

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Tamas Pataki, *Against Religion*

Russell Grigg

*Fundamentally indeed every religion is . . . a religion of love for all those whom it embraces; while cruelty and intolerance towards those who do not belong to it are natural to every religion.*

Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology*

In this book Tamas Pataki makes two principal claims: that religious beliefs are irrational beliefs; and that religion is a pernicious influence on human society that we would be better off without. Pataki also thinks that neither the irrationality of religious belief nor the insidious nature of religion can be properly understood unless we look to psychoanalytic explanations of some underlying unconscious motivations.

If we assume that people who hold religious beliefs don't do so on rational grounds, how do we explain the fact that they can adhere to such extravagant claims about the nature of reality? This is a major task of this book, which doesn't attempt to address any of the claimed rational grounds for belief in God. There is not one argument for the existence of God; it is assumed that these all fail and that the attempt to find a valid one can be put down to no other source than wishful thinking.

Pataki cuts through the need for any of this scholastic discussion with the claim that even if there were good grounds for religious beliefs—and he doesn't believe there are—these are not the actual reasons why most people turn to religion (p. 10). So, what are these actual reasons? Responses to the question of what motivates people to turn to religion are not exactly in short supply. And this very long list of explanations famously includes those of Sigmund Freud who referred to the all-too-human psychological dependency that seeks to find refuge in the belief in a supreme figure uncannily displaying many of the features of the child's attitude towards its parents when very young, which Freud combined with an analysis of the obsessional motivation underlying ritual and the sacred. The recent trend, however, even among psychoanalysts, has been to dismiss Freud's account as based on scientific and enlightenment views that reveal him to be a man of his time.<sup>1</sup> Pataki is having none of this. He takes a resolutely anticlerical stance, arguing against the value of religion and setting himself in the tradition of not only Freud but also of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, particularly Nietzsche, and Russell. Religion, he holds, 'springs from fear, conceit and cruelty'; it has 'a terrible record of moral obstruction and slaughter'; it is 'delusional' in the way it confronts 'weakness and helplessness'; it 'distorts reality', 'undermines reason, inhibits curiosity and imagination, obstructs self-knowledge', 'persecutes difference' and 'threatens the rule of law'. (p. 13)

These are, as Pataki acknowledges, weighty accusations. And isn't it unfair to lay them before every person who believes in God? It is surely both wildly inaccurate and unfair to accuse every religious believer of the above sins. Pataki's response is to introduce a distinction between 'the religious', for whom religion is roughly a matter of opinion and belief, and 'the religiose' (modeled on 'the grandiose') for whom religion 'is a powerful expression of conviction and character' (p. 15) and for whom religion has the capacity to fill some very powerful and unconscious desires. Pataki hones in on the latter, and offers an account of the unconscious motivation that

produces the religiose as a psychopathological figure whose sickness is religion. The religiose, he contends, are satisfying a range of infantile narcissistic desires, and these form the actual motivation for their turn towards religion. While Pataki admits that not every religious believer is motivated in this way, these are nevertheless very widespread motives whose impact, he says, cannot be overestimated.

One further comment on this general proposition. Freud saw that there were various ways in which one might sustain oneself in the face of the pain of existence in a hostile world, ranging from drugs and alcohol through to ideological formations and the special illusions of religion. For Pataki, the special status that religion occupies in this business derives from the fact that children are inducted into religious belief from an early age and also, and arguably more significantly, because it has a peculiar ability to satisfy various primitive and enduring desires. It is interesting to speculate on the ability of religion to satisfy these desires in comparison with, say, racism—another topic, incidentally, on which Pataki has made an important contribution.<sup>2</sup> The work that Pataki sees religion as doing includes the following: sustaining self-esteem and identity, suppressing guilt and shame, expressing envy and hatred, articulating desires for specialness and superiority and providing a sense of belonging. (pp. 15-16) All of which can be seen in the psychology of racism as well. Does this mean that what is specific to the 'religiose' has not been ascertained? Or does it mean that there is more in common between the racist and the religiose than meets the eye? The implication of Pataki's thesis is, I think, that religion and racism provide similar psychical sustenance.

Pataki's analysis of the phenomenon of religion is very interesting. He focuses on monotheism, specially Judaism and Christianity, and covers issues such as the current revival of religion (which is the inspiration for this book), and the reasons behind it. He both summarises and presents novel perspectives. He is interesting on the issue of the personal relationship to a God, arguing that attributing personal characteristics to God is unavoidable in religion. He discusses the relationship between religion, violence and the law, just as he makes a strong case for claiming that the dismal connections between religion and sexual morality, and between religion and reason, are not incidental but are central to religion. Some of what he says here will be familiar to those who know the literature, but Pataki always brings some insightful commentary and discussion to his material. His treatment of Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* is very good. While sympathetic to Dawkins' anti-religious views, Pataki demonstrates very clearly many of the shortcomings of Dawkins' theses, specially where these concern the motivation for religious belief. Pataki shows, convincingly, that no psychobiological or evolutionary account can explain the enduring attraction of religious belief, specially the content of religious belief. This argument is integral to Pataki's line that we cannot explain the satisfactions that religious belief and belief in the Almighty offer, unless we appeal to unconscious motivations.

This brings us to some comments on the psychoanalytic explanation that Pataki makes of the religiose character. Pataki's account differs from Freud's, which essentially appeals to the father; he appeals instead to work in attachment theory and object relations theory. The deep motivation for the religiose's beliefs in the tenets of monotheistic religion is twofold: on the one hand, the deep libidinal attachments that should have been established in childhood have not been instituted, and a later attachment to God provides the religiose with the secure attachment to a parent he or she lacked in their formative years. This can explain the importance of a relationship to a caring and powerful protector. I'm not sure if this is true—where's the evidence? But in any case, this aspect of Pataki's account is silent on that other, superego aspect of the wrathful, jealous and vengeful god. This latter aspect of the figure of God is so prominent in the Torah and in relation to the God of the Covenant. Pataki's discussion of this is most interesting because he recognizes that it would be atavistic or at least anachronistic to impute all of this to the loving god of Christianity. At this point Pataki draws equally on Nietzsche and on psychoanalytic writers to then see aggressive and destructive unconscious impulses directed at the figure of Christ in the split between the Father and the Son.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable book. It is well written, well argued and superbly set out. At 130 pages in length, it is spare in its style and direct in its argumentation, which is always robust. The historical detail is never gratuitous but advanced to make a compellingly strong case for both viewing religion as pernicious in its influence and a weirdly irrational belief system. A compelling combination of psychoanalysis and logical analysis.

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#### NOTES

1. See for instance David M. Black, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Routledge, 2006).
2. See the Introduction to Michael P. Levine and Tamas Pataki, eds., *Racism in Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2004) and Pataki's essay, 'Psychoanalysis, Racism and Envy'.