

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 3

1-1-1987

Taking Suspicion Seriously: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism

Merold Westphal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Westphal, Merold (1987) "Taking Suspicion Seriously: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

TAKING SUSPICION SERIOUSLY: THE RELIGIOUS USES OF MODERN ATHEISM

Merold Westphal

The atheism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud can be called the atheism of suspicion in contrast to evidential atheism. For while the latter focuses on the truth of religious beliefs, the former inquires into their function. It asks, in other words, what motives lead to belief and what practices are compatible with and authorised by religious beliefs. The primary response of Christian philosophers should not be to refute these analyses, since they are all too often true and, moreover, very much of the same sort as found in the religion critique of Jesus and the prophets. Rather, our primary response should be to show the Christian community, including ourselves, how even the truth can become an instrument of self-interest. In this way the atheism of suspicion can provide helpful conceptual tools for personal and corporate self-examination.

It is not every form of modern atheism that I have in mind. It is, in particular, the atheism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, three of the most widely influential atheists of the modern era. The decision to focus on these three requires a simultaneous broadening and narrowing of the meaning of 'atheism'.

To begin, 'atheism' comes to be used as a synonym for religious unbelief in a broad and inclusive sense. It includes both the atheist proper, who purports to know that God does not exist, and the agnostic who, with a kind of Socratic ignorance, only purports to know that we don't or can't know whether God exists or not. 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 theory to practice with the claim that the liturgical, devotional, and ethical practices of the religious life are rationally impermissible or at best unwarranted.

There is a narrowness, however, which corresponds to this broadness of usage. For Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are representative of a specific type of atheism, a type different from the type which has dominated European philosophy of religion from at least the time of Gaunilo through Kant and which continues to this day to hold center stage in Anglo-American discussion. This latter type, which we can call evidential atheism, 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 God were to ask him why he had not been a believer: "I'd say, 'Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!'"



Following Ricoeur, who has designated Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the “masters” of the “school of suspicion,”² we can speak of the atheism of suspicion in distinction from evidential atheism. Suspicion can be distinguished from Cartesian doubt and the epistemological tradition governed by it in that Cartesian doubt is directed toward the elusiveness and opacity of things or facts, while suspicion is directed toward the evasiveness and mendacity of consciousness.³ Its target is not the proposition but the person who affirms it, not the belief but the believer. Its attack on the theory and practice of religion is an indirect one, whose immediate goal is to discredit the believing soul.

In other words, suspicion assumes that the task of epistemological reflection is not completed until the problem of false consciousness is met head on. It assumes, in Ricoeur’s words, that “representation obeys not only a law of intentionality, which makes it the expression of some object, but also another law, which makes it the manifestation of life, of an effort or desire. It is because of the interference of the latter expressive function that representation can be distorted. Thus representation may be investigated in two ways: on the one hand, by a gnoseology (or criteriology) according to which representation is viewed as an intentional relation ruled by objects that manifest themselves in that intentionality, and on the other hand by an exegesis of the desires that lie hidden in that intentionality.” Either project by itself would be reductive and abstract. The moment of suspicion is necessary to keep before us “the nonautonomy of knowledge, its rootedness in existence, the latter being understood as desire and effort. 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.”⁴

The difference between these two types of reflection can be illustrated from David Hume’s philosophy of religion. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and in Sections X and XI of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he asks familiar questions about whether there is sufficient evidence to provide rational support for belief in God and miracles. But in the Introduction to *The Natural History of Religion* Hume distinguishes between such questions “concerning [religion’s] foundation in reason” and those “concerning its origin in human nature.”⁵

This question of origin, to which the *Natural History* is devoted, turns out in the first instance to be a question 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, the appetite

for food and other necessities.” In short, the originating motive for the religious life is the hopes and fears of ordinary life, especially the latter.⁶

The hopes and fears that come to our attention in this way are not, at least not primarily, those which have been fashioned in the school of moral ideals. They are rather the hopes and fears of more or less immediate self-interest, and Hume sees them as constituting a “selfish view.” It is this standpoint of self-interest which Hume finds at the heart of “idolatry or polytheism.”⁷ But since the negative effects which Hume sees as stemming from this “selfish view” belong to popular religion as such and are not limited to polytheism, it looks as if Hume is working toward a definition of idolatry or superstition—he uses the terms interchangeably—which depends more on the motivation of the believing soul than on the propositional content of belief.

Hume gives special attention to two such effects. Where our relation to someone of superior power is primarily based on our hopes and fears of what we can get out of the relationship, the temptation is all but unavoidable to resort to flattery. The believing soul will naturally speak of adoration, but the suspicion of Hume detects adulation. Just to the degree that this suspicion is well founded, the relationship between believer and deity shows itself to be dishonest, founded on falsehood.⁸ Naturally, if the believer is not shameless and cynical, it will be necessary not only to hide this dishonesty from the deity but from the believing soul as well. Piety becomes inseparable from self-deception.

When piety is grounded in self-interest there is a second consequence, however, which reveals that the self-deception and dishonesty just noted do not remain internal to the relation between believer and deity. 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.” He finds 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.”⁹ Once again it looks as if he is giving a contextual definition of idolatry and superstition as the comfortable views which 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 a general one. To ask about the *origin* of religion in human nature is not only to ask about the *motives* of the religious life, and thus about the inwardness of the believing soul; it is also to ask about the *function* of the religious life, and thus about the public behavior “compatible with” or “authorised by” it.

Hume’s suspicion of religion culminates in this question about the function

of faith. On his view reflection on religious beliefs can be neither serious nor complete until the question is posed: what practices (lifestyles, institutions) do these beliefs in fact (that is, in real life) serve to legitimate. This question of function does not replace the question of motive; for, as the later masters of the school of suspicion know full well, in a context where self-deception is all too possible, function is the best and sometimes the only key to motive. We find out what our real motives are only when we find out what role our beliefs actually play in our lives.

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are the masters of the school of suspicion because they carry out this Humean project unrelentingly. Unlike Hume, they do so in the context of an unambiguous atheism. It seems to me, however, that it is not the aggressive and uncompromising nature of their atheism that should govern our response as Christian philosophers to them but rather its foundation in suspicion. For I believe, and this is the major point I want to make, that our response to the atheism of suspicion should be entirely different from our response to evidential atheism.

I want to place my suggestion about our response to the atheism of suspicion in the context of Al Plantinga's timely advice to Christian philosophers, reminding us that we unavoidably wear two hats, one as Christian participants in the larger philosophical world and one as the philosophers of the Christian community, to which we belong in a more fundamental sense.¹⁰ This community has its own philosophical needs, whether it recognizes them or not, and as the philosophers of the Christian community these needs are our task. There are times when both the topics we address and the audience to which we address ourselves need to be governed by this role. This is the fact which grounds my belief that the two kinds of atheism call for two kinds of response from us.

Our primary response to evidential atheism, it seems to me, should be to seek to refute it. This can be done by trying to show that there is sufficient evidence to make religious beliefs (and the practices linked to them) rationally respectable. Or it can be done by challenging the way in which the evidentialist demands evidence. I shall not here discuss the relative merits of these strategies, though I will predict that the most recent challenge to evidentialism as such in the form of the so-called Calvinist epistemology 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.¹¹

Our primary response to the atheism of suspicion, by contrast, should not be attempted refutation but the acknowledgment that its critique is all too true all too much of the time. Further, while the apologetic refutation of evidential atheism is addressed to the unbeliever (even if the believer is the primary consumer), the acknowledgment that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have described us all too accurately should be addressed to the community of believers. In short,

I am calling upon Christian philosophers to be the prophetic voices which challenge the Christian community to take seriously the critique of religion generated by suspicion and which show the Christian community how to do so fruitfully. To that end I want a) to indicate why I think this should be our response, b) to address two objections or potential obstacles to accepting this responsibility, and c) to illustrate, if ever so briefly, how to go about taking suspicion seriously.

If the nasty things suspicion says about religion are indeed all too true all too much of the time, that would be sufficient reason to take suspicion seriously rather than to seek to refute it. The commitment of philosophy to the truth should be, if anything, deepened by our identity as Christian philosophers. We, of all people, should be the last to be interested in refuting the truth.

But how can we be enabled to recognize in the diatribes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud the painful truth about ourselves? The best way, in my view, is to recognize the powerful parallel between their critique of religion and the biblical critique of religion. One has but to mention Jesus' critique of the Pharisees, Paul's critique of works righteousness, and James' critique of cheap grace to be reminded that the Christian 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.¹² These New Testament diatribes against false religion cannot be neutralized by appeals to either metaphysical orthodoxy or ritual rectitude and zeal, which is to say that the God of the New Testament transcends both metaphysics and ritual and cannot be captured by either or both.

But this is not new. The same kind of critique permeates the Old Testament, whose writers know, in the words of Buber, that "if there is nothing that can hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can, religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God."¹³ The kinds of religion which can do this are forms of instrumental religion, the religion in which the sacred power becomes a means to the achieving of human ends. Instrumental religion need not violate the first two of the Ten Commandments, for it can be practiced in the name of Yahweh and without the aid of graven images. But it violates the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." In historical context this is not so much a prohibition of what we think of as swearing as it is of magical practices and conjuring. Commenting on this meaning of the third commandment, Von Rad gives in effect a helpful definition of instrumental religion. "Israel has been assailed at all periods by the temptation to use the divine power with the help of the divine name in an anti-social manner and to place it at the service of private and even sinister interests."¹⁴

The Old Testament critique of instrumental religion finds its clearest expression in the sustained polemic, not against Israel's tendency to go "whoring" after other gods, but against religious practices, especially sacrifice, performed in Yahweh's own name. Sacrifice is unacceptable, even detestable, when it is

combined with disobedience to the revealed will of God.¹⁵ More specifically, when sacrifice is “compatible with” economic exploitation and indifference toward the poor, allowing people to think that these practices are “authorised by” the halo of sanctity which shines forth from such rites, the rites themselves become sinful acts which evoke God’s wrath and lead to punishment.¹⁶ As one theologian has put it, in such circumstances “what is in fact required by Yahweh has become blasphemy.”¹⁷

Another way to put the same point would be to say that what is verbally the worship of the one true God has become idolatry. We might call it third commandment idolatry, for when we take God’s name in vain by using religion to legitimate impious practices we worship in fact another god. In his *Narnia Chronicles* C. S. Lewis has put the point succinctly. Tash is the false god of the pagan Calormenes, of whom Aslan, the true God, says, “We are opposites.” But Aslan also says, “And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted.”¹⁸

Martin Buber has described “the degenerate sacrificial cult, in which the offering is changed from being a sign of the extreme self-devotion and becomes a ransom from all true self-devotion” as “the baalisation of YHVH Himself.”¹⁹ Part of what it means to say that God is a jealous God is that he allows himself to be worshipped only in conformity with his character as it has been revealed to human understanding. Therefore, to seek to place the divine power at our disposal while freeing ourselves from responsibility to God’s revealed will is to worship another god, no matter what name we use. In the ancient world magical practices were a primary way of doing this. In the modern world there are many creative variations on this theme of magical, instrumental religion; and it is precisely these that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are so good at exposing. Eagerness to refute the masters of suspicion rather than to take them seriously may well be a way of putting ourselves in the company of those who rejected Jesus and the prophets in biblical times.

While reluctance to having our own personal and corporate idolatries exposed is no doubt the most serious obstacle to opening ourselves to suspicion’s questioning, there are two lesser objections which deserve a response. The first comes from those most fully at home in Anglo-American philosophical traditions often lumped together under the rubric ‘analytic’. It goes like this. It is not even clear that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are philosophers; but insofar as they are, their roots are in the lugubrious landscape of post-Kantian speculative metaphysics, in the unintelligibilities of people like Hegel and Schopenhauer. How can we be asked to try to understand them, let alone take them seriously?

Hume is helpful here not only because he presents the structure of suspicion with such clarity, but also because he makes it clear that the hermeneutics of suspicion is not an idiosyncrasy of post-Kantian German culture. On the contrary,

suspicion turns out to be a very common and widespread part of our intellectual heritage. Hume's contemporary, Rousseau, applied it in the political sphere when describing the final stages of political decline. "Finally, when the State, close to its ruin, continues to subsist only in an illusory and ineffectual form; when the social bond is broken in all hearts; *when the basest interest brazenly adopts the sacred name of the public good*, then the general will becomes mute; all—*guided by secret motives*—are no more citizens in offering their opinions than if the State had never existed, *and iniquitous decrees whose only goal is the private interest are falsely passed under the name of laws.*"²⁰

Hume's own suspicion can fruitfully be viewed as but the development of ideas presented by Francis Bacon in his critique of the Idols of the Tribe and Cave. "The human understanding," writes Bacon, "is no dry light, 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.*" Then, after referring to impatience, hope, superstition, arrogance, and pride, he 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 student of nature adopt the rule "that *whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is to be held in suspicion.*"²¹

In our own time suspicion plays a prominent role in Anglo-American moral philosophy. It is suspicion that leads Rawls to create the veil of ignorance in seeking to define justice. At least if Dworkin's interpretation is correct, the original position serves to filter out the self-deceptive self-interest which otherwise contaminates discussions of justice. "It supposes, reasonably, that political arrangements that do not display equal concern and respect are those that are established by *powerful men and women who, whether they recognize it or not, have more concern and respect for members of a particular class, or people with particular talents or ideals, than they have for others.*" The veil of ignorance serves to make it impossible for those who determine the rules society will run on "to *design institutions, consciously or unconsciously, to favor their own class.*"²²

Similarly, it is suspicion that leads R. M. Hare to challenge anything more than a *prima facie* reliance on our *prima facie* moral institutions in asking what rights I may possess. "For people who ask this latter question will, being human, nearly always answer that they have just those rights, whatever they are, which will promote a distribution of goods which is in the interest of their own social group. *The rhetoric of rights*, which is engendered by this question, *is a recipe for class war, and civil war.* In pursuit of these rights, people will, because they have convinced themselves that justice demands it, inflict almost any harms on the rest of society and themselves."²³

Alasdair MacIntyre goes even farther. In his view it is not only the concept of rights, but also the concept of utility, to which Hare appeals as a corrective, and even the concept of the efficiency of experts which he suspects of being moral fictions. By moral fictions he means concepts whose use is ironical but is not noticed to be so. Irony in its simplest form involves the discrepancy between the purported meaning and the actual use of discourse. The refrain from Mark Anthony's funeral oration is a familiar example, "But Brutus is an honorable man." The statement which presents itself as commendation actually functions to raise doubts and eventually to accuse. Similarly, MacIntyre argues, in contemporary moral discourse key concepts often purport to offer objective and impersonal criteria while their use is actually that of rhetorical manipulation in the service of unavowed interests. It is typical of the modern world that moral causes "offer a rhetoric which serves to conceal behind the masks of morality what are in fact the preferences of arbitrary will and desire..."²⁴

A final example of the wide ranging contexts in which we encounter suspicion brings us back to religion rather than politics and morality as the target. It is from Augustine's *Confessions*. In the midst of the story of how the friends of Ponticianus were dramatically changed by reading the life of Antony, Augustine writes, "But you, Lord, while he was speaking, were turning me around so that I could see myself; you 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...If I tried to look away from myself...you were setting me in front of myself, 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."²⁵

Along with Sartre's analysis of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* this passage is the finest account I know of the nature of the self-deception which suspicion seeks to uncover. That of which we are fully aware we nevertheless manage not to notice because it is easier not to notice than to deal honestly with what is there to be noticed. Thus, to use a very apt figure of speech, we turn a blind eye to unwelcome facts.²⁶

It was only as he was freed from this kind of bad faith that Augustine was able to discover the *origin*, in the Humean sense, of his Manichean faith, the pride which was its *motive* and the self-justification which was its *function*.²⁷ Not only was his religion "compatible" (Hume's term) with a lifestyle of which he himself did not approve, focused as it was on the pursuit of sexual pleasure, wealth, and social status; his religion "authorized" (Hume's term) his immoral behavior by providing a metaphysical theory which made him the innocent victim of an evil power outside himself. Augustine's primary complaint against the Manichean faith, once he had abandoned it, was not that it was false, but that

it functioned to legitimate a life of sin.

One could multiply examples, but I think these are sufficient to indicate that one need not be on the road that leads from Hegel to what has been called *die Derrida Krankheit* to have sufficient doubts about the disinterestedness of thought to become suspicious that behind many, if not all, things bright and beautiful there lies motivated self-deception. Like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the thinkers just mentioned are fully aware of both the ironical discrepancy between official meaning and actual use and the need of the ironist to hide this, not just from others but especially from himself or herself. If Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud differ essentially from the others it is not by virtue of the philosophical traditions with which they are most closely associated, but rather because their critique of morals and politics is embedded in their critique of religion and because their critique of religion is directed, not toward some form of paganism, but primarily toward the theory and practice of orthodox biblical religion. In both these respects their critique stands in the closest relation to that of Jesus and the prophets. As such it can become a powerful tool for personal and corporate self-examination if we will open ourselves to it in honesty and humility. Perhaps it would not be going too far to think of suspicion as the hermeneutics of Lent.

There is a second objection to taking suspicion seriously which deserves a reply. It goes like this. The atheism of suspicion involves the systematic practice of bad reasoning in the support of its unbelief. It combines the *ad hominem* and genetic fallacies and illegitimately infers the irrationality of religious belief and practice from the unfaithfulness of the believer. For the sake of truth and for the protection of the logically unsophisticated, it is important to point out the fallaciousness of these arguments.

The first thing to be said in reply to this objection is to grant its point. Kant, for example, seeks to free his own moral ideals from precisely this kind of pseudo-refutation, and 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: But people don't really act that way.

Kant himself can be added to our list of those who practice suspicion. He knows that "innocence is a glorious thing," but also that it "is easily led astray." Because the inclinations represent a "powerful counterweight" to duty, there "arises a natural dialectic, i.e., a propensity to quibble with these strict laws of duty, to cast doubt upon their validity...and to make them, where possible, more compatible with our wishes and inclinations." But it is not just by such amendments to the moral law that self-interest corrupts the moral life. Even when we do the right thing we do not always do so for the right reason. Sometimes "after the keenest self-examination we can find nothing except the moral ground of duty that could have been strong enough to move us to this or that good action and to such great sacrifice. But there cannot with certainty be inferred from this

that some secret impulse of self-love, merely appearing as the idea of duty, was not the actual determining cause of the will. We like to flatter ourselves with the false claim to a more noble motive; but in fact we can never, even by the strictest examination, completely plumb the depths of the secret incentives of our actions."²⁸

But while Kant 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, which is always turning up, and upon which the intent of our actions is based rather than upon the strict command of duty," 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..."²⁹

Ricoeur makes the same point in relation to the Freudian critique itself. 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. It has been said that Freud does not speak of God, but of god and the gods of men; what is involved is not the *truth* of the foundation of religious ideas but their *function*..."³⁰ This is precisely the point of the objection under consideration, that the question of truth and the question of function must be seen as two different questions.

There is another way to return the fire of suspicion's atheists. It derives from Dostoyevsky's insight that the psychological argument cuts both ways. We can call it the *et tu Brute* strategy. To see the way it works we might begin with an example which does not directly bear upon the critique of religion. Suppose F. A. Hayek wants to use suspicion to discredit egalitarian appeals for greater justice in the distribution of society's wealth. 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..."³¹

It is not easy to deny the presence of envy or even 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 the noise about liberty is but a mask for the greed of those most highly favored by the natural and social lotteries which have distributed the abilities to do what our society most generously rewards? 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 game with, for example, Freud. He finds our belief in the God of Judeo-Christian theism to be a wish-fulfilling illusion derived from our sense of helplessness before the impersonal indifference of nature. Under those circumstances he thinks we "tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be."³² This is the origin, in the Humean sense, of God the Father.

But both Freud's biography and his theory of the Oedipal complex testify to the fact that we have at least as powerful an inclination to hate and resent paternal power and authority as to long for it. *Et tu Sigmunde*. The pot is calling the kettle black. If our belief is a childish wish-fulfillment, is not your unbelief an adolescent rebellion combined with an infantile wish-fulfillment?

It is unquestionably possible to score points against the atheism of suspicion using either of these two strategies. The problem is that one only wins Pyrrhic victories in this manner and ends up dead right, which is just as dead as dead wrong. One reason for this is that while the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud often encourage the reader to make the fallacious inferences in question, they never, or at least almost never, formally make the arguments themselves. In fact, they sometimes warn against confusing the questions of motive and function with the question of truth. For example, in *The Future of An Illusion* Freud is careful to note that while we have reason to be suspicious of illusions, which he defines as beliefs whose motivation includes wish-fulfillment as a "prominent factor," such beliefs may nevertheless be true.³³

The reason why the atheists of suspicion need not formally rely on *ad hominem* or genetic arguments to establish their atheism is that if questioned about the grounds of their unbelief they would often reply in evidentialist terms. This is clearly the case in the instance just mentioned, Freud in *The Future of An Illusion*. There he gives a positivist, evidentialist rationale for his atheism. Whatever we cannot get from science in the way of justified belief simply cannot be justified.³⁴ In general I think the typical atheist of suspicion, if pressed for the grounds of

that atheism, will give an evidentialist answer of some sort. The hermeneutics of suspicion is not so much an answer to the question, "How can we prove that religion is wrong?" as it is to the question, "Since we already know that it is wrong, how can we explain how it survives and has such influence?" To argue that atheistic conclusions do not follow from suspicion's descriptions, even if these are well founded, is to make a good point. But it is also to throw a knockout punch that doesn't land.

But there is a more profound reason why attempting to refute or discredit the atheism of suspicion by either of the strategies under consideration is not an appropriate first response. The story of the Good Samaritan is introduced by an exchange between Jesus and a lawyer of the Pharisees about eternal life. The Pharisee is able to give the same magnificent two-fold summary of the law which Jesus himself gives on another occasion. But when Jesus tells him simply to do this and he will live he gets defensive. We read, "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.³⁵

We open ourselves to precisely this same critique when our first response to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is to try to score points against them by either of the strategies we've just noted. In either case the points we raise are worth raising in themselves. But in the circumstances we discredit ourselves more than our unbelieving brothers by raising them. For we stand accused by their critique of being Pharisees, of practicing a religion which by virtue of its instrumentalism of self-interest is idolatrous by our own standards. If our first response is to defend ourselves by attacking them, we invite the impartial observer to say, "But they, willing to justify themselves, began to talk about *ad hominem* and genetic fallacies and to turn suspicion against the suspicious." Just as Jesus taught us to attend to the speck in our brother'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 their critique seriously.³⁶

There is a final reason why we should resist the immediate inclination to refute the atheism of suspicion. We have already noted that what presents itself as the love of liberty or justice can turn out under the cross examination of suspicion to be but greed or envy. Nietzsche is especially fond of making this point and finds an elegant German word play for doing so. He writes, "And when they say, 'I am just,' [*ich bin gerecht*] it always sounds like 'I am just—revenged [*ich bin gerächt*].'"³⁷ The point is a general one about the irony of the moral life, that what presents itself as an altruistic virtue may be, in terms of motive and function, but an egoistic vice dressed up in its Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes. John Howard Yoder makes the warning in appropriately general terms. "The

real temptation of good people like us is not the crude and the crass and the carnal, as those traits were defined in popular puritanism...but [the temptation] of egocentric altruism; of being oneself the incarnation of a good and righteous cause for which others may rightly be made to suffer; of stating in the form of a duty to others one's self justification."³⁸

One can, like Kant, who knows all about this discrepancy between meaning and use, insist that the ideal (or the belief, as the case may be) remains untainted by our empirical imperfections. But there is a better refutation of Nietzsche and company on this issue. It is in fact the only real refutation, and it is a practical one and not a theoretical one. It is to practice the virtue (or proclaim the belief) even when it is manifestly not in one's interest (as usually understood) to do so. If, for example, the call for socio-economic justice is discredited as the envy and greed of the poor, then let the wealthy, whose possessions would be fewer in a more nearly just society, be the ones who preach justice and begin to practice it through the voluntary adoption of a less affluent lifestyle. This is just what Jesus taught with reference to the virtue of hospitality when he said, "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."³⁹

There is an important point to note about this practical refutation of suspicion, and it has a bearing on the claim that our first response to suspicion should be to take it seriously. Unless we have already taken suspicion seriously and learned from its critique the pitfalls of ironical morality and instrumental religion, we will neither see the need for this response to suspicion nor know what sort of behavior would constitute such a response. According to the practical logic of the situation, the one truly unanswerable refutation of suspicion's critique cannot be our first response but can only be a subsequent response.

There is an understandable hesitancy about subjecting our faith to a secular critique. Subjecting piety to suspicion may seem too much like casting pearls before swine. But perhaps Balaam's ass would provide a better metaphor, reminding us that God does not always speak to us through official priestly voices. While discussing the role of secular theories of justice in Christian ethics, Al Verhey makes a point which has a more general application to our problem. "In that dialogue such theories may challenge and judge certain claims made on the basis of Scripture. Scripture has, after all, been *used* to justify racial and sexual discrimination; it has been *used* to justify 'holy wars,' crusades, and inquisitions; it has been *used* to justify the abuse of power and the violation of the rights and integrity of others in order to pursue what has been taken to be God's cause. Secular moral wisdom, and especially the principle of justice, has sometimes challenged such *uses* of Scripture and led the church to reconsider particular practices and to repent of them. We must note that it is not the authority of Scripture itself that comes under criticism and review here, but authorizations

for the *use* of Scripture...In the churches Scripture itself has sometimes finally corroborated the judgments of secular morality and been vindicated against both its detractors and its so-called defenders in such cases."⁴⁰

I would like to conclude this invitation for you to join me in your own way in the project I've been describing with a single example of the sort of thing I have in mind and a warning. The example comes from Freud's discussion of the taboo upon rulers in *Totem and Taboo*. In the theories of the ruler's sanctity and especially in the ceremonials in which it is celebrated in some cultures, Freud detects the same deep seated ambivalence and compromise formation that he first encountered in his neurotic patients, where love and hate, duty and inclination often co-exist most ingeniously.

This phenomenon can be seen in the elaborate protection rituals of sacred rulers like the Mikado of Japan. "It must strike us as self-contradictory," writes Freud, "that persons of such unlimited power should need to be protected so carefully from the threat of danger; but that is not the only contradiction...For these people also think it necessary to keep a watch on their king to see that he makes a proper use of his powers." Freud then quotes Frazer about this proper use. In such societies the sovereign "exists only for his subjects; his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of his position by ordering the course of nature for his people's benefit. So soon as he fails to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is dismissed ignominiously, and may be thankful if he escapes with his life. Worshipped as a god one day, he is killed as a criminal the next...A king of this sort lives hedged in by a ceremonious etiquette, a network of prohibitions and observances, of which the intention is not to contribute to his dignity, much less his comfort, but to restrain him from conduct which, by disturbing the harmony of nature, might involve himself, his people, and the universe in one common catastrophe."⁴¹

Another example Freud gives from Frazer concerns the Timmes people from Sierra Leone, "who elect their king, reserve to themselves the right of beating him on the eve of his coronation; and they avail themselves of this constitutional privilege with such hearty goodwill that sometimes the unhappy monarch does not long survive his elevation to the throne." To which Freud adds, "Even in glaring instances like this, however, the hostility is not admitted as such, but masquerades as a ceremonial."⁴²

Needless to say, the official meaning of such ceremonials is veneration, affection, and homage, even when their motivation is envy and hostility and their function is to seize control of the sacred power embodied in the ruler. Here is the finest *coup d'etat* one could imagine, for the effectiveness of the rebellion consists precisely in its being unacknowledged and unnoticed. Such a king is "hedged in" by rites which "restrain" him and "annihilate his freedom," even

though they purport to “contribute to his dignity.”⁴³ I am reminded of the Mother’s Day celebrations of my childhood, in which the restriction of women to one particular role in society was reinforced and legitimated by rites of veneration in which Mother was placed on a pedestal as Queen for a Day.

Freud’s question, of course, is not addressed to Japan or Sierra Leone but to his Jewish and Christian contemporaries and to us. To what degree does our worship, like that on the first Palm Sunday, honor in order to domesticate divine power, seeking to turn Aslan into a watchdog, or a hunting dog, or even a lap dog? Theory is as much at issue as practice. For the metaphysical compliments which our theology throws in God’s direction are also capable of a variety of different functions. To discover the actual function of both our theology and our worship would be the task of the king of self-examination the masters of suspicion lay before us.

Finally a word of warning. Suspicion easily turns sour. MacIntyre wisely warns against the aesthete, whose suspicion sees through everything and is deceived by nothing except its own cynicism. It is all too easy to become the Sunday School teacher who, at the end of a lesson on the Pharisee and publican who went up to the temple to pray, said, “And now, children, let us fold our hands and close our eyes and thank God that we are not like that Pharisee.” We need to remind ourselves that our role is not to pass judgment on the sincerity of others, nor even to earn points with God by the purity of our own hearts; and so we will have to learn even to be suspicious of our suspicion. But we will first need to learn to be suspicious of our reluctance to learn the kind of self-examination that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud can teach us.

Hope College

NOTES

1. Quoted 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. The essays by the editors in this volume develop in detail the concept of evidentialism as an epistemological posture and its dependence on a foundationalist model of knowledge.

2. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32.

3. See Ricoeur, p. 33.

4. Ricoeur, pp. 457-58.

5. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 21.

6. Hume, pp. 27-28, 31.
7. Hume, p. 47.
8. Hume, pp. 43, 65-67.
9. Hume, pp. 48, 72, 76.
10. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, 1(1984), 255.
11. See Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, for important discussions of the "Calvinist" challenge to evidentialist assumptions about religious knowledge.
12. See Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984), pp. 120-30 for a discussion of Paul and James which shows their compatibility by showing how each offers a religious critique of religion.
13. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 18.
14. Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 57. On the sanctity of the divine name and God's unwillingness to be conjured, see Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 237-38, with notes.
15. See Ps. 40:6-8, Prov. 15:8, Isa. 66:1-4, Jer. 6:16-21, 7:21-23, 14:10-12, and Hos. 6:6, 8:11-13.
16. Prov. 21:3, Isa. 1:10-17, Amos 5:21-24, and Micah 6:6-8. Cf. Isa. 58, where the same theme is developed in relation to fasting.
17. Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 2nd ed., trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), p. 30 on Isa. 1:12.
18. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 165. I am indebted to Steve Evans for calling this passage to my attention.
19. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, trans. Carlyle Witton-Davies (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 119.
20. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, IV, 1 (Masters' translation). My italics. Cf. Ps. 94:20 and Isa. 10:1 ff. with Rousseau's reference to "iniquitous decrees...under the name of laws."
21. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, XLIX and LVIII. My italics. The style is different, to be sure, but Schopenhauer is clearly making essentially the same point when he says that by will he does not mean a power guided by knowledge and under the direction of reason; that instead we should think of the will by analogy with blind instinct whose instrument reason is; that 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; that, in short, the will is substance and master, the intellect accident and servant. See *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), I, 111, 114, 292, 368-69, and II, 126-28.
22. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 181. My italics.
23. R. M. Hare, "Justice and Equality," reprinted in *Justice: Alternative Political Perspectives*, ed. James Sterba (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1980), p. 119. My italics.
24. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 69. See Chapters 6 and 9 for the full discussion. MacIntyre does not use the concept of unnoticed irony in expounding the concept of moral fictions. His 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,” suggests that suspicion comes to the fore and moral fictions are more easily discovered where confidence in demonstrable objective truth is in decline. But if, as sometimes seems to be the case, he also wants to suggest that such circumstances contribute in essential ways to the false consciousness which suspicion seeks to unmask, this is doubtful. Belief in truth that is at once objective and discoverable provides fertile soil for bad faith. See my essay, “Orthodoxy and Inattention,” in *The Reformed Journal*, January, 1980.

25. Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, 7 (Warner translation). Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), I, 2, “Bad Faith.”

26. Pine-Coffin uses just this figure in translating the passage just cited from the *Confessions*. “I had known it all along, but I had always pretended that it was something different. I had turned a blind eye and forgotten it.”

27. *Confessions*, IV, 15; V, 10; VII, 3; VIII, 10; and IX, 4.

28. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), pp. 405-407. I have given the Academy edition pagination which is to be found in most editions of the *Grundlegung*.

29. Kant, p. 407.

30. Ricoeur, pp. 230 and 235. My italics. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 144-45, 190, and 440.

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

32. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (henceforth S. E.), ed. and trans. by James Strachey, et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XXI, 33 and 24.

33. Freud, XXI, 31.

34. Freud, XXI, 31-32, 51-56. 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 creations of the human mind...” this is a premise and not a conclusion of his psychoanalytic analysis. S. E., XIII, 24.

35. Luke 10:29 (RSV). In Matt. 22:35 the lawyer is identified as a Pharisee.

36. Matt. 7:5 (RSV).

37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 95 (Second Part, “On the Virtuous”).

38. Quoted in Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 131.

39. Luke 14:13 (RSV).

40. Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 193. The italics are mine and are meant to call attention both to the distinction between truth and function in Verhey’s argument and to the appropriateness of the negative connotations of ‘use’ in this context, as when we speak of someone using another person in failing to show the respect deserved by that person as a person.

41. Freud, S. E., XIII, 43-44.

42. XIII, 49.

43. XIII, 44.