

Freud and the Problem of God

What are the origin and nature of religion? The question has haunted the West for centuries. Religious dogma long supplied the answers, as Jewish and Christian theologians variously insisted that other religions were distortions of the original, pure, monotheistic faith. In the 18th century, rationalists, notably France's Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, proposed a new dogma: Mankind had originally placed its faith in reason; latter-day religions were the distortions. With the 19th century, however, came a *science of religion* that claimed not to be dogma. Its supporters explained religion in terms of historical and psychological factors, among others. Two of its advocates—Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud—were raised under similar conditions (each had German Jewish parents and grew up in an anti-Semitic environment). Both rejected Judaism for atheism. Marx called religion “the opium of the masses”; Freud described religion as science's “really serious enemy . . . unworthy of belief.” Yet theologian Hans Küng, in this essay drawn from his new book *Does God Exist?*, questions just how unreligious Freud really was.

by Hans Küng

In 1854—the same year that Pope Pius IX in Rome promulgated the dogma of Mary's immaculate conception—open conflict broke out at the 31st assembly of German natural scientists and doctors in Göttingen. It was the famous “materialism controversy” between medical specialist Rudolf Wagner, working in the field of anatomy and physiology, and physiologist Carl Vogt.

Wagner sought to defend, by philosophical and theological arguments, the existence of a special, invisible, weightless “soul

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Sigmund Freud's brother, Alexander, was six years old when Sigmund, then 16, told him: "Look, . . . our family is like a book. You and I are the first and the last of the children, so we are like the strong covers that have to support and protect the weak girls who were born after me and before you." Pictured from left to right are Sigmund, Adolphine, Alexander, Anna, Paula, Marie, and Rosa Freud.

substance" against recent physiological theories. Vogt sharply discounted this venerable concept; he compared the relationship between brain and thought to that between liver and bile or between kidneys and urine.*

For the educated public in Germany at that time, Vogt and the materialists had won the battle. After the controversy, it was clear to them that religious persuasions had no place in questions of natural science or medicine. The interconnection of mechanical and natural laws had to be investigated to the very end without philosophical or theological reservations; there was no activity of consciousness without cerebral activity, no soul existing independently of the body; religion had nothing to do with science and—if it counted at all—was a private matter.

Two years later, while the controversy was still brewing, Sigismund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in the small Catholic town of Freiberg in Moravia, now in Czechoslovakia. (Named

*The debate had begun when Wagner proclaimed his support of the traditional Judeo-Christian belief of mankind's descent from a single pair of human beings, Adam and Eve, as told in Genesis 2-5. Vogt assumed that there were several original human couples.

Sigismund by his parents, Freud began using the name Sigmund when he was 17). Only 2 percent of the townsfolk were Protestants, with a similar proportion of Jews. Sigmund's father, Jakob Freud, a wool merchant, was a patriarchal figure. He had been educated an Orthodox Jew, and, despite his liberal, aloof attitude to Jewish tradition, he was never converted to Christianity, unlike Karl Marx's father.

According to Ernest Jones, author of a monumental three-volume biography of Freud, the boy "grew up devoid of any belief in a God or Immortality and does not appear to have felt the need of it."* This is a surprisingly sweeping statement, for which Jones, who sometimes goes on at great length about the most trivial details concerning his hero, can produce no evidence. In any case, Freud himself wrote that reading the Bible had made a strong impression on him as a young man.

It was Freud's mother, Amalie, who instructed him in the Jewish faith. Such instruction, of course, could be of very dubious value, as is clear from Freud's later recollection:

When I was six years old and was given my first lessons by my mother, I was expected to believe that we were all made of earth and must therefore return to earth. This did not suit me, and I expressed doubts of the doctrine. My mother thereupon rubbed the palms of her hands together—just as she did in making dumplings, except that there was no dough between them—and showed me the blackish scales of *epidermis* produced by the friction as a proof that we were made of earth.

Two kinds of "antireligious" experiences made a deep impression on Freud at an early age: his experiences of Christian ritualism and his experience of anti-Semitism.

The old nanny who looked after him during his earliest years was efficient and strict, a Czech Catholic who implanted in the small boy Catholic ideas of heaven and hell, and probably also of redemption and resurrection. She used to take him with

*Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, New York: Basic Books, 1953-57.

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her to Mass in the Catholic Church. At home afterward, he would imitate the liturgical gestures, preach, and explain "God's doings." Could this have been the source of Freud's later aversion to Christian ceremonies and doctrines? At any rate, it cannot be accidental that his first essay on religion, in 1907, bore the title "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices."

"Our God Logos"

Then there was anti-Semitism. Freud considered himself a Jew and was proud of the fact. But he had to suffer for it. As an outsider at primary and secondary school, where he was quite clearly first in his class, his position was similar to that of Karl Marx in Trier from 1830–35. He had only a few non-Jewish friends; humiliations of all kinds at the hands of anti-Semitic "Christians" were his daily lot. He would have preferred to have been educated, like his nephew John, in the more liberal atmosphere of England.

Freud lost much of his respect for his father when he learned at the age of 12 that Jakob Freud had simply swallowed the insult when a boy had thrown his new fur cap into the mud and shouted, "Get off the pavement, Jew." Such experiences unleashed in Freud feelings of hatred and revenge at an early date and made the Christian faith completely incredible to him. It was no better at the University of Vienna: "Above all, I found that I was expected to feel myself inferior and an alien because I was a Jew. I refused absolutely to do the first of these things."

These negative experiences with religion, however much they discredit Christianity, need not have shaken Freud's Jewish faith in God. How did this come about?

When Freud went to medical school in Vienna at the age of 17, he found himself surrounded by the main proponents of the new mechanistic physiology, which explained all life and its development in terms of biological and chemical factors. This school of thought had emerged from a group of young physicists and physiologists in Berlin in the 1840s. Mechanism renounced all traces of *vitalism*, the Aristotelian and Scholastic tradition, which assumed that organisms had been endowed by the Creator with immaterial factors as well and therefore with higher roles and ultimate objectives.

It is understandable that many people began to see the universal panacea for all the sufferings of the late 19th century in natural science and not in religion, politics, or philosophy. A method of investigation was turned into a world view; people

FREUD, THE FAMILY MAN

Sigmund Freud had to live with his public reputation as an arrogant, uncaring egotist, and he knew it. In a letter to fellow psychiatrist C. J. Jung, he once sighed, "As you know, I suffer all the torments that can afflict an 'innovator'; not the least of these is the unavoidable necessity of passing, among my own supporters, as the incorrigibly self-righteous crank or fanatic that in reality I am not."

Indeed, Freud's letters to family and friends reveal another side—the devoted family man, who took pleasure in raising his three daughters and three sons.

The center of Freud's life was his wife, Martha Bernays. Freud married her in 1886 when he was 30 years old, after a four-year engagement during which he sent her more than 900 love letters. He once wrote, "Before I met you, I didn't know the joy of living, and now that 'in principle' you are mine, to have you completely is the one condition I make to life, which I otherwise don't set any great store by."

In another letter to her, Freud took stock: "For a long time I have known that I am not a genius and cannot understand how I ever could have wanted to be one. I am not even very gifted; my whole capacity for work probably springs from my character and from the absence of outstanding intellectual weakness."

Beginning in 1891, Freud lived and worked for almost 47 years at Bergasse 19, a house near Vienna's historic Tandelmarkt. Freud and his family inhabited the third floor, while his offices (complete with couch) were on the second floor. (The ground floor included a butcher's shop.) The punctual doctor gave each of his patients exactly 55 minutes; during his five-minute breaks, he often ran upstairs to visit his family. He frequently received patients until 10 at night but still found time for writing, chess, and the theater.

When the Nazis took over Austria, Freud resisted leaving Vienna. On March 15, 1938, Gestapo agents forced their way into his home and searched some of its rooms. But when Freud appeared, saying

"believed" in it. For Freud, it probably caused his transition to atheism, but there is no direct evidence of this transition in his writings. This is odd. Freud, who otherwise related the most intimate details of his life, does not say a word about experiences that led to his transition to atheism.

For Freud, belief in God was replaced by belief in science, "our god logos," he once phrased it. There he found the "sure support . . . lacking" to believers in God. Fully aware of the

nothing but with eyes blazing, the intimidated intruders left. A week later, however, they picked up Freud's daughter Anna for interrogation. She returned that same day, but the experience was enough to persuade Freud to flee.

In June 1938, Freud left Vienna with Martha and Anna. Soon after World War II began, he died in London on September 23, 1939, at the age of 83, after suffering stoically for 16 years from a cancer of the palate. With Freud's consent, the family doctor gave him an injection of morphine to ease his last hours.

After Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali drew this sketch of Freud in July 1938, Freud wrote to a friend, "I was inclined to look upon surrealists, who have apparently chosen me for their patron saint, as absolute (let us say 95 percent, like alcohol) cranks. The young Spaniard, however, with his candid fanatical eyes and his undeniable technical mastery, has made me reconsider my opinion."



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inadequacy of man and of his progress, Freud nevertheless emphatically confessed his faith ("We believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world") and forswore unbelief—"No, our science is no illusion."

Freud viewed religion as quite obviously psychological in character. In "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," he described obsessional neuroses as a "pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion" and religion itself as a "universal

obsessional neurosis.”*

In 1912, Freud expanded this thesis and attempted to corroborate it by examining the history of religion. This he did in four essays published as a book under the title *Totem and Taboo*. Whether investigating the horror of incest, taboo prohibitions as a whole, animism and magic, or totemism,† he inevitably found a similarity between the customs and religious attitudes of primitive tribesmen on the one hand and the obsessive actions of his neurotic Viennese patients on the other.

Freud believed that behind totemism what was secretly at work was nothing other than the Oedipus complex: attachment to the mother and death wish toward the father, who is seen as a rival. And the very core of totemism—the annual totem meal in which the totem animal as a sacred object is ritually killed and eaten, then mourned, and finally celebrated by a feast—makes it clear that killing the father is the starting point of totemism and thus of the formation of religion as a whole. In the case of Christianity, in Freud’s words, “the ceremony of the totem meal still survives, with but little distortion, in the form of Communion.”

Ultimately, however, Freud looked beyond religious rites to ask what are “religious ideas.” The study of this question preoccupied him the rest of his life. In his main critical work on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud applied to the phenomenon of religion the model of wish fulfillment he had first discovered in dreams and neurotic symptoms. Where did religion acquire its force? Religious ideas, he proclaimed, are “not precipitates of experiences or end-results of our thinking” but “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind.

“The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes,” he wrote. Among the wishes he described were those of the childishly helpless human being for protection from life’s perils, for the realization of justice in this unjust society, for the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life, for knowledge

*Neuroses, according to Freud, are a category of psychiatric disturbance in which an individual generally suffers minimal loss of contact with popularly accepted views of reality but exhibits defensive, generally unconscious and self-defeating, behavior. Obsessional neuroses are characterized by the repeated intrusion of ideas that the neurotic person finds unwelcome. Obsessional neuroses are common and may be manifest in compulsive behavior that can either be crippling (e.g., pyromania—the compulsive setting of fires) or minor (e.g., habitual ear-pulling).

†In totemism, a clan or tribe regards itself as related to—sometimes even descended from—a particular animal (the totem animal), which is believed to protect the clan. The animal can neither be harmed nor killed by members of the clan, except for their ritual totem meal. Scottish theologian-anthropologist W. Robertson Smith (1846–94) was the first to define totemism, which he had observed in a primitive Australian clan, as *the* original religion. Freud accepted Smith’s deduction.

of the origin of the world, of the relationship between the corporeal and the mental: "Immortality, retribution, the whole hereafter, are such representations of our psychical interior . . . psychomythology."

Obsessional neuroses, the Oedipus complex, and wish fulfillment—these were the major elements of Freud's thinking on religion. It is to his immense credit that he worked out how much the unconscious determines the individual human being and the history of mankind, how fundamental even the earliest childhood years, the first parent-child relationships, and the approach to sexuality are for a person's religious attitudes and ideas as well. But no conclusions can be drawn about the existence or nonexistence of God from analysis of the influence of psychological (or economic or social) factors on religion. The believer in God can still say:

¶ Religion, as Marx shows, can certainly be opium, a means of social assuagement and consolation (repression). But it need not be.

¶ Religion, as Freud shows, can certainly be an illusion, the expression of a neurosis and psychological immaturity (regression). But it need not be.

¶ All human believing, hoping, loving—related to a person, a thing, or God—certainly contains an element of projection. But its object need not be a mere projection.

It does not follow from man's profound desire for God and eternal life that God exists and eternal life and happiness are real—as some theologians have mistakenly concluded. But those atheists who think that what follows is the nonexistence of God and the unreality of eternal life are mistaken too.

Freud's explanation of the psychological genesis of belief in God does not refute faith itself; his atheism thus turns out to be a pure hypothesis, an unproved postulate, a dogmatic claim. And at bottom Freud was well aware of this. For religious ideas, though incredible, were for him also irrefutable. In principle they might also be true. Even for him, what has to be said of their psychological nature by no means decides their truth.

Freud's thesis, then, of the supersession of religion by science turns out to be an assertion without any apparent foundation: an extrapolation into the future that even today, in retrospect, cannot in any way be verified. Can faith in science replace faith in God? Contrary to Freud's prophecy, neither in the West nor in the East has belief in God yet disappeared to make way

"A REALLY SERIOUS ENEMY"

In 1933, six years after The Future of an Illusion, Freud returned to the question of the relationship between religion and science in the last chapter of New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis.

Scientific research looks on the whole field of human activity as its own, and must adopt an uncompromisingly critical attitude towards any other power that seeks to usurp any part of its province.

Of the three forces which can dispute the position of science, religion alone is a really serious enemy. Art is almost always harmless and beneficent; it does not seek to be anything else but an illusion. . . . Philosophy is not opposed to science; it behaves itself as if it were a science, and to a certain extent it makes use of the same methods. . . .

Philosophy has no immediate influence on the great majority of mankind; it interests only a small number even of the thin upper stratum of intellectuals, while all the rest find it beyond them. In contradistinction to philosophy, religion is a tremendous force, which exerts its power over the strongest [human] emotions. . . .

If one wishes to form a true estimate of the full grandeur of religion, one must keep in mind what it undertakes to do for men. It gives them information about the source and origin of the universe, it assures them of protection and final happiness amid the changing vicissitudes of life, and it guides their thoughts and actions by means of precepts which are backed by the whole force of its authority . . .

The scientific spirit began in the course of time to treat religion as a human matter and to subject it to a critical examination. This test it failed to pass. . . . But it was long before any one dared to say it aloud: The assertions made by religion that it could give protection and happiness to men, if they would only fulfill certain ethical obligations, were unworthy of belief.

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for science. For a long time, we have ceased to take every advance in science as a contradiction to belief in God—as was assumed in Freud's student years.

Atheists accuse religion of being wishful thinking. But we for our part may ask whether atheism too might not be wishful thinking, projection.

This question, which we raise with the utmost caution, is not intended to neutralize Freud's criticism of religion. Nevertheless, there is food for thought in the fact that Freud was not brought up without religion. He testified in "An Autobiographical Study" (1925) that he was quite familiar with the Bible, but oddly enough, he said so in a sentence that was added only in 1935. He also admitted that he was seized in his early

years by a strong bent toward speculation on the riddle of the world and of man but, as he put it, "ruthlessly checked it." Thus he "secretly nursed the hope" of arriving, by a detour through physiology, at his "original objective, philosophy."

Freud the atheist undoubtedly rejected Christianity in principle. But in practice was he so remote from it? "As you admit, I have done a great deal for love," Freud wrote in 1910 to Oskar Pfister, a Reform Church minister in Zurich, Switzerland, and the first clergyman known to embrace psychoanalysis. In Freud's system at that time, however, there was no place for any concept except that of sexually determined love, the all-embracing libido.

Only at the end of his life did Freud discover nonsexual love. Man then became for him more than the mechanistically understood system, driven by the ego instinct and libido—an *homme machine*, basically isolated and egoistic. Man was now seen as a being essentially related to others, driven by vital instincts demanding unification with others. Life and love belonged together and were more deeply rooted than all sexuality.

In 1930, in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud had described the Christian commandment of love of neighbor as "not reasonable," as "unpsychological" and "impossible to fulfill." Three years later, in view of the darkening world situation with Hitler's seizure of power, in an open letter (not published in Germany) to Albert Einstein, Freud called for love "without a sexual aim" as an indirect way of opposing war: "There is no need for psychoanalysis to be ashamed to speak of love in this connection, for religion itself uses the same words: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'"

What Freud admitted here in theory—love of neighbor—he had practiced for a long time, but without knowing why. As early as 1915, he had written to James Putnam, the Harvard neurologist: "When I ask myself why I have always behaved honorably, ready to spare others and to be kind wherever possible, and why I did not give up being so when I observed that in that way one harms oneself and becomes an anvil because other people are brutal and untrustworthy, then, it is true, I have no answer."

Is there really no answer?

EDITOR'S NOTE: In addition to the Ernest Jones biography of Freud, readers may wish to consult Sigmund Freud: His Life in Pictures and Words, edited by Ernst Freud, Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (1976), and Freud: Biologist of the Mind, by Frank J. Sulloway (1979).