

# "WAS RELIGION INVENTED BY MAN?"

**By Mike Burnham**

One of the questions committed atheists have asked is, "If there is no God, why are so many people involved in religion?" The atheist seeks to understand where religion came from and why it continues to persist in an enlightened age if there is no objective and real foundation for its existence. The most common answer is that man invents God out of pressures of human fears and weaknesses.

The father of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was very much interested in discovering the answer to the question of the origin of religion. He proposed a very interesting and credible theory on the motives behind the human invention of religion.

The threat of nature holds many mysteries and displays awesome powers of destructive force. Freud sees man going through a process of humanizing and personalizing nature. Religion begins by attributing human characteristics and personality to impersonal forces such as earthquakes and storms. If a human being is angry with me and threatens to harm me, I can do several things to dissuade him. I can plead for mercy; I can flatter and praise him to try to get him to like me; etc. There are a lot of ways to deal with human anger.

But how do you negotiate with a hurricane? You can't bribe it or plead with it to go away. It has no checking account and no ears to hear your pleas for mercy. Freud answers that man deals with the impersonal forces of nature by personalizing them via religion. You invent a spirit that lives in the storm or the flood. If the spirits are personal, then all the forces of personal persuasion can be brought to bear on them. In the monotheism all the pleading, bargaining, praise, and service can be

focused on one personal deity who has control of all nature. By religion, nature is made sacred and personal so that its threatening power is brought under control.

### **"Is religion an invention of the rich?"**

Karl Marx sees religion as the invention of the ruling classes. With wealth and luxury in the hands of a few, the rich, he says, are always afraid of an uprising by the poor masses.

So how does the minority control the majority? They invent a religion that does several things to protect their vested interests. The religion emphasizes such virtues as industry, service, humility, and obedience. This religious "ethic" helps keep the masses in line.

If there is no God then their theories of the origin of religion are plausible. That man has the ability to invent religion is obvious. That he in fact did invent religion is not so obvious.

Though the atheist offers an interesting study of psychological motives for religious belief, the New Testament offers some interesting input about the psychological motives for atheism.

Last week we looked Romans 1:18 and saw that God has clearly revealed himself to all men through the created order, and he maintains that all men "clearly perceive" this revelation. However man "represses" or "suppresses" this knowledge. Paul goes on to say in verse 23 that man "exchanges the truth of God for a lie and serves the creature rather than the creator." This substitution indicates that the repressed knowledge is not actually destroyed but forced down into the unconscious. It works its way back to the surface in a softened understanding of God that is non-threatening. It is common for people to speak of belief in a "higher power" or as "something greater than ourselves." These faceless, nameless deities make no personal demands upon us. "Religion" may represent human attempts to tame God or remove the threat of his truth from us. It is one thing to believe in a

"higher power"; it is another to believe in a holy personal God who makes ultimate demands upon us and before whom we are ultimately accountable.

### "Why is man afraid of God?"

What is it about God that would terrify man so much and lead him into this exchange process? Perhaps the five most significant aspects of his being that make man uncomfortable are: 1) his holiness, 2) his omniscience, 3) his sovereignty, 4) his omnipotence, and 5) his immutability.

"The threat of holiness" a man named Rudolf Otto did a massive study of the effect on people of various cultures of the experience of the holy. He discovered that mankind from the Fiji islands to Washington D. C. Have strong mixed emotions to the holy. Mixed feelings of dread and fascination seem to accompany such experiences. The Bible relates that when men confront the holy they are reduced to a state of terror.

The prophet Isaiah recorded his experience in the temple of encountering a vision of the Holy God...Isa. 6:1-5. What does Isaiah mean when he says that he is "undone"? Freud would have said it was a psychological process of disintegration. Isaiah is "coming apart." his self-image is shattered and his sense of being a complete being is annihilated. Why? Where formerly he judged himself by comparing himself to other fallen human beings and thus came to a high opinion of himself, he now measures himself against the ultimate standard of holiness. In the vision Isaiah not only finds out who God is, but he also finds out who Isaiah is. His self-image is shattered as he sees himself as a man of unclean lips. The same experience of personal disintegration is recorded by Job and by Habakkuk.

Another strange example of men's reaction to the Holy may be seen in Mark 4:36-41 which tells of Jesus stilling the tempest.

Here we have a unique combination of a description of men's fear

of the power of nature coupled with the human fear of the holy.

You can sense the disciples fear when they woke him. Yet, after the storm has ceased and the sea is calmed they become very much afraid. When the threat of nature is removed their fear is not eliminated but increased. Now they are more afraid of Jesus than they were of the storm. There was no safe category in which they could put Jesus and disarm him. He was in a class by himself, a class that was utterly alien...the class of the holy.

The same response is expressed by Peter after Jesus has his nets filled to the breaking point following a frustrating night of fishing without success...Luke 5:8. Instead of asking Jesus to go into the fishing business with him, Peter exclaims, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter expresses a common human desire, that we be removed to a safe distance from the holy.

We can challenge Freud's thesis that the fear of nature is the chief factor in the origin of Christianity. Man may indeed invent a personal deity to protect him from nature. But would he invent a personal holy deity whose holiness is even more dreadful than the forces of nature?

"The threat of omniscience." one of our greatest fears in this life is that our most closely-guarded secrets might be exposed (Psa. 90:8,9). There are closely guarded skeletons in everybody's closet. (Psa. 10:11)

The biblical imagery of "nakedness" calls attention to the discomfort of shame. The first awareness of man after the fall was expressed not in terms of guilt but in an awareness of nakedness, an image of shame. The first action of man after the fall was to hide himself from the gaze of God...Gen. 3:7,8,10.

If God is omniscient then every closet is transparent Pro.15:3. There is nowhere to hide. He cannot be deceived or avoided; there can be no cover-up. If man was going to invent a God they sure wouldn't

invent one who was omniscient...Psa. 139:1-6

"The threat of sovereignty."(1 Ch. 29:11,12) if anything about God provokes negative psychological reactions, it is his law. Because God is sovereign he does as he pleases (Psa. 135:5,6), and one of the things he pleases to do is to make man responsible to his law. Over against all of our self-interests stands the absolute law of God. If there is a God, then I am not free to do as I please. I may have a measure of freedom, but I can never be autonomous. (an immovable rock and an irresistible force)(Dan. 4:35,37). To achieve absolute freedom God must be destroyed or denied. The belief in a "higher power" is a God without sovereignty, a God without a law. (Rom. 3:19,20)

The problem of guilt is one of the most paralyzing factors in a human. Any psychiatrist knows how devastating guilt can be to the human personality. When real guilt is acquired, there are basically two things we can do about it. We can deny it, or we can seek to have it forgiven. The first alternative is the least painful, but it doesn't work. The guilt is real and requires real forgiveness. If we get rid of God, we get rid of guilt. (Psa. 50:16,17,21)

Not everyone denies the existence of God. They instead attempt to circumvent the sovereignty of God and be free of guilt by reshaping God's nature into a deity whose only attribute is love. God is stripped of his wrath, justice, and sovereignty; He is left with a kind of love that makes no demands. Requires no repentance but exhibits a kind of love that means "never having to say that you are sorry." this stripped, weak, helpless God is the god of a very popular American religion. But it is not Christianity.

"The threat of omnipotence." (Isa. 46:11; Rev. 19:6) we have heard people say, "I believe in a higher power" but have you ever heard anyone say they believe in an "absolute power"? (Psa. 130:3). Even the term "higher power" represents an attempt to escape the absolute

character of god's power, (Psa. 36:1; 66:7) when we add to that absolute power, absolute holiness, absolute omniscience, and absolute sovereignty, we are overwhelmed. (Psa. 33:4-12) in contrast to God man is impotent and that is not a thought natural man wants to think about.

"The threat of Immutability." (Mal. 3:6; Jas.1:17) why would the unchanging character of God be an attribute that threatens man? This attribute cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest. In relationship to God's other attributes this one is the clincher. For with God's immutability all hope that God will ever change vanishes. There is no hope that tomorrow God will compromise his holiness. There is no chance that God will ever fall and become tainted with sin as we are. There is not the remotest possibility that God will be afflicted with hardening of the arteries and begin to have lapses of memory. His eyesight will never become dim so we can escape his gaze. His omnipotence will never be diminished by muscle atrophy and feebleness. His sovereignty will never be overthrown. Whatever God is now, he will be forever. Thus, if I am going to get along with God, it is I who must change, not he. If God were not immutable, he would not be God. That which changes ceases to be what it was.

When man transgresses the law of God, he is left with three chief options: 1) he can repent, which involves a change in himself. 2) he can redefine the basis of ethics to meet his level of behavior. 3) he can redefine the character of God to make him less threatening to him. This is the essence of idolatry, to change the immutable God into something less than he is.

Fear, sin, guilt, shame and evil desires cause man to deny God, exchange God for an idol, or water down the character of God and make him weak, helpless and undemanding. Some may say that religion is a crutch and it might be used as such; but the atheist and agnostic must acknowledge that their lack of religion is also a crutch.

Even Christians need to be careful about softening his view of God and reshaping him in our own image. It may be that if we have no fear of God, if he is not awesome to us, we may have a watered-down view of him and have obscured his real identity.