

Critiques of religious belief

Helping you revise the key critiques

Edexcel: 6RS03, A2
Unit 3 Developments



Sociological arguments

Durkheim's theory of religion argues that religion plays a function in society: to unite and preserve the community. He defined religion as: 'A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all who adhere to them.' He likened a religious community to a primitive clan that worshipped a totem, symbolising God and the unity of the clan. The clan and God are one and the same, hence there is no separate entity called God, and thus God does not exist. What does exist is a unified social system that believes it owes its being to God. This belief is expressed in shared rituals, values and identity, and discourages change.

Criticisms of Durkheim's view

- Religious believers distinguish between membership of their religious community and belief in God. Their loyalty is to God, not to the community.
- The theory does not explain how religious believers are sometimes prepared to go against society and even to reject it.
- Society constantly changes; beliefs about the nature of God are timeless and unchanging.

Marx

Marx, who maintained that economics was the motivation behind all things in society, argued that God was an invention of the human mind in order to satisfy emotional needs. Only by loving one another rather than God could man regain his humanity and reclaim the powers that belonged to man, but which man had ascribed to God. Religion was used by the ruling classes to dominate and oppress their subjects, offering them an illusion of escape. Marx maintained that when a revolution overthrew the ruling class, and religion was abolished, the oppressed masses could be liberated.

Psychological arguments

Freud argued that religion is a projective system, a 'universal neurosis' which should be disregarded as illusory. Like Durkheim, Freud also saw the origins of religious belief as lying in the primitive horde. The tension between the dominant male and the subordinate males led to the overthrow of the father (a manifestation of the Oedipus complex), but the subsequent guilt of the sons leads them to elevate his memory and to worship him. The superego takes the place of the father as the source of authority, which is derived from the family, education and the Church. Freud maintained that man was still dependent upon religion to 'make his helplessness tolerable'.

Carl Jung

Carl Jung was Freud's pupil, but left Freud after they disagreed over the role of sexuality and spirituality in an individual's psychological development: Freud emphasised sexuality over spirituality; Jung disagreed. Jung was concerned with the interplay between conscious and unconscious forces. He proposed two kinds of unconscious: *personal* and *collective*. Personal unconscious (shadow) includes those things about ourselves that we would like to forget. The collective unconscious refers to events that we all share, by virtue of having a common heritage (humanity). For example, the image (archetype) of a mythic hero is something that is present in all cultures, and often viewed as a god.

Criticisms of Freud's view

- Freud attributed all religious behaviour to the projection of psychosexual drives and claimed that the individual's relation to God depended on their relationship with their father. This is a highly generalised observation and based on a limited study.
- Kate Lowenthal distinguished between *projective* religion, which is immature, and *intrinsic* religion, which is serious and reflective. Freud assumed that all aspects of belief in God were immature, and he neglected the diversity and development of religious beliefs.
- Arthur Guirdham argued that Freud overplayed the connection between belief in God and the psychopathological tendencies of much organised religion, and between the feeling of security in the womb (the *oceanic feeling*) and religious belief. He observed that Freud's anti-religious stance may be thought just as neurotic as the religious preoccupations of others.

Is the atheist on stronger ground?

If it is not possible to decisively prove the existence of God, it must be impossible to disprove it too. Consider now whether the atheist really is on any stronger ground than the theist, remembering that the same rules of proof and probability must apply to an atheistic argument as to a theistic one.

To think about...

1 *It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.*

Rudolph Bultmann

- Is this an atheist view?
 - Consider critically whether any of these arguments support the claim that there is no God.
- 2 *It is wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence.*
- Consider the meaning of this claim with reference to atheism.