

Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about “God Almighty.” But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as an “act of defiance.”

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve he was horrified to learn of his father’s youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. “Jew! Get off the pavement!” a “Christian” had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a “wish fulfillment,” he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation’s leading journalists and historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud’s 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn’s first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft’s founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the “painful riddle of death,” Freud once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson’s death brought great grief: “Everything has lost its meaning to me.... I can find no joy in life.” In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer’s pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God’s love, who could tactfully explain the faith’s rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology-and history-be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be “Christians” but don’t have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. “Christians aren’t perfect,” reads a popular bumper sticker, “just forgiven.”

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life’s most difficult circumstances.

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