

A Biographical Critique of Freud's Atheism

IN SPITE OF Freud's repeated expressions of attraction to Christianity, the fact remains, of course, that he did not convert or assimilate. Instead, after the crisis period of self-analysis (roughly 1895 to 1900), Freud emerged as a founder of modern psychology and as one of history's greatest critics of religion. As we have seen, the underlying pro-Christian motivation never left him, but it appears to have dropped off, for there is less significant material relating to Christianity from the last three decades of his life than from any earlier period of the same duration.

Certainly one of the more important reasons behind the reduction of Freud's pro-Christian (or pro-assimilation) feelings was the decline in the intensity of his unsatisfied ambition: That is, he was increasingly acknowledged throughout the world as a major thinker, and this recognition appears to have slaked the fires of this need. I am also inclined to think that part of Freud's somewhat greater peace of mind—and hence his reduced attraction to assimilation—came from his finally finding the field of intellectual life that was, in fact, most natural to him: psychology. In discovering that he was a psychologist and a philosopher of culture, not a natural or biological scientist, Freud was freed of some of the sense of failure and frustration that had troubled him for so long, and that would have remained with him had he remained oriented toward scientific medicine as the field in which he must excel.

Another significant factor was that his self-analysis brought to consciousness the buried material about his nanny. This bringing to the surface of previously unconscious material could easily have reduced the extent of Freud's unconscious attraction to his nanny—and to Catholic elements associated with her.

A fourth important factor would have had to do with the changing political climate. Starting at about the same time Freud turned from medical science to psychology (i.e., from the 1880s on), there was an increase in anti-Semitism in Austria. By 1895-1897, the election of Karl Lueger as the mayor of Vienna signaled the end of much of the old liberal political system—and the end of the old Catholic liberalism, with its tolerant, positive support for Jewish assimilation.¹ Hostility to the Jews had grown so strong that the liberal political climate favoring assimilation was clearly over; this political and social environment brought out Freud's tough, obdurate ethnic (though not religious) Jewish resistance. Furthermore, the fact that Freud had moved out of the university world (where Gentiles and assimilated Jews like Gomperz dominated)—first into the essentially Jewish world of private practice (with primarily well-to-do Jewish patients), and then in time into the very Jewish world of psychoanalysis—all meant that assimilation

¹ Schorske, C. E. (1980). *Fin-de-siecle Vienna: Politics and culture*. New York: Knopf, Ch. 3; Klein, D. B. (1981). *Jewish origins of the psychoanalytic movement*. New York: Praeger, Ch. 1.

became increasingly irrelevant. In fact, for Freud and many others, assimilation became repugnant as Jews responded to anti-Semitism by increasing their identification with their Jewishness and emphasizing Jewish intellectual and moral superiority.²

As a result, Freud's attacks on religion, most of which came in this last period, can be viewed not only as motivated by his political sympathies with the old liberal Austrian program of secularism, but also as a way of fighting anti-Semitism, a great deal of which was associated with Catholic political parties. Thus, there is support for the contention of Thomas Szasz that "One of Freud's most powerful motives in life was the desire to inflict vengeance on Christianity for its traditional anti-Semitism."³

In a more psychological vein, Freud's critiques of religion are interpretable as reactions (even "reaction formations") against his earlier and persistent temptations to assimilate, as well as against his remaining unconscious motives. His "loathing" for such Jews as Adler, and for his student Tausk, both of whom assimilated by becoming Christians, can be seen in this light.⁴

However, from the previous chapters, we have seen that political and social motives were not the real forces that drove Freud, especially with respect to religious issues. It is now, finally, time to reflect on this knowledge of Freud's personal relationship to religion, in order to clarify how it sheds a new light on his critique of religious belief. We need to begin by briefly reviewing the major features of Freud's anti-religious position.

Religion as Illusion

Freud's most powerful and influential attack on religion came in 1927, in his work *The Future of an Illusion*. The illusion was, of course, religion, and Freud's conclusion was that it didn't have any future. The essay dealt with three major subjects, religion, science, and culture; we are concerned here almost entirely with his treatment of religion.

First, a few comments on what Freud was *not* writing about are in order. The findings and logic of psychoanalysis were not relevant to his discussion of religion here. He explicitly said in a letter to Oskar Pfister: "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 [emphasis added]*. They are my personal views, which coincide with those of many non-analysts and pre-analysts, but there are certainly many excellent analysts who do not share them."⁵ This was, however, Freud's private message to Pfister; the public impression given by *The Future of an Illusion* then, as now, is that psychoanalysis somehow supports the atheistic thesis.

² Klein (1981, Ch. 1).

³ Szasz, T. (1978). *The myth of psychotherapy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 139.

⁴ For Adler's becoming a Christian, see Eissler, K. R. (1971). *Talent and genius: The fictitious case of Tausk contra Freud*. New York: Quadrangle, p. 376); for Freud's "loathing" of Adler, see Freud, S., & Andreas-Salomé, L. (1972). *Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé: Letters* (E. Pfeifer, Ed.; E. & W. Robson-Scott, Trans.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 19); for Tausk's baptism, see Eissler (1971, p. 68); for Freud's "lack of enthusiasm" for Tausk, see Eissler (1971) and Roazen, P. (1969). *Brother animal: The story of Freud and Tausk*. New York Knopf. In addition to Adler and Tausk, the list of important figures in Freud's life who converted to Christianity includes Heine; Michael Bernays; a medical professor called "B" (see Freud, S. (1960). *Letters of Sigmund Freud* (E. L. Freud, Ed.; T. Stern & J. Stern, Trans.). New York: Basic Books. p. 150); Mahler; V. C. Blum, the surgeon who performed the Steinache operation on Freud in 1923; and no doubt others, especially in the university medical world. (The Steinache operation—ligature of the vas deferens on both sides, a kind of "symbolic castration"—was performed on the basis of the hypothesis, now discredited, that it would rejuvenate the patient. For more on Blum and the operation, see Jones, E. (1953, 1955, 1957). *The life and work of Sigmund Freud* (Vols. 1-3). New York: Basic Books, pp. 98-99, and the detailed discussion in Romm, S. (1983). *The unwelcome intruder: Freud's struggle with cancer*. New York: Praeger)

⁵ S. Freud & Pfister (1963, p. 117).

The Future of an Illusion is not a book in which theology is debated and rationally evaluated. Freud again made this clear: “To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie in the scope of the present enquiry.”⁶ Instead, Freud’s concern was with a general psychological interpretation of the motives or wishes that lie behind religious beliefs. Given these two important qualifications, what did Freud say about the underlying psychology of religion?

Freud claimed that religious ideas derive from our desires, that they are “born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race.”⁷ Religion thus protects us from our greatest anxieties: from the fear of natural forces, from the threat of injury or injustice inflicted by other men, from the terror of death. Religion provides a higher purpose in life and makes us feel that all is well. In the end, we believe that justice triumphs, because in life after death all evil is punished and good rewarded. The sufferings of this life are thus compensated for. Freud claimed that these ideas are convenient illusions, that these religious “truths” just happen to be exactly what we would *want* there to be.⁸ These beliefs,

which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—protection through love....⁹

Freud went on to note, however, that an illusion is not necessarily an error. It is conceivable that an illusion might be true; it is possible that a girl who dreams of a handsome prince may actually meet one, get married, and live happily ever after. (For Freud, we may recall, the Acropolis *did* turn out to exist!) But as Freud saw it, *any* idea or belief is an illusion “when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation.”¹⁰

A fact that is not widely appreciated today is that the central point of Freud’s analysis—namely, that religion is a projection of human needs, and thus an illusion—was widely known decades before Freud’s essay. Ludwig Feuerbach, in his historic attack on Christianity, *The Essence of Christianity*,¹¹ first expressed the projection theory in its modern form. Feuerbach’s interpretation had become an intellectual commonplace, especially in German cultural circles. For example, both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were familiar with Feuerbach’s ideas and spent some time expanding (and refining on) his position, about which they were clearly enthusiastic.¹² Freud in his late teens already mentioned having read Feuerbach on this issue.¹³ Even more interesting is that Freud’s personal library contained Feuerbach’s book expounding this view. The copy in his library had a 1923 copyright date, just a few years before *The Future of an Illusion* came out.¹⁴ It is plausible that Freud reread it at that time to refresh his memory on Feuerbach. Among Feuerbach’s more pertinent remarks are these:

⁶ Freud, S. (1927a). The future of an illusion. *Standard Edition*, 21, 33.

⁷ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 18).

⁸ Freud here overlooks the belief in God’s personal judgment, and the notion of Hell, which are hardly comforting. If one has a conscious or unconscious fear of judgment, then God’s nonexistence is exactly how an atheist would want things to be; and, of course, for those who make “Faustian” bargains in their life, the nonexistence of God must be a truly urgent desire.

⁹ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 30).

¹⁰ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 31).

¹¹ Feuerbach, L. (1957). *The essence of Christianity* (E. G. Waring & F. W. Strothman, Eds.). New York: Ungar.

¹² Waring (Ed.), in Feuerbach (1841/1957, pp. iii-ix).

¹³ Trilling, L. (1955). *Freud and the crisis of our culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 47.

¹⁴ Trosman & Simmons (1973) list recently republished German editions of both *The Essence of Christianity* (1923) and *The Essence of Religion* (1923) in Freud’s library. The latter was another book by Feuerbach, very similar to the first in its criticism of religion.

Man projects his nature into the world outside of himself before he finds it in himself. In the beginning, his own nature confronts him as being distinct from himself. Religion is the child-like condition of humanity.... Hence the historical progress. of religion consists of this: that which during an earlier stage of religion was regarded as something objective is now recognized as something subjective, so that which was formerly viewed and worshipped as God is now recognized as something human.¹⁵

Every bit as “Freudian” are such comments as “God is...a personification of man’s moral conscience.”¹⁶ And as for wish-fulfillment, Feuerbach wrote: “What man misses—whether this be an articulate and therefore conscious, or an unconscious [emphasis added], need—that is his God.”¹⁷

Freud’s Lack of Experience with Religious Patients

In view of the essentially derivative character of Freud’s thesis in *The Future of an Illusion*, how is one to account for the widespread power and influence that this essay had (and still has)? The effectiveness of the work has no doubt derived to some degree from Freud’s consummate style, and from his ability to weave together in an interesting fashion his understanding of science with his discussion of the origin of culture and his critique of religion. Moreover, Feuerbach had been to a degree forgotten by this time, and his writings were also generally longer and less elegantly expressed than Freud’s. Finally, by 1927 (when Freud’s work appeared), there was a much larger audience of unbelievers eager to hear such a message. But certainly one of the greatest reasons for this essay’s impact was that it was written by a famous psychologist. That is, by implication, readers have understood that they are reading a man who time after time observed the unconscious needs behind the religious beliefs of his patients. It is implied that somehow Freud was an expert in the psychology of religion not only because he was an expert in psychology (which he was), but because he was an expert in religion, and even more, an expert on the psychology of believers. But here the situation was not what most readers have assumed, for Freud’s contacts with religion when he was an adult and a practicing psychoanalyst were few, and limited in the extreme.

For example, not one of Freud’s major published cases dealt with a patient who was a believing Christian or Jew. The only case of Freud’s, besides the Wolf-Man case, in which I could find any significant reference to the Christianity of the patient was a minor reference to one of his very early patients, reported in his book with Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895). Here Freud referred to his attempts to relieve the anxiety attacks of an elderly woman who had become extremely religious. Freud commented that she “always received me as if I were the Devil, she was always armed with a small ivory crucifix which she hid in her hand.”¹⁸ Freud’s diagnosis was that her anxiety attacks derived from a sensual attraction to a young man that she had experienced in her youth, years earlier; she had resisted (repressed) her sensual feelings, and her anxiety was the result. The diagnosis is not especially convincing, but in any case Freud mentioned nothing about any possible connection between her religious beliefs and wish-fulfillment.

A majority of Freud’s patients were Jewish; they were typically secular, well-to-do, and educated. However, I have not found one case where Freud analyzed a practicing, devout Jew (e.g., Orthodox). Freud would of course have been moderately familiar with religious Jews from his family and his in-laws, but social familiarity—most of which occurred during his pre-

¹⁵ Feuerbach (1841/1957, p. 11).

¹⁶ Feuerbach (1841/1957, p. 23).

¹⁷ Feuerbach (1841/1957, p. 33).

¹⁸ Breuer, J., & Freud, S. (1893-1895). *Studies on hysteria. Standard Edition*, 2, 273-274.

psychoanalytic years as a youth and a young man—was not the same thing as psychoanalytic knowledge. In any case, I have not been able to find any case histories involving Freud’s secular Jewish patients in which Freud identified childish wishes lying behind an adult’s religious belief or religious practice.

One testimony to the absence of religious Judaism in Freud’s life comes from Ernest Jones, one of the few Gentiles who was regularly at the center of Freud’s circle of friends. Jones, an atheist (from a Protestant background) married to a secularized Jewess, was a close associate of Freud from about 1908 on—thus, for all but the early years of psychoanalysis. He reports: “It has never been my fortune to know a Jew possessing religious belief, let alone an orthodox one.”¹⁹ This is a remarkable statement, and can only mean that Freud’s world, the world of psychoanalysis, was extremely secularized with respect to Jewish religious life. Freud’s own description of himself as “an infidel Jew”²⁰ captures this absence of religion pretty well. Hence, the conclusion must be that Freud was not a psychoanalyst experienced in the treatment of believing Jews (and still less in that of Christians).

Where, then, did Freud get his knowledge of religion? What made him such an authority on the underlying psychology of religion, especially the religion of the masses of ordinary believers (for this was the only religion he attempted to explain)? By now, the reader should be well prepared for the nanny as the answer to this question. Nevertheless, it is useful to systematically take up and reject other possible sources of religious influence. Doing this makes it even clearer how important the nanny always remained for Freud’s “religious” life.

Perhaps Freud was strongly affected through his *friendship* with serious Christians or Jews? But the only Christian believer that Freud appears to have known was Pfister. The impact of Pfister’s personal faith and warmth on Freud was considerable, but the letters between them show an ongoing, very basic disagreement about the nature of religious belief. In particular, Pfister wrote: “Our disagreement [with respect to religion] derives chiefly from the fact that you grew up in proximity to pathological forms of religion and regard these as ‘religion’...”²¹ In part, Pfister, as a liberal evangelical Protestant, was criticizing Freud for being overly Roman Catholic in his concept of religion, but one also suspects that Pfister was to some extent aware of Freud’s nanny and her traumatic meaning for Freud and religion.

There is no evidence that, after his childhood, Freud was in any sort of close contact with *any* believing Christian other than Pfister. A remote possibility remains that the youthful contact with Brentano might qualify; he was an adult who believed in God and in Christ. From the passages of Freud’s youthful letters already quoted in Chapter Two, it is clear that Freud talked over the issue of the existence of God with Brentano. However, it is not at all plausible that the young Freud, decades before psychoanalysis, would have found in Brentano’s philosophically oriented discussions evidence for his future position: that religious belief is derived from childhood wishes. Instead, the famous, intelligent, and personally impressive Brentano, who believed in God, seems to have made Freud more favorably disposed toward such belief—at least temporarily.²²

No doubt, Freud observed religious Jews while growing up. His own father, in his later years, took to frequent reading of Jewish religious texts (such as the Talmud) and became involved in

¹⁹ Jones, E. (1959). *Free associations: Memories of a psycho-analyst*. New York: Basic Books, 210.

²⁰ Freud, S. (1928). A religious experience. *Standard Edition*, 21, 170.

²¹ S. Freud & Pfister (1963, p. 122).

²² Brentano was a teacher who had considerable personal impact on many of his students, and he was known as a kind and profoundly moral man. For example, Brentano was a pacifist who in the early 1900s lived in Italy, but after the outbreak of World War I, he moved to Switzerland as a protest against Italy’s participation in the war. See Boring, E. G. (1950). *A history of experimental psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts., p. 358).

religious discussions.²³ But the point is that even if Freud's father, and his teacher Hammerschlag as well, were deeply devout Jews during the period when Freud was growing up (in fact, there is no reason to think that his father was devout), and even if Freud had felt that behind their beliefs lay childish needs (and this seems extremely far-fetched), still these contacts and impressions would *not* constitute good psychoanalytic evidence.

Perhaps Freud got his knowledge of religion from reading theology? Again the evidence is negative, especially with respect to orthodox (whether Christian or Jewish) religious thought—the only kind of belief he was interested in. With the exception of Feuerbach and similarly secularized writers such as Renan, who were functioning as critics of traditional belief (a position Freud would adopt as his own), there is no evidence that he ever read religious writers at all, and still less evidence that he read any who defined and defended the traditional Christian faith.

Instead, Freud's many references to things Christian and Jewish, which have been cited so often in earlier chapters, came from two major sources: his own youthful reading of the Philippon Bible (Old Testament), and his immersion in a kind of ambivalent "Christianized" literature, such as *Faust*, *Paradise Lost*, and Merejkowski's *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*. His quotations from the New Testament could easily have been picked up from these latter sources and from the widespread use of such phrases in the culture at large during this period. There is no evidence that he actually read the New Testament itself. Freud often took quotations from secondary sources. For example, his quotations from the *Aeneid* as in the motto of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and in his famous analysis of the *aliquis slip*, both very likely came from a secondary source.²⁴

Freud's report that he couldn't read Hebrew—along with the considerable evidence already cited of Freud's antipathy to the Jewish religion—means that he was never seriously involved in the reading of Jewish scripture or of the commentaries, which would have presented to him a mature, intelligent basis for evaluating traditional Judaism.

It might seem conceivable that Freud's insights into religion came from his own personal religious experiences. The answer is negative: Neither I nor any other biographer has found evidence supporting the possibility of any obvious and significant religious experience in Freud's life. On the contrary, in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud explicitly complained: "If the truth of religious doctrines is dependent on inner experience which bears witness to that truth, what is one to do about the many people who do not have this rare experience?"²⁵ Freud was including himself in this category.

In fact, the evidence supports the notion that Freud was in many respects afraid of religious experience, and to some extent took steps to avoid it. It has been mentioned more than once in this book that Freud did not like music—an almost unheard-of attitude for an educated and sophisticated man in Vienna, a city that was in important respects the very center of Western musical achievement. It was a great Mozart center; the birthplace of Schubert; and the home of non-Viennese im ports like Beethoven and Brahms, and later Mahler, Schoenberg, and Berg. We may recall that Freud claimed he didn't like music because he did not wish to be

²³ See Grollman, E. A. (1965). *Judaism in Sigmund Freud's world*. New York: Block, 50, who cites Heller, J. B. (1956). Freud's mother and father, a memoir. *Commentary*, 21, 418-421.

²⁴ See Schorske, C. E. (1980). *Fin-de-siecle Vienna: Politics and culture*. New York: Knopf, p. 200). Freud very probably took his Virgil quotes from the political writer and socialist Lassalle; for example, see Swales, P. J. (1982a). Freud, Minna Bernays, and the conquest of Rome: New light on the origins of psychoanalysis. *New American Review*, 1, p. 5).

²⁵ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 28).

emotionally moved by something he didn't understand rationally.²⁶ Where rational understanding wasn't possible, he wanted no part of it—even if it meant a life more or less without music, except for *Don Giovanni*! Now in its “irrational” quality, the experience of music is indeed often close to religious experience, and for many listeners it brings on religious experience. For Freud, such experiences were too disturbing, even threatening. Music would trigger Moravian memories of music at the Freiberg church with his nanny, and their associated emotions. These unconscious, religiously tinged memories could only bring on a painful unease.

Freud's word for religious experience was somewhat unusual, and betrayed his desire to avoid such experience. He referred to it as “the oceanic feeling.”²⁷ Such terminology—in contrast, for example, to “the peak experience”—shows that Freud viewed religious experience as something primitive, archaic, lower than the experience of daily life (people live *above* sea level); moreover, he saw it as something dangerous, in which one might drown. In this wateriness, it may also have been associated with baptism, and with feminine principles. By contrast, the term “peak experience” suggests something higher than the experiences of daily life; something elevated and requiring much effort to reach it; something that, when reached, allows one to see far and to look down on others. No, Freud did not have any conscious desire for religious experience; indeed, he had the conscious desire to have *no* religious experience. And as far as anyone has been able to tell, except for the very troubling experience on the Acropolis, he got his wish.

In the context of this discussion, it should be noted that Freud's complaint that many people do not have religious experiences was clearly disingenuous. Since Freud never sought such experience (he even avoided it), it is not so surprising that he didn't have any! Freud would never have been allowed to get away with setting himself up as a critic of music or as an aesthete of musical experience, nor would he have attempted such a thing. Why, then, has he been allowed to reject, as an “expert,” the existence of something that he studiously avoided experiencing and finding out about?

The Nanny and the Projection of Disillusionment

The question of why Freud's critique has been influential would take us far afield into the psychology and sociology of modern life, and so we return to our investigation of Freud, and in particular to his argument in *The Future of an Illusion*. If Freud's “understanding” of religion in this work did not come from his familiarity with religious patients or with knowledgeable adult believers, or from the study of orthodox theologians of his time or of the past, or from his own religious experiences, it must have come from his own childhood contact with religion—which brings us back to his nanny. Thus, like so much of Freudian theory, *The Future of an Illusion* had an important autobiographical origin.

In the book itself, Freud stated that psychoanalysis is not the basis of his arguments; in the letter to Pfister cited above, he made it clear that the ideas set forth in the book were an expression of his personal philosophy. This notion was amplified in his postscript to *An Autobiographical Study* (1935), where he wrote that in the past ten years his writings had shown a significant change: After a detour through medicine and science, he had “returned to the cultural problems which had fascinated me long before, when I was a youth....”²⁸ Whenever Freud wrote about “cultural problems,” religion always figured as a central issue.

But the best evidence that Freud's conception of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* went back to his own childhood is to be found in the peculiar words he used to describe religion. He

²⁶ Freud, S. (1914a). *The Moses of Michelangelo*. *Standard Edition*, 13, 211.

²⁷ For example, see Letters (p. 389).

²⁸ Freud, S. (1935). Postscript to *An autobiographical study*. *Standard Edition*, 20, 72.

called it the store of ideas “born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood....”²⁹ Thus, religious beliefs are illusions, wishes and not “precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking.”³⁰

This period—childhood—on which Freud focused, somewhat obsessively, was of course the only period when he himself had any serious contact with religion. And we know that his relationship with the one religious person whom he knew was well suited to produce a strongly neurotic interpretation of religion.

The very notion of illusion, which figured so prominently in Freud’s argument, is an interesting one. In Freud’s own life, the primal and only real experience of disillusionment was the loss of his nanny. (We may recall that Freud suffered no other loss of love, or even real interpersonal failure, until his father died in 1896 after a lengthy illness. His father’s death was deeply moving for Freud, but it was no disillusionment.) His first love, and his first and only deeply painful separation—with its resultant mourning, anxiety, and anger—were attached to this woman who introduced him to basic Christian ideas. And her loss would have immediately raised a “terrifying impression of helplessness.” The theory that separation causes basic anxiety about one’s security is one that Freud himself eventually arrived at, and one that Bowlby has subsequently compellingly amplified. Freud’s nanny’s sudden disappearance would have set in motion the longing for her return (something that would never happen), and would thus have linked this woman and all she stood for with something that had failed him, with an illusion. This loss would also have aroused great anger, and this anger would have strongly affected Freud’s final stage of psychological disengagement from his nanny, through the building of defenses against her and all she symbolized. I propose, then, that Freud’s criticism of religion, as in *The Future of an Illusion*, was an expression of his attempt to cope with the lost happiness of his Freiberg days—with a loss that remained mysterious and painful to the end of his life. In his critiques of religion he was consciously turning with bitterness and anger (tempered by resignation) on his nanny, and most especially on the ideas so deeply associated with her: salvation, Christianity, and the Catholic Church. In abandoning him, in letting him down, she had “proven” that the happiness he had known in her religious world was an illusion.

Whatever the deep yearnings Freud continued to feel for his nanny, he would also have had a strong and equally unconscious need to criticize and reject everything for which the nanny stood. For example, if she stood for things that were trivial or stupid or illusory, then Freud would not really have lost very much after all. In particular, if her religion was an illusion, then Freud was in this respect the better off for her having left him. The interpretation of religion as an illusion thus allowed him the pleasure of interpreting religious belief as other people’s problem, not his own loss. Furthermore, if Freud’s arguments about the illusory nature of religion caused Christians to lose their faith, then Freud would have the extra satisfaction of hurting his unfaithful nanny and all she stood for. (There would also have been the conscious secondary gain of attacking anti-Semitic Christians as well.)

What might other *unconscious* expressions of Freud’s childhood religious complex be? One would be the desire to find or recapture his nanny and her religious world, so to speak. We have already seen many manifestations of this unconscious part of Freud—of this love breaking through, from his haunting of churches to his interpretations of paintings. The use of displacement and of other strategies to cope with his Christian complex has already been covered.

Another common neurotic pattern is known as “fixation,” and Freud was clearly fixated on an understanding of religion that his critics have often described as primitive and immature.

²⁹ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 18).

³⁰ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 30).

(Fixation is a consequence of repression and of trauma, both of which were present here.) Freud, in his critique of religion, was only interested in and concerned with the “masses” and their simple religion. Of course this is just a relatively small part of religion, Christianity in particular. Yet it was this simple (indeed, simple-minded) religion of the masses, as communicated to Freud by his nanny and as forever emotionally associated with her, that was the only religion that ever mattered to him. He remained fixated at the one level of religion he had directly experienced—a three-year-old’s Catholicism. It was this religion that was so deeply connected to his separation anxiety, and it was to this kind of religion that Freud returned over and over.

Yet another but related way of clearly seeing Freud’s rejection of religion as an illusion is to understand this rejection as an expression of “derealization.” As noted in Chapter Six, Freud described this psychic mechanism as that way in which the ego defends itself by denying reality. In introducing derealization in the context of his interpretation of his one vaguely religious experience, the one on the Acropolis, Freud directly implied that his ego used exactly such a neurotic defense against religious reality.

The Future of an Illusion was, then, a neurotic derealization of religious reality and a projection of Freud’s own past disillusionment with his “unfaithful,” religious nanny-mother. His reactions—that is, his intellectual interpretations of religion—were based on his strong, persistent, unconscious, childish needs, connected to his nanny’s early abandonment of him and his first experience of helplessness. In short, Freud’s religious neurosis was deeply satisfied by his theory that religion is an illusion.

Origins of Freud’s Atheism

I now turn to a new but closely related topic—the factors behind Freud’s explicit atheism, as distinct from his conceptualization of religion as illusion. I begin by recalling his life-long rejection of Jewish religiousness, which contrasted with his acceptance of the Jewish ethnic and cultural heritage.

As a young man, Freud was so disturbed at the prospect of being married in a Jewish wedding ceremony, which he called “loathsome,” that he contemplated assimilating to Christian culture by becoming a Protestant! In spite of the persistent complaints of his wife, who came from a seriously practicing Jewish family, Freud always refused to allow any Jewish religious ceremonies in their family life. As mentioned earlier, Freud does not appear to have had any seriously religious Jews among his friends or intellectual associates (though he did have one good Christian friend and colleague, Oskar Pfister). Freud never spoke positively of Jewish religiousness, as expressed, for example, in Orthodox or Hasidic life of the times. Finally, in his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud attacked Judaism by claiming that its great hero (and, to a considerable degree, founder), Moses, was not a Jew but an Egyptian, and that the Jews murdered Moses. Thus, Freud deprived the Jews of their claim of being the first monotheists. Not surprisingly, Freud’s thesis was experienced by religious Jews as an unexpected and exceedingly painful attack on Judaism at a time when Hitler’s rise to power had made support for the Jews a pressing need.³¹ Freud himself acknowledged that *Moses and Monotheism* was an attack on the Jews, but he turned a deaf ear to those Jews who wrote him before the book’s final publication imploring him not to publish such an attack.

There is little doubt that Freud’s rejection of religious Judaism was derived largely from his rejection of his father, Jakob. Freud’s various biographers have identified many reasons for this rejection.

³¹ For example, see Jones (1957, p. 194).

Certainly social and ideological factors must have been important. Freud's father was a nice but unsuccessful man; he was essentially a failure in Sigmund's eyes, in that he never achieved any visible social or economic success. Freud's struggle with and resentment of his poverty were, among other things, implicit indictments of his father. And of course, Freud was dramatically better "educated" and socially more "advanced" than his father, who never went to the university or had any status in a profession or as an intellectual. For Freud, his father must have been a constant reminder of the ordinariness of his family origins—and we know how much Freud wished to be free of his poverty, how intensely he desired success. Some of his friends from similarly humble backgrounds could at least point to their fathers' commercial prosperity; Freud could not. In short, Freud had "good" social reasons for rejecting his father and his father's world—for putting all that behind him as he moved, as they say, up the social (and financial and cultural) ladder. (It can hardly be doubted that countless young men of accomplishment in the modern period have rejected their family and their religious origins for precisely the same reasons: social needs for self-esteem.) But it was far from just a social and economic issue, for Freud's whole concept of being a participant in modern intellectual life—and, even more so, his desire to make psychoanalysis a universal science—required that any religious taint or specificity be left behind, if possible. Freud, like almost all of those trying to make a career in the secular world, knew that atheism was simply the best policy.³² To be religious, especially Jewish, would have been a serious handicap for the acceptance of his ideas, and Freud's ambition demanded as few handicaps as possible.

None of these reasons, however, necessarily accounts for Freud's hostility to and active rejection of Jewish religiousness. After all, he could, like so many other intellectual Jews moving into modernism, have simply let go of his religious origins while maintaining a comfortable ethnic identity. But Freud actively rejected Jewish religiousness, and for the animus behind this we must turn to the psychological reasons for his rejection of his father.

At least three major psychological explanations are available to account for Freud's rejection of his father—and, with him, of Judaism and of God. First, there is the often-cited incident of his father's passive acceptance of anti-Semitism. (We may recall that Jakob told his son, when Sigmund was about ten, of the time when his hat was knocked off by a local anti-Semitic youth; Jakob just picked up his hat and walked away. Sigmund was ashamed of his father upon hearing this story.) Whatever the power of this one incident, it certainly symbolizes the passivity that characterized Jakob as far as his son was concerned. Whatever Freud was, he was most certainly a fighter, who admired strength and despised passivity and weakness in any form. He did not identify with generals for nothing; Freud was, as he himself said, an intellectual "Conquistador."³³ During the Fascist buildup in Germany in the 1930s, there was an anti-Semitic joke going the rounds that Jews were parading in Berlin carrying signs that said, "Throw us out." Freud is reported to have briefly believed it to be true, and to have been very angry about it.³⁴ His tendency to believe such a tale strikes one as a kind of fear of his father's weakness, and as a deep anger that there even were Jews like Jakob. Thus, Freud's own resistance to anti-Semitism, in contrast to his father's passivity, is perhaps ample reason to account for his rejection of his father.

Then, too, there was the alleged affair between Freud's mother and his half-brother Philipp—which I am very inclined to think actually occurred, on the basis of the evidence. Jakob may have been unaware of this affair (if so, this would have made him look rather a fool); if he was aware of it, he apparently made no strong response. (He certainly didn't react like King David in the Bible or King Sigismund!) Such an insult to his father's authority not only would have

³² See Vitz, P. C. (1985). The psychology of atheism. *Truth, 1*, 29-36.

³³ Jones (1953, p. 348).

³⁴ Jones (1957, p. 198).

undermined Freud's respect for his father, but also would have raised doubts about his own paternity. Who was his father? This is a question he apparently never psychologically resolved.

And finally, there are still other possible reasons for Freud's rejection of his father, noted in Chapter Five.³⁵ We may recall the statements of Freud in letters to Fliess, suggesting that his father was a cause of hysterical symptoms in his own family³⁶ and that his own father was "perverse."³⁷ It was only a year or so prior to these comments that Freud had concluded, in a letter to Fliess on October 15, 1895, that "Hysteria is the consequence of a presexual sexual shock [Freud's emphasis]."³⁸ Later, Freud followed up this remark by writing, "Well then, let us speak plainly. In my analyses the guilty people are close relatives...it then turned out that her supposedly otherwise noble and respected father regularly took her to bed when she was from eight to twelve years old..."³⁹ Thus, there is evidence that for Freud his father was linked to some kind of sexual—abuse of his own children.⁴⁰ In summary, any or all of the reasons given above could have served as an adequate source of Freud's strong rejection of Jakob.

Why would Freud have rejected God as well? There is conclusive evidence throughout Freud's writings that he reliably associated the concepts of father and God. The logic of such a rejection is explicit in such a statement as this:

Psycho-analysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is psychologically nothing other than an exalted father, and it brings us evidence every day of how young people lose their religious beliefs as soon as their father's authority breaks down.⁴¹

Here we have in a nutshell Freud's theory of the psychological basis for loss of belief. And again, as in so many instances, we need only assume that it was true for him and not that it is necessarily true for everyone. Let the father's power, strength, or authority be undermined, and God no longer seems credible—this is hardly a sound rational basis for atheism. However, the psychological basis of atheism receives a still clearer expression within the Freudian system.

Atheism and the Oedipus Complex.⁴²

The most powerful expression of Freud's rejection of his father is to be observed in the concept of the Oedipus complex. In this motivational system, which is at the very heart of psychoanalysis, Freud proposed hatred of the father and the desire to kill him, in fact or in fantasy; he saw this proposed complex as the source of countless dreams, wishes, and illusions. And, certainly, Freud's own neurotic tendencies were intimately bound up with his father.

Now one striking thing about Oedipal motivation is that, in postulating it, Freud was

³⁵ Krüll, M. (1979). *Freud und sein Vater*. Munich: C. H. Beck

³⁶ Freud, S. (1985). *The complete letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904* (J. M. Masson, Ed. and Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³⁷ S. Freud (1985, p. 264). Also, Jakob was called by Freud "one of these perverts"; for example, see the summary of Masson's position in Blumenthal, R. (1981, August 25). Did Freud's isolation, peer rejection prompt key theory reversal? *New York Times*, p. C5).

³⁸ S. Freud (1985, p. 144).

³⁹ S. Freud (1985, p. 238; also pp. 213, 286).

⁴⁰ Blumenthal (1981, p. C5); Masson, J. M. (1984). *The assault on truth: Freud's suppression of the seduction theory*. (2nd ed.). New York: Viking Penguin, eg. 114-115.

⁴¹ Freud, S. (1910a). Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood. *Standard Edition*, 11, 123.

⁴² For a more extensive development of the ideas in this section, see Vitz, P. C., & Gartner, J. (1984a). Christianity and psychoanalysis, Part 1: Jesus as the Anti-Oedipus. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 12, 4-14; Vitz, P. C., & Gartner, J. (1984b). Christianity and psychoanalysis, Part 2: Jesus as transformer of the super-ego. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 12, 82-90).

inadvertently proposing a powerful, unconscious, universal, childish, and neurotic wish for the death not only of the father but also of his symbolic surrogate, God. As a consequence, Freud himself has given us the conceptual basis for understanding atheism as Oedipal wish-fulfillment. By Freud's own definition, atheism is an illusion like any other—a belief where “wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation.”⁴³ Freud's life is a rich testimony to his theory: He was a man so permeated with Oedipal motivation that his atheism was overdetermined. And from Freud's example, one has reason to suspect that behind many an atheist, agnostic, or skeptic of today lies shame, disappointment, or rage directed at the father. For many people, disbelief in “God the Father” is the closest to revenge that they can get.

In the case of Freud, the childhood suffering that burdened him all his life, and with which he obsessively and tenaciously struggled, arouses our sympathy. Sigmund Freud, like Heinrich Heine in his last Lazarus poem, never put down his weapons. Our sympathy for Freud's struggle must not, however, be allowed to blind us to the understanding that his own life gives us of the neurotic, and untrustworthy, origin of his unbelief and the unbelief of many others.

Conclusion

In Chapter One and in this section, I note that Freud powerfully expressed the argument that the psychological needs served by religious beliefs make such beliefs no longer believable. But, as I have shown here, such a thesis is a sword that cuts both ways; indeed, I claim that it cuts, more deeply into the roots of atheism than it cuts in the other direction. The case for this claim is based on two final arguments that the reader can now evaluate.

First, I have noted that at no time did Freud psychoanalyze someone who believed in God so as to show in any specific way how belief is a consequence of neurotic childhood experience. But in the preceding pages, we have seen how detailed clinical evidence does show that the rejection of God can be a consequence of unconscious neurotic needs. Furthermore, the unbeliever in question is Freud himself, and the unbelief in question includes his specific critical theories of religion.

Second, the present theoretical understanding ties Freud's atheism and, by extension, the atheism of many others⁴⁴—much more firmly to the theoretical structure of psychoanalysis than Freud ever tied belief. The interpretation of Freud's unbelief as derived from the effects of separation anxiety is not integral to Freudian psychoanalysis, but its logic is widely found in today's expanded psychoanalytic framework. And of course, the interpretation given here of Freud's atheism as involving derealization, repression, projection, and fixation uses standard Freudian concepts. Finally, the interpretation of atheism as unconscious Oedipal wish-fulfillment is one that comes from the very center of Freudian theory.

The reader may not agree with me that the weight of the psychological evidence now makes atheism a more probable symptom of neurosis than theism. However, at the very least, it should be clear that atheism certainly may often be an expression of a psychological pathology. This conclusion, combined with the preceding rationale, also means that the whole question of God—yes, even *der liebe Gott*—needs a new and much fairer treatment on the part of the “compact majority” that controls contemporary psychology, a majority well known for its persistent criticism of religious belief. In the future, as psychology moves (as I believe it will) toward a more honest approach to the question of the existence of God, I propose that at least

⁴³ S. Freud (1927a, S.E., 21, p. 31).

⁴⁴ Freud was often willing to generalize from his own psychology to that of others—sometimes to *all* others, as in the proposed universality of the Oedipus complex. Hence, to generalize from the psychology of Freud's Oedipally based atheism to “many others” is a very modest conclusion, at least in Freudian terms.

two important spirits of Freud would wish such a new venture well: the spirit of his intellectual courage, and the spirit of a three-year-old boy with his nanny.