

Paul C.  
Vitz

New York University  
Department of Psychology

## The Psychology of Atheism

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There seems to be a widespread assumption throughout much of the Western intellectual community that belief in God is based on all kinds of irrational immature needs and wishes, but atheism or skepticism is derived from a rational, no-nonsense appraisal of the way things really are. This essay shows that what holds for belief in God holds as much if not more for atheism. Sauce for the believer is equally sauce for the unbeliever.

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The title of this paper, “The Psychology of Atheism,” may seem strange. Certainly, my psychological colleagues have found it odd and even, I might add, a little disturbing. After all, psychology, since its founding roughly a century ago, has often focused on the opposite topic — namely the psychology of religious belief. Indeed, in many respects the origins of modern psychology are intimately bound up with the psychologists who explicitly proposed interpretations of belief in God.

William James and Sigmund Freud, for example, were both personally and professionally deeply involved in the topic. Recall *The Will to Believe* by James, as well as his still famous *Varieties of Religious Experience*. These two works are devoted to an attempt at understanding belief as the result of psychological, that is natural, causes. James might have been sympathetic to religion, but his own position was one of doubt and skepticism and his writings were part of psychology’s general undermining of religious faith. As for Sigmund Freud, his critiques of religion, in particular Christianity, are well known and will be discussed in some detail later. For now, it is enough to remember how deeply involved Freud and his thought have been with the question of God and religion.

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Given the close involvement between the founding of much of psychology and a critical interpretation of religion, it should not be surprising that most psychologists view with some alarm any attempt to propose a psychology of atheism. At the very least such a project puts many psychologists on the defensive and gives them some taste of their own medicine. Psychologists are always observing and interpreting others and it is high time that some of them learn from their own personal experience what it is like to be put under the microscope of psychological theory and experiment. Regardless, I hope to show that the psychological concepts used quite effectively to interpret religion are two-edged swords that can also be used to interpret atheism. Sauce for the believer is equally sauce for the unbeliever.

Before beginning, however, I wish to make two points bearing on the underlying assumption of my remarks. First, I assume that the major barriers to belief in God are not rational but — in a general sense — can be called psychological.

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I do not wish to offend the many distinguished philosophers — both believers and nonbelievers — in this audience, but I am quite convinced that for every person strongly swayed by rational argument there are many, many more affected by nonrational psychological factors.

The human heart — no one can truly fathom it or know all its deceits, but at least it is the proper task of the psychologist to try. Thus, to begin, I propose that neurotic psychological barriers to belief in God are of great importance. What some of these might be I will mention shortly. For believers, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that psychological motives and pressures that one is often unaware of, often lie behind unbelief.

One of the earliest theorists of the unconscious, St. Paul, wrote, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. . . . I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind. . . .” (Rom. 7:18, 23). Thus, it seems to me sound theology as well as sound psychology that psychological factors can be impediments to belief as well as behavior, and that these may often be unconscious factors as well. Further, as a corollary it is reasonable to propose that people vary greatly in the extent to which these factors are present in their lives. Some of us have been blessed with an upbringing, a temperament, social environment, and other gifts that have made belief in God a much easier thing than many who have suffered more or have been raised in a spiritually impoverished environment or had other difficulties with which to cope. Scripture makes it clear that many children — even into the third or fourth generation — suffer from the sins of their fathers, including the sins of fathers who may have been believers. In short, my first point is that some people have much more serious psychological barriers to belief than others, a point consistent with the scriptures’ clear statement that we are not to judge others, however much we are called to correct evil.

My second point as qualification is that in spite of serious difficulties to belief, all of us still have a free choice to accept God or reject Him. This qualification is not in contradiction to the first. Perhaps a little elaboration will make this clearer. One person, as a consequence of his particular past, present environment, etc., may find it much harder than most people to believe in God. But presumably, at any moment, certainly at many times, he can choose to move toward God or to move away. One man may start with so many barriers that even after years of slowly choosing to move toward God he may still not be there. Some may die before they reach belief. We assume they will be judged — like all of us — on how far they traveled toward God and how well they loved others — on how well they did with what they had. Likewise, another man without psychological difficulties at all is still free to reject God, and no doubt many do. Thus, although the ultimate issue is one of the will and our sinful nature, it is still possible to investigate those psychological factors that predispose one to unbelief, that make the road to belief in God especially long and hard.

### The psychology of atheism: social and personal motives

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immature needs and wishes, but atheism or skepticism is derived from a rational, no-nonsense appraisal of the way things really are. To begin a critique of this assumption, I start with my own case history.

As some of you know, after a rather weak, wishy-washy Christian upbringing, I became an atheist in college in the 1950s and remained so throughout graduate school and my first years as a young experimental psychologist on the faculty at New York University. That is, I am an adult convert or, more technically, a reconvert to Christianity who came back to the faith, much to his surprise, in my late thirties in the very secular environment of academic psychology in New York City. I am not going into this to bore you with parts of my life story, but to note that through reflection on my own experience it is now clear to me that my reasons for becoming and for remaining an atheist-skeptic from about age 18 to 38 were superficial, irrational, and largely without intellectual or moral integrity. Furthermore, I am convinced that my motives were, and still are, commonplace today among intellectuals, especially social scientists.

The major factors involved in my becoming an atheist — although I wasn't really aware of them at the time — were as follows.

#### *General socialization*

An important influence on me in my youth was a significant social unease. I was somewhat embarrassed to be from the Midwest, for it seemed terribly dull, narrow, and provincial. There was certainly nothing romantic or impressive about being from Cincinnati, Ohio and from a vague mixed German-English-Swiss background. Terribly middle class. Further, besides escape from a dull, and according to me unworthy, socially embarrassing past, I wanted to take part in, in fact to be comfortable in, the new, exciting, even glamorous, secular world into which I was moving. I am sure that similar motives have strongly influenced the lives of countless upwardly mobile young people in the last two centuries. Consider Voltaire, who moved into the glittery, aristocratic, sophisticated world of Paris, and who always felt embarrassed about his provincial and nonaristocratic origin; or the Jewish ghettos that so many assimilating Jews have fled, or the latest young arrival in New York, embarrassed about his fundamentalist parents. This kind of socialization pressure has pushed many away from belief in God and all that this belief is associated with for them.

I remember a small seminar in graduate school where almost every member there at some time expressed this kind of embarrassment and response to the pressures of socialization into "modern life." One student was trying to escape his Southern Baptist background, another a small town Mormon environment, a third was trying to get out of a very Jewish Brooklyn ghetto, and the fourth was me.

#### *Specific socialization*

Another major reason for my wanting to become an atheist was that I desired to be accepted by the powerful and influential scientists in the field of psychology. In particular, I wanted to be accepted by my professors in graduate school. As a graduate student I was thoroughly socialized by the specific "culture" of

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academic research psychology. My professors at Stanford, however much they might disagree on psychological theory, were, as far as I could tell, united in only two things — their intense personal career ambition and their rejection of religion. As the psalmist says, “...The man greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord. In the pride of his countenance the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 10:30–4). In this environment, just as I had learned how to dress like a college student by putting on the right clothes, I also learned to “think” like a proper psychologist by putting on the right — that is, atheistic — ideas and attitudes.

#### *Personal convenience*

Finally, in this list of superficial, but nevertheless, strong irrational pressures to become an atheist, I must list simple personal convenience. The fact is that it is quite inconvenient to be a serious believer in today’s powerful secular and neo-pagan world. I would have had to give up many pleasures and a good deal of time. Without going into details it is not hard to imagine the sexual pleasures that would have to be rejected if I became a serious believer. And then I also knew it would cost me time and some money. There would be church services, church groups, time for prayer and scripture reading, time spent helping others. I was already too busy. Obviously, becoming religious would be a real inconvenience.

Now perhaps you think that such reasons are restricted to especially callow young men — like me in my twenties. However, such reasoning is not so restricted. Here I will take up the case of Mortimer Adler, a well known American philosopher, writer, and intellectual who has spent much of his life thinking about God and religious topics. One of his most recent books is titled *How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan* (1980). In this work, Adler presses the argument for the existence of God very strongly and by the latter chapters he is very close to accepting the living God. Yet he pulls back and remains among “the vast company of the religiously uncommitted” (Graddy, 1982). But Adler leaves the impression that this decision is more one of will than of intellect. As one of his reviewers notes (Graddy, 1982), Adler confirms this impression in his autobiography, *Philosopher at Large* (1976). There, while investigating his reasons for twice stopping short of a full religious commitment, he writes that the answer “lies in the state of one’s will, not in the state of one’s mind.” Adler goes on to comment that to become seriously religious “would require a radical change in my way of life...” and “The simple truth of the matter is that I did not wish to live up to being a genuinely religious person” (Graddy, p. 24).

There you have it! A remarkably honest and conscious admission that being “a genuinely religious person” would be too much trouble, too inconvenient. I can’t but assume that such are the shallow reasons behind many an unbeliever’s position.

In summary, because of my social needs to assimilate, because of my professional needs to be accepted as part of academic psychology, and because of my personal needs for a convenient lifestyle — for all these needs atheism was

\* I understand there is a sequel to the story of Adler. I've recently been told that about 2 years ago Adler became a Christian, and Anglican.

simply the best policy. Looking back on these motives, I can honestly say that a return to atheism has all the appeal of a return to adolescence.\*

## The psychology of atheism: psychoanalytic motives

As is generally known, the central Freudian criticism of belief in God is that such a belief is untrustworthy because of its psychological origin. That is, God is a projection of our own intense, unconscious desires; He is a wish fulfillment derived from childish needs for protection and security. Since these wishes are largely unconscious, any denial of such an interpretation is to be given little credence. It should be noted that in developing this kind of critique, Freud has raised the *ad hominem* argument to one of wide influence. It is in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927, 1961) that Freud makes his position clearest:

[R]eligious ideas have arisen from the same needs as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature. (p. 21)

Therefore, religious beliefs are:

illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection — for protection through love — which was provided by the father. . . . Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the danger of life. (p. 30)

Let us look at this argument carefully, for in spite of the enthusiastic acceptance of it by so many uncritical atheists and skeptics, it is really a very weak position.

In the first paragraph Freud fails to note that his arguments against religious belief are, in his own words, equally valid against *all* the achievements of civilization, including psychoanalysis itself. That is, if the psychic origin of an intellectual achievement invalidates its truth value, then physics, biology, much less psychoanalysis itself, are vulnerable to the same charge.

In the second paragraph Freud makes another strange claim, namely that the oldest and most urgent wishes of mankind are for the loving protecting guidance of a powerful loving Father, for divine Providence. However, if these wishes were as strong and ancient as he claims, one would expect pre-Christian religion to have strongly emphasized God as a benevolent father. In general, this was far from the case for the pagan religion of the Mediterranean world — and, for example, is still not the case for such popular religions as Buddhism and for much of Hinduism. Indeed, Judaism and most especially Christianity are in many respects distinctive in the emphasis on God as a loving Father.

However, let us put these two intellectual gaffes aside and turn to another understanding of his projection theory. It can be shown that this theory is not really an integral part of psychoanalysis — and, thus cannot claim fundamental support from psychoanalytic theory. It is essentially an autonomous argument. Actually, Freud's critical attitude toward and rejection of religion is rooted in his personal predilections and is a kind of meta psychoanalysis — or background framework which is not well connected to his more specifically clinical concepts. (This separation or autonomy with respect to most psychoanalytic

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theory very likely accounts for its influence outside of psychoanalysis.) There are two pieces of evidence for this interpretation of the projection theory.

The first is that this theory had been clearly articulated many years earlier by Ludwig Feuerbach in his book *The Essence of Christianity* (1841, 1957). Feuerbach's interpretation was well-known in European intellectual circles, and Freud, as a youth, read Feuerbach avidly (see Gedo & Pollock, 1976, pp. 47, 350). Here are some representative quotes from Feuerbach which make this clear:

What man misses — whether this be an articulate and therefore conscious, or an unconscious, need — that is his God. (1841, 1957, p. 33)

Man projects his nature into the world outside himself before he finds it in himself. (p. 11)

To live in projected dream-images is the essence of religion. Religion sacrifices reality to the projected dream.... (p. 49)

Many other quotes could be provided in which Feuerbach describes religion in "Freudian" terms such as wish-fulfillment, etc. What Freud did with this argument was to revive it in a more eloquent form, and publish it at a later time when the audience desiring to hear such a theory was much larger. And, of course, somehow the findings and theory of psychoanalysis were implied as giving the theory strong support. The Feuerbachian character of Freud's *Illusion* position is also demonstrated by such notions as "the crushing superior force of nature" and the "terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood," which are not psychoanalytic in terminology or in meaning.

The other piece of evidence for the nonpsychoanalytic basis of the projection theory comes directly from Freud, who explicitly says so himself. In a letter of 1927 to his friend Oskar Pfister (an early psychoanalyst, and believing Protestant pastor), Freud wrote:

Let us be quite clear on the point that the views expressed in my book (*The Future of an Illusion*) form no part of analytic theory. They are my personal views. (Freud/Pfister, 1963, p. 117).

There is one other somewhat different interpretation of belief in God which Freud also developed, but although this has a very modest psychoanalytic character, it is really an adaptation of Feuerbachian projection theory. This is Freud's relatively neglected interpretation of the ego ideal. The superego, including the ego ideal is the "heir of the Oedipus complex," representing a projection of an idealized father — and presumably of God the Father (see Freud, 1923, 1962, pp. 26–28; p. 38).

The difficulty here is that the ego ideal did not really receive great attention or development within Freud's writings. Furthermore, it is easily interpreted as an adoption of Feuerbach's projection theory. Thus, we can conclude that psychoanalysis does not in actuality provide significant theoretical concepts for characterizing belief in God as neurotic. Freud either used Feuerbach's much older projection or illusion theory or incorporated Feuerbach in his notion of the ego ideal. Presumably, this is the reason Freud acknowledged to Pfister that his *Illusion* book was not a true part of psychoanalysis.

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## Atheism as Oedipal wish fulfillment

Nevertheless, Freud is quite right to worry that a belief can be an illusion because it derives from powerful wishes — from unconscious, childish needs. The irony is that he clearly did provide a very powerful, new way to understand the neurotic basis of atheism. (For a detailed development of this position see Vitz and Gartner, 1984a, b; Vitz, 1986, in press.)

The central concept in Freud's work, aside from the unconscious, is the now well-known Oedipus Complex. In the case of male personality development, the essential features of this complex are the following: Roughly in the age period of three to six the boy develops a strong sexual desire for the mother. At the same time the boy develops an intense hatred and fear of the father, and a desire to supplant him, a "craving for power." This hatred is based on the boy's knowledge that the father, with his greater size and strength, stands in the way of his desire. The child's fear of the father may explicitly be a fear of castration by the father, but more typically, it has a less specific character. The son does not really kill the father, of course, but patricide is assumed to be a common preoccupation of his fantasies and dreams. The "resolution" of the complex is supposed to occur through the boy's recognition that he cannot replace the father, and through fear of castration, which eventually leads the boy to identify with the father, to identify with the aggressor, and to repress the original frightening components of the complex.

It is important to keep in mind that, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex is never truly resolved, and is capable of activation at later periods — almost always, for example, at puberty. Thus the powerful ingredients of murderous hate and of incestuous sexual desire within a family context are never in fact removed. Instead, they are covered over and repressed. Freud expresses the neurotic potential of this situation:

The Oedipus-complex is the actual nucleus of neuroses.... What remains of the complex in the unconscious represents the disposition to the later development of neuroses in the adult (Freud, 1919, Standard Edition, 17, p. 193; also 1905, S.E. 7, p. 226ff.; 1909, S.E., 11, p. 47).

In short, all human neuroses derive from this complex. Obviously, in most cases, this potential is not expressed in any seriously neurotic manner. Instead it shows up in attitudes toward authority, in dreams, slips of the tongue, transient irrationalities, etc.

Now, in postulating a universal Oedipus complex as the origin of all our neuroses, Freud inadvertently developed a straightforward rationale for understanding the wish-fulfilling origin of rejecting God. After all, the Oedipus complex is unconscious, it is established in childhood and, above all, its dominant motive is hatred of the father and the desire for him not to exist, especially as represented by the desire to overthrow or kill the father. Freud regularly described God as a psychological equivalent to the father, and so a natural expression of Oedipal motivation would be powerful, unconscious desires for the nonexistence of God. Therefore, in the Freudian framework, atheism is an illusion caused by the Oedipal desire to kill the father and replace him with oneself. To act as if God does not exist is an obvious, not so subtle

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disguise for a wish to kill Him, much the same way as in a dream, the image of a parent going away or disappearing can represent such a wish: “God is dead” is simply an undisguised Oedipal wish-fulfillment.

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It is certainly not hard to understand the Oedipal character of so much contemporary atheism and skepticism. Hugh Hefner, even James Bond, with their rejection of God plus their countless girls, are so obviously living out Freud’s Oedipal and primal rebellion (e.g., *Totem and Taboo*). So are countless other skeptics who live out variations of the same scenario of exploitative sexual permissiveness combined with narcissistic self-worship. And, of course, the Oedipal dream is not only to kill the father and possess the mother or other women in the group but also to displace him. Modern atheism has attempted to accomplish this. Now man, not God, is the consciously specified ultimate source of goodness and power in the universe. Humanistic philosophies glorify him and his “potential” much the same way religion glorifies the Creator. We have devolved from one God to many gods to everyone a god. In essence, man — through his narcissism and Oedipal wishes — has tried to succeed where Satan failed, by seating himself on the throne of God. Thanks to Freud it is now easier to understand the deeply neurotic, thoroughly untrustworthy psychology of this unbelief.

One interesting example of the Oedipal motivation proposed here is that of Voltaire, a leading skeptic about all things religious who denied the Christian and Jewish notion of a personal God — of God as a Father. Voltaire was a theist or deist who believed in a cosmic, depersonalized God of unknown character.

The psychologically important thing about Voltaire is that he strongly rejected his father — so much that he rejected his father’s name and took the name “Voltaire.” It is not exactly certain where the new name came from but one widely held interpretation is that it was constructed from the letters of his mother’s last name. When Voltaire was in his early twenties (in 1718), he published a play entitled “Oedipus” (*Edipe*), the first one of his plays to be publicly performed. The play itself recounts the classic legend with heavy allusions to religious and political rebellion. Throughout his life, Voltaire (like Freud) toyed with the idea that he was not his father’s son. He apparently felt the desire to be from a higher, more aristocratic family than his actual middle-class background. (A major expression of this concern with having a more worthy father is the play *Candide*.) In short, Voltaire’s hostility to his own father, his religious rejection of God the Father, and his political rejection of the king — an acknowledged father figure — are all reflections of the same basic needs. Psychologically speaking, Voltaire’s rebellion against his father and against God are easily interpretable as Oedipal wish fulfillment, as comforting illusions, and therefore, following Freud, as beliefs and attitudes unworthy of a mature mind.

Diderot, the great Encyclopaedist and an avowed atheist — indeed he is one of the founding brothers of modern atheism — also had both Oedipal preoccupation and insight. Freud approvingly quotes Diderot’s anticipatory observation:

If the little savage were left to himself, preserving all his foolishness and adding to the small sense of a child in the cradle the violent passions of a man of thirty, he

would strangle his father and lie with his mother (from *Le nouveau de Rameau*; quoted by Freud in Lecture XXI of his Introductory Lectures (1916–1917), *S.E.*, 16, pp. 331–338).

### The Psychology of atheism: the theory of defective father

I am well aware of the fact that there is good reason to give only limited acceptance to Freud's Oedipal theory. In any case, it is my view that although the Oedipus complex is valid for some, the theory is far from being a universal representation of unconscious motivation. Since there is need for deeper understanding of atheism and since I don't know of any theoretical framework — except the Oedipal one — I am forced to sketch out a model of my own, or really to develop an undeveloped thesis of Freud. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud made the following remark:

Psychoanalysis, which has taught us the intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God, has shown us that the personal God is logically nothing but an exalted father, and *daily* demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down (*Leonardo da Vinci*, 1910, 1947 p. 98).

This statement makes no assumptions about unconscious sexual desires for the mother, or even about presumed universal competitive hatred focused on the father. Instead he makes the simple easily understandable claim that once a child or youth is disappointed in and loses his or her respect for their earthly father, then belief in their heavenly Father becomes impossible. There are, of course, many ways that a father can lose his authority and seriously disappoint a child. Some of these ways — for which clinical evidence is given below — are:

1. He can be present but obviously weak, cowardly, and unworthy of respect — even if otherwise pleasant or “nice.”
2. He can be present but physically, sexually, or psychologically abusive.
3. He can be absent through death or by abandoning or leaving the family.

Taken all together these proposed determinants of atheism will be called the “defective father” hypothesis. To support the validity of this approach, I will conclude by providing case history material from the lives of prominent atheists, for it was in reading the biographies of atheists that this hypothesis first struck me.

We begin with Sigmund Freud's relationship to his father. That Freud's father, Jacob, was a deep disappointment — or worse — is generally agreed to by his biographers. (For the supporting biographical material on Freud see, for example, Krull, 1979, and Vitz, 1983, 1986.) Specifically, his father was a weak man unable to financially provide for his family. Instead money for support seems to have been provided by his wife's family and others. Furthermore, Freud's father was passive in response to anti-Semitism. Freud recounts an episode told to him by his father in which Jacob allowed an anti-Semite to call him a dirty Jew and to knock his hat off. Young Sigmund, on hearing the story, was mortified at his father's failure to respond, at his weakness. Sigmund Freud was a complex and in many respects ambiguous man, but all agree that he was a courageous fighter and that he greatly admired courage in others. Sigmund, as

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a young man, several times stood up physically against anti-Semitism — and, of course, he was one of the greatest of intellectual fighters.

Jacob's actions as a defective father, however, probably go still deeper. Specifically, in two of his letters as an adult, Freud writes that his father was a sexual pervert and that Jacob's own children suffered from this. There are also other possible moral disasters that I have not bothered to note.

The connection of Jacob to God and religion was also present for his son. Jacob was involved in a kind of reform Judaism when Freud was a child, the two of them spent hours reading the Bible together, and later Jacob became increasingly involved in reading the Talmud and in discussing Jewish scripture. In short, this weak, rather passive "nice guy," this schlemiel, was clearly connected to Judaism and God, and also to a serious lack of courage and quite possibly to sexual perversion and other weaknesses very painful to young Sigmund.

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Very briefly, other famous atheists seem to have had a similar relationship to their fathers. Karl Marx made it clear that he didn't respect his father. An important part in this was that his father converted to Christianity — not out of any religious conviction — but out of a desire to make life easier. He assimilated for convenience. In doing this Marx's father broke an old family tradition. He was the first in his family who did not become a rabbi; indeed, Karl Marx came from a long line of rabbis on both sides of his family.

Ludwig Feuerbach's father did something that very easily could have deeply hurt his son. When Feuerbach was about 13, his father left his family and openly took up living with another woman in a different town. This was in Germany in the early 1800s and such a public rejection would have been a scandal and deeply rejecting to young Ludwig — and, of course, to his mother and the other children.

Let us jump 100 years or so and look at the life of one of America's best known atheists — Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Here I will quote from her son's recent book on what life was like in his family when he was a child. (Murray, 1982) The book opens when he is 8-years-old: "We rarely did anything together as a family. Hatred between my grandfather and mother barred such wholesome scenes." (p. 7) He writes that he really didn't know why his mother hated her father so much — but hate him she did, for the opening chapter records a very ugly fight in which she attempts to kill her father with a 10-inch butcher knife. Madalyn failed but screamed, "I'll see you dead. I'll get you yet. I'll walk on your gravel!" (p. 8)

Whatever the cause of O'Hair's intense hatred of her father, it is clear from this book that it was deep and that it went back into her childhood — and at least psychological (e.g. p. 11) and possibly physical abuse is a plausible cause.

Besides abuse, rejection, or cowardice, one way in which a father can be seriously defective is simply by not being there. Many children, of course, interpret death of their father as a kind of betrayal or an act of desertion. In this respect it is remarkable that the pattern of a dead father is so common in

the lives of many prominent atheists.

Baron d'Holbach (born Paul Henri Thiry), the French rationalist and probably the first public atheist, is apparently an orphan by the age of 13 and living with his uncle. (From whom he took the new name Holbach.) Bertrand Russell's father died when young Bertrand was four years old; Nietzsche was the same age as Russell when he lost his father; Sartre's father died before Sartre was born and Camus was a year old when he lost his father. (The above biographical information was taken from standard reference sources.) Obviously, much more evidence needs to be obtained on the "defective father" hypothesis. But the information already available is substantial; it is unlikely to be an accident.

The psychology of how a dead or nonexistent father could lay an emotional base for atheism might not seem clear at first glance. But, after all, if one's own father is absent or so weak as to die, or so untrustworthy as to desert, then it is not hard to place the same attribute on your heavenly Father.

Finally, there is also the early personal experience of suffering, of death, of evil, sometimes combined with anger at God for allowing it to happen. Any early anger at God for the loss of a father and the subsequent suffering is still another and different psychology of unbelief, but one closely related to that of the defective father.

Some of this psychology is captured in Russell Baker's recent autobiography. (Baker, 1982) Russell Baker is the well-known journalist and humorous writer for the *New York Times*. His father was taken to the hospital and died there suddenly when young Russell was five. Baker wept and sorrowed and spoke to the family housekeeper, Bessie:

...For the first time I thought seriously about God. Between sobs I told Bessie that if God could do things like this to people, then God was hateful and I had no more use for Him.

Bessie told me about the peace of Heaven and the joy of being among the angels and the happiness of my father who was already there. The argument failed to quiet my rage.

"God loves us all just like His own children," Bessie said.

"If God loves me, why did He make my father die?"

Bessie said that I would understand someday, but she was only partly right. That afternoon, though I couldn't have phrased it this way then, I decided that God was a lot less interested in people than anybody in Morrisonville was willing to admit. That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted.

After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me dearly in pain. At the age of five I had become a skeptic... (*Growing Up*, p. 61).

Let me conclude by noting that however prevalent the superficial motives for being an atheist, there still remain in many instances the deep and disturbing psychological sources as well. However easy it may be to state the hypothesis of the "defective father," we must not forget the difficulty, the pain, and complexity that lie behind each individual case. And for those whose atheism has been conditioned by a father who rejected, who denied, who hated, who manipu-

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lated, or who physically or sexually abused them, there must be understanding and compassion. Certainly for a child to be forced to hate his own father — or even to despair because of his father's weaknesses is a great tragedy. After all, the child only wants to love his father. For any unbeliever whose atheism is grounded in such experience, the believer, blessed by God's love, should pray most especially that ultimately they will both meet in heaven. Meet and embrace and experience great joy. If so, perhaps the former atheist will experience even more joy than the believer. For, in addition to the happiness of the believer, the atheist will have that extra increment that comes from his surprise at finding himself surrounded by joy in, of all places, his Father's house.

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Christian Leadership Ministries  
P.O. Box 129  
4901 Keller Springs Road  
Suite 106 Addison, TX 75001  
Phone: 972-713-7130  
Fax: 972-713-7670  
Email: lu@clm.org