that corresponds to sexual desire. But what about other desires? Does a desire for meaning point toward a real satisfaction for this desire? What about a desire for dignity, or a desire for immortality, or a desire for God? All these deeply human aspirations, Lewis argues, function as cosmic pointers to real satisfaction. (I will develop this further in a future article.)

Take the capacity for "awe" that human beings experience. This desire to stand before that which inspires awe seems to be highest in poets, philosophers, novelists, and saints. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis says:

There seem to be only two views we can hold about awe. Either it is a mere twist in the human mind, corresponding to nothing objective and serving no biological function, yet showing no tendency to disappear from that mind at its fullest development in poet, philosopher, or saint; or else, it is a direct experience of the really supernatural, to which the name Revelation might properly be given.

Materialists such as Feuerbach, Freud, and Marx reduce what is often regarded as the highest aspirations of humanity to a mere twist. This makes human beings, of all beings, the most miserable. A rock can't contemplate the meaninglessness of life. If materialism is true, we must stare into the abyss, build our lives on the basis of "unyielding despair" (Bertrand Russell) or as full of sound and fury—signifying nothing. In any case, wishing for something does not prove that what is desired exists but certainly does not prove that what is desired does not exist. Natural desires have a corresponding fulfillment. If a desire for the supernatural is part of our human nature, might it be a cosmic pointer to a real God who exists to satisfy that desire?

In a later section of *Pilgrim's Regress*, Reason (R) and John (J) dialogue:

R—*The Spirit of the Age wishes to allow argument and not allow argument.*

J—*How is that?*

R—*You heard what they said. If anyone argues with them they say that he is rationalizing his own desires, and therefore need not be answered. But if anyone listens to them, they will argue themselves to show that their own doctrines are true.*

J—*I see. And what is the cure for this?*

R—*You must ask them whether any reasoning is valid or not. If they say no, then their own doctrines, being reached by reasoning, fall to the ground. If they say yes, then they will have to examine your arguments and refute them on their merits: for if some reasoning is valid, for all they know, your bit of reasoning may be one of the valid bits.*

For instance, Marx claims that all ideas arise out of matter, particularly the economic realm of matter. He seems to except himself from this argument. How is he able to get above this economic determination in order to give an undetermined theory of how religious and cultural ideas are caused? In Lewis's terms, is all reasoning determined by matter or not? If all reason is so determined, then Marx's theories have arisen out of his own material economic interests. If some reasoning is valid (Marx's ideas), then some religious and cultural ideas may be true, too.

In Freud's case, if all belief came out of the non-rational unconscious, then is this not true of Freud's own view? Either his explanation of others' views applies to himself or not. If it applies to himself, his own views are suspect. If it doesn't apply to him, why

not? Lewis argued that Freud and Marx were merrily “sawing off the branch they were sitting on.” Their philosophies were self-refuting.

In Lewis’s essay “Bul-verism” (in *First and Second Things*), he points out that this “wish-fulfillment” or “opiate” explanation of religion is guilty of a logical fallacy (begging the question). He uses the analogy of a bank account:

If you think that my claim to have a large balance is due to wishful thinking, it might be a good idea first to find out whether I have such an account and determine what amount I have in it.

Lewis says:

In other words, you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong. The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly.

In other words, Feuerbach, Freud, and Marx have called religion a “projection,” “wish-fulfillment,” and an “opiate” while neglecting the most important question of proving or disproving (in their case) whether God exists. They have assumed (begged the question) that God does not exist and then proceeded to call their opponents names or attach psychological labels to them. They *reject* rather than even attempt to *refute* their opponent’s position. Lewis invents a name for this fallacy, which he uses as a title for his essay “Bulverism.” The name comes from an imaginary character by the name of Ezekiel Bulver...

...whose destiny was determined at the age of five when he heard his mother say to his father—who had been maintaining that two sides of a triangle were together greater than that of the third—‘Oh, you say that because you are a man.’ ‘At that moment,’ E. Bulver assures us, ‘there flashed across my opening mind the great truth that refutation is no necessary part of an argument. Assume that your opponent is wrong, and then explain his error, and the world will be at your feet. Attempt to prove that he is wrong or (worse still) try to find out if he is wrong or right, and the rational dynamism of our age will thrust you to the wall.’ That is how Bulver became one of the makers of the twentieth century.

Bulverism is a very convenient and often used ploy. In fact, Lewis says that he sees Bulverism at work in “every political argument” and until “Bulverism is

crushed, reason can play no effective part in human affairs.” In any case, Freud and Marx are both guilty of rejecting (rather than refuting), name-calling, and logical fallacy, as well as being self-contradictory.

If you want to play the Bulverism game, you need to understand that it works both ways. Bulverism is a “truly democratic game.” Lewis says:

...I see my religion dismissed on the grounds that ‘the comfortable parson had every reason for assuring the nineteenth century worker that poverty would be rewarded in another world.’ Well, no doubt he had. On the assumption that Christianity is an error, I can see easily enough that some people would have a reason for inculcating it. I see it so easily that I can, of course, play the game the other way around, by saying that ‘the modern man has every reason for trying to convince himself that there are no eternal sanctions behind the morality he is rejecting.’

In fact, you might argue that atheism is a projection onto the cosmos of sinful, rebellious desires that God *not* exist. Atheism is an “opiate” of the conscience. Atheism is “wish-fulfillment,” a giant Oedipus complex wishing the death of the heavenly Father. However, you could only argue this after the matter is settled on other grounds—philosophical, historical, experiential, pragmatic, etc.

Lewis sums up his argument against Freud and Marx in “Bulverism”:

The Freudians have discovered that we exist as bundles of complexes. The Marxians have discovered that we exist as members of some economic class.... Their (our) thoughts are ideologically tainted at the source. Now this is obviously great fun; but it has not always been noticed that there is a bill to pay for it. There are two questions that people who say this kind of thing ought to be asked. The first is, Are all thoughts thus tainted at the source, or only some? The second is, Does the taint invalidate the tainted thought in the sense of making it untrue—or not?... If they say that all thoughts are thus tainted, then of course.... The Freudian and the Marxian are in the same boat with all the rest of us and cannot criticize us from the outside. They have sawn off the branch they are sitting on. If, on the other hand, they say that the taint need not invalidate their thinking, then neither need it invalidate ours. In which case, they have saved their own branch, but also saved ours along with it.

The problem with Marx, Freud, and a host of post-modernists is that if they succeed, then they fail. They are “trying to prove that all proofs are invalid. If you

fail, you fail. If you succeed, then you fail even more—for the proof that all proofs are invalid must be invalid itself.”

So, in the end, you have two choices. Either you can conform your desires to the truth, affirming that there is a God who is not silent and that reality was created with a place for you in it, or you can deny that there is such a reality and attempt to create a “truth” in conformity with your desires. You can attempt to create your own reality. Freud and Marx tried to create their own reality and failed. They were suspicious of everybody else but not sufficiently suspicious of themselves and their own theories. Let’s learn from the lessons of the past, especially as we face a similar postmodern suspicion surrounding us today.

There is truth—a God who exists and has revealed Himself in Christ. He has created a world that we can know and explore and enjoy. All truth is God’s truth. Let us conform ourselves to it.

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