

Freudian Slip

His “True Enemy”

In 1937, shortly before World War II, a Jewish doctor had a colleague who urged him to flee Austria for fear of Nazi oppression. The doctor replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?[\[1\]](#)

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 that the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life. A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling even his Jewish parents about “God Almighty”. But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his difficulties, and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as (some suggest) 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 so-called “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 secondary school, he abandoned Judaism for secular science and humanism. At the University of Vienna, he studied the atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist. Religion for him was simply a “wish fulfillment,” a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls.

This psychiatrist was Sigmund Freud. He became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language, religion and culture. Obsessed with what

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

What factors might have influenced Freud’s reaction to Christianity? Have you ever been discouraged about life or angry with God because of a major disappointment or the way a Christian has treated you? In the next section, we’ll consider Freud’s encounter with bigotry.

Anti-Semitism

Have you ever observed a Christian acting in un-Christlike ways? How did you feel? Disappointed? Embarrassed? Disgusted? Maybe you can identify with Sigmund Freud.

When Freud was about ten or twelve, his father Jakob told him that during his own youth, a “Christian” had knocked Jakob’s cap into the mud and shouted “Jew! Get off the pavement!” Jakob had simply picked up his cap. Little Sigmund found his father’s acquiescence to Gentile bigotry unheroic. Hannibal, the Semitic general who fought ancient Rome, became Sigmund’s hero. Hannibal’s conflict with Rome came to symbolize for Freud the Jewish-Roman Catholic conflict.[\[2\]](#)

In his twenties, Freud wrote of an ugly anti-Semitic incident on a train. When Freud opened a window for some fresh air, other passengers shouted for him to shut it. (The open window was on the windy side of the car.) He said he was willing to shut it provided another window opposite was opened. In the ensuing negotiations, someone shouted, “He’s a dirty Jew!” At that point, his first opponent announced to Freud, “We Christians consider other people, you’d better think less of your precious self.”

Freud asked one opponent to keep his vapid criticisms to himself and another to step forward and take his medicine. “I was quite prepared to kill him,” Freud wrote, “but he did not step up...{3}

Sigmund’s son Martin Freud recalled an incident from his own youth that deeply impressed Martin. During a summer holiday, the Freuds encountered some bigots: about ten men who carried sticks and umbrellas, shouted “anti-Semitic abuse,” and apparently attempted to block Sigmund’s way along a road. Ordering Martin to stay back, Sigmund “without the slightest hesitation ... keeping to the middle of the road, marched towards the hostile crowd.” Martin continues that his “...father, swinging his stick, charged the hostile crowd, which gave way before him and promptly dispersed, allowing him free passage. This was the last we saw of these unpleasant strangers.” Perhaps Sigmund wanted his sons to see their father boldly confronting bigotry rather than cowering before it, as he felt his own father had done.{4}

Jews in Freud’s Austria suffered great abuse from so-called Christians. No wonder he was turned off toward the Christian faith. How might disappointment and loss have contributed to Freud’s anti-Christian stance?

Suffering’s Distress

Have you ever been abandoned, lost a loved one, or endured illness and wondered, “Where is God?” Perhaps you can relate to Freud.

Earlier, I spoke about Freud’s Catholic nanny whom he loved dearly, who was accused of theft and was dismissed. As an adult, Freud blamed this nanny for many of his own psychological problems.{5} The sudden departure—for alleged theft—of a trusted Christian caregiver could have left the child with abandonment fears{6} and the adult Freud with disdain for the nanny’s faith. Freud wrote, “We naturally feel

hurt that a just God and a kindly providence do not protect us better from such influences [fate] during the most defenseless period of our lives.”{7}

Freud’s daughter, Sophie, died suddenly after a short illness. Writing to console her widower, Freud wrote: “...it was a senseless, brutal stroke of fate that took our Sophie from us . . . we are . . . mere playthings for the higher powers.”{8}

A beloved grandson died at age four, leaving Freud depressed and grief stricken. “Fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me,” he admitted shortly before the child died.{9}

Freud’s many health problems included a sixteen-year bout with cancer of the jaw. In 1939, as the cancer brought death closer, he wrote, “my world is . . . a small island of pain floating on an ocean of indifference.”{10} Eventually a gangrenous hole in his cheek emitted a putrid odor that repulsed his beloved dog but attracted the flies.{11}

Like many, Freud could not reconcile human suffering with a benevolent God. In a 1933 lecture, he asserted:

It seems not to be the case that there’s a power in the universe which watches over the well-being of individuals with parental care and brings all their affairs to a happy ending. On the contrary, . . . Obscure, unfeeling, unloving powers determine our fate.{12}

Freud’s suffering left him feeling deeply wounded. Could that be one reason he concluded that a benevolent God does not exist? Do you know people whose pain has made them mad at God, or has convinced them He doesn’t exist? Intellectual doubt often has biographical roots.

Spiritual Confusion

Hypocritical Christians angered Sigmund Freud. The deaths of

his loved ones and his own cancer brought him great distress. His loss and suffering seemed incompatible with the idea of a loving God. So what did he think the main message of the Christian faith was?

In the book, *The Future of An Illusion*, his major diatribe against religion, Freud outlined his understanding of Christianity. He felt it spoke of humans having a “higher purpose”; a higher intelligence ordering life “for the best”; death not as “extinction” but the start of “a new kind of existence”; and a “supreme court of justice” that would reward good and punish evil.{13}

Freud’s summary omits something significant: an emphasis on human restoration of relationship to God by receiving His free gift of forgiveness through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for human guilt.

Discussions of the biblical message often omit or obscure this important concept. I used to feel I had to earn God’s love by my own efforts. Then I learned that from a biblical perspective, no one can achieve the perfection necessary to gain eternal life.{14} Freud’s view of Christianity at this point seemed to be missing grace, Jesus, and the cross.

Two years after he wrote *The Future of An Illusion*, he seemed to have a clearer picture of Christian forgiveness. He wrote that earlier he had “failed to appreciate” the Christian concept of redemption through Christ’s sacrificial death in which he took “upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone.”{15}

Freud also attacked the intellectual validity of Christian faith.{16} He objected to arguments that one should not question the validity of religion and that we should believe simply because our ancestors did. I don’t blame him. Those arguments don’t satisfy me either. But he also felt the biblical writings were untrustworthy. He shows no awareness of

the wealth of evidence supporting, for example, the reliability of the New Testament documents or Jesus' resurrection.[{17}](#) His apparent lack of familiarity with historical evidence and method may have been a function of his era, background, academic pursuits or profession.

Perhaps confusion about spiritual matters colored Freud's view of the faith. Do you know anyone who is confused about Jesus' message or the evidence for its validity?

Freud's Christian Friend

Freud often despised Christianity, but he was quite fond of one Christian. He actually delayed publication of his major criticism of religion for fear of offending this friend. Finally, he warned his friend of its release.[{18}](#) Oskar Pfister, the Swiss pastor who had won Freud's heart, responded, "I have always believed that every man should state his honest opinion aloud and plainly. You have always been tolerant towards me, and am I to be intolerant of your atheism?"[{19}](#) Freud responded warmly and welcomed Pfister's published critique. Their correspondence is a marvelous example of scholars who differ doing so with grace and dignity, disagreeing with ideas but preserving their friendship. Their interchange could well inform many of today's political, cultural and religious debates.

Freud's longest correspondence was with Pfister. It lasted 30 years.[{20}](#) Freud's daughter and protégé, Anna, left a glimpse into the pastor's character. During her childhood, Pfister seemed "like a visitor from another planet" in the "totally non-religious Freud household." His "human warmth and enthusiasm" contrasted with the impatience of the visiting psychologists who saw the family mealtime as "an unwelcome interruption" in their important discussions. Pfister "enchanted" the Freud children, entering into their lives and becoming "a most welcome guest."[{21}](#)

Freud respected Pfister's work. He wrote, "[Y]ou are in the fortunate position of being able to lead . . . [people] to God."[{22}](#)

Freud called Pfister "a remarkable man a true servant of God, . . . [who] feels the need to do spiritual good to everyone he meets. You did good in this way even to me."[{23}](#)

"Dear Man of God," began Freud after a return home. "A letter from you is one of the best possible things that could be waiting for one on one's return."[{24}](#)

Pfister was a positive influence for Christ. But in the end, so far as we know, Freud decided against personal faith.

People reject Christ for many reasons. Hypocritical Christians turn some off. Others feel disillusioned, bitter, or skeptical from personal loss or pain. Some are confused about who Jesus is and how to know Him personally. Understanding these barriers to belief can help skeptics and seekers discern the roots of their dilemmas and prompt them to take a second look. Examples like Pfister's can show that following the Man from Nazareth might be worthwhile after all.

Notes

1. Much of this article is adapted from Russell Sims Wright, *Belief Barriers and Faith Factors: Biographical Roots of Sigmund Freud's Reaction to the Christian Faith and Their Relevance for Christian Ministry*, unpublished M.Th. dissertation, University of Oxford (Westminster College), May 2001.

2. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900. In James Strachey (Gen. Editor/Translator), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volumes IV and V (London: Hogarth, 1953-1966), pp. 196-197. Subsequent references to this Standard Edition are here abbreviated "S.E.", per professional convention.

3. Sigmund Freud; Ernst L. Freud (ed.); Tania and James Stern (translators), *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1961[1970 reprint]), pp. 92-94.
4. Martin Freud, *Sigmund Freud: Man and Father* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1983), pp. 68-71.
5. Sigmund Freud, Letters 70 (October 3-4, 1897) and 71 (October 15, 1897) to Wilhelm Fliess. In *S.E., Volume I*, pp. 261-265.
6. Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1901. In *S.E. Volume VI*, pp. 49-51.
7. Sigmund Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood, 1910. In *S.E. Volume II*, pp. 136-137; quoted in Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *Why Did Freud Reject God? A Psychodynamic Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 241-242. The bracketed word is apparently Rizzuto's.
8. Ernst Freud, Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, eds., *Sigmund Freud: His Life in Pictures and Words* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), p. 220.
9. Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Dover, 1960 [1992 unaltered reprint of 1960 Basic Books edition]), pp. 343-344.
10. Max Schur, M.D., *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1972), p. 524.
11. Ibid., pp. 526-527.
12. Armand Nicholi, Jr., M.D., "When Worldviews Collide: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud: A comparison of their thoughts and viewpoints on life, pain and death," Part One, *The Real Issue* 16:2, January 1998, p. 11.
13. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, ed. and trans.

James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1928 work), pp. 23-24.

14. Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 1-5.

15. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 edition of the 1930 work), pp. 99-100.

16. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, p. 33.

17. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).

18. Heinrich Meng and Ernst L. Freud, eds., Eric Mosbacher trans., *Psycho-Analysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Oskar Pfister* (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), pp. 109-110.

19. Ibid., p. 110.

20. Nicholi, loc. cit.

21. Meng and E. Freud, op. cit., p. 11.

22. Ibid., p. 16.

23. Ibid., p. 24.

24. Ibid., p. 29.

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Christianity and Racism – Was Jesus a Racist?

Rusty Wright takes a hard look at this question: does Christianity promote racism? He looks at the lives and teachings of Jesus and Paul to see if they taught equality of all races or promoted racism. He finds that it is not the teachings of Christianity that promote racism. A biblical worldview will create a love for all people and a desire to help them develop personal faith.

Does Christianity Promote Racism?

Thirty years after the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, racial issues in the US remain sensitive. Racial quotas in the workplace and academia continue to be controversial. Prominent corporations are accused of racist practices. Certain supremacy groups promote the Bible, God and the white race. Race and politics interact in ways that carry both national and international significance.

A few years back, the Southern Baptist Convention made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raised a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place? How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" ever become linked with human bondage and social apartheid?

African-American theologian James Cone notes that "In the old slavery days, the Church preached that slavery was a divine decree, and it used the Bible as the basis of its authority."[1](#)

"Not only did Christianity fail to offer the ... [Black] hope of

freedom in the world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him tended to degrade him. The ... [Black] was taught that his enslavement was due to the fact that he had been cursed by God. ... Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the...[Black] should be the servant of the white man...." [\[2\]](#)

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms, drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so the injustice I saw saddened me deeply. I was appalled that the Ku Klux Klan used the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in North Carolina. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their longstanding policy of racial segregation. Thereafter, any Blacks attending would be handed a note explaining the policy and asking that they not return. I was outraged and left the church. (Postscript: A few years ago I learned that that white church had folded and that an African-American church came to use the same facility. Maybe God has a sense of humor.)

Does Christianity promote racism? Is it mainly a faith for whites? This article will examine these two burning questions.

Was Jesus Racist?

Does the Christian faith promote racism? Is it mainly for whites? Certain extremists think so. Some slavery-era ministers wrote books justifying slavery. George D. Armstrong wrote in *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, "It may be... that Christian slavery is God's solution of the problem [relation of labor and capital] about which the wisest statesmen of Europe confess themselves at fault." [\[3\]](#)

Consider another book, *Slavery Ordained of God*. In it, Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God, ... to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family, until another and better destiny may be unfolded."[\[4\]](#)

Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom. Each had its own turf. Jews considered the Samaritans to be racial "half-breeds." The two groups disputed which followed the Bible better and on whose land proper worship should occur.

The Samaritans were often inhospitable to[\[5\]](#) and hostile toward the Jews. Many Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthened their journeys to bypass Samaria. Jews publicly cursed Samaritans in their synagogues, would not allow Samaritan testimony in Jewish courts, and generally considered Samaritans excluded from eternal life.[\[6\]](#)

Once a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?"[\[7\]](#) Jesus, who as Jew surprised people by mixing freely with Samaritans, told him a now famous story. Robbers attacked a Jewish traveler, beating him and leaving him half-dead. Two Jewish religious leaders ignored the injured man as they passed by. But a Samaritan felt compassion for the Jewish victim – his cultural enemy – and bandaged his wounds, transported him to an inn and provided for his care. Jesus' point? This "Good Samaritan" was an example of how we should relate to those with whom we differ.

The founder of the Christian faith was no racist. He told people to get along. What about a chief expositor of the Christian faith? And why is eleven o'clock Sunday morning

often the most segregated hour of the week? Let's turn now to these important questions.

Was A Chief Expositor of the Faith A Racist?

Does Christianity promote racism? As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth was no racist. Living in a culturally and racially diverse society that was in many ways analogous to ours, He promoted harmony by His example and His words. What about Paul, one of the chief expositors of faith in Christ?

Paul often had to counsel members of the communities he advised about diversity issues. Some in the groups with which he consulted were Jews, some were non-Jews or "Gentiles." Some were slaves and some were free. Some were men and some were women. The mix was potentially explosive.

From prison, Paul wrote to a friend whose slave had run away, had met Paul, and had come to faith. Paul appealed to his friend on the basis of their relationship to welcome the slave back not as a slave but as a brother. He offered to repay any loss from his own pocket. The letter survives in the New Testament as the book of "Philemon" and is a touching example of a dedicated believer seeking to internally motivate a slaveholder to change his attitudes and behavior.{8}

Paul felt that the faith he had once persecuted could unify people. He wrote to one group of believers that because of their common spiritual commitment, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one..."{9} Paul, a Jew by birth, wrote to some non-Jewish believers that "Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us."{10}

Paul exhorted another group of believers to live in harmony. He wrote, "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he

loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony."[\[11\]](#)

Paul promoted harmony, not discord. If the founder of the faith and its chief expositor were not racists, why is eleven o'clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week?

True Followers?

Why is Christianity often associated with racism? The short answer is that some that claim to be followers of Jesus are not really following Him. They may have the label "Christian," but perhaps they never have established a personal friendship with Christ. They may be like I was for many years: a church member, seemingly devoted, but who had never accepted Christ's pardon based on His death and resurrection for me. Or they may have genuine faith, but haven't allowed God into the driver's seat of their life. I've been there, too.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton was a leader of the Georgia Black Student Movement in the 1970s. Bo was a racially prejudiced white Christian. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and some of his cronies beat Norton up. The animosity ran deep.

Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo rejected his hypocrisy and began to follow his faith with God in control. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a Christian conference. Initial tension melted into friendship

as they forgave each other, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Of course not all disobedient Christians are racists. Nor is everyone not aligned with Jesus a racist. But faith in Christ can give enemies motivation to reconcile, to replace hatred with love.

Historical examples abound of true faith opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, came to faith, renounced his old ways, became a pastor, and wrote the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton encouraged his Christian friend, William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

Does Christianity promote racism? No, true Christianity seeks to eliminate racism by changing people's hearts.

After I had spoken on this theme in a sociology class at North Carolina State University, a young African-American woman told me, "All my life I've been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people. Now I realize those oppressors were not really following Christ."

Is Christianity just for whites? Norton, the Black activist, certainly did not think so. Let's look further at the faith that crosses racial divides.

The Heart of the Matter

Is Christianity just for whites? Jesus and Paul said anyone who believed would be plugged into God forever. Africa has millions who follow Jesus. Koreans send missionaries to the US. And don't we need them!

In Cape Town, South Africa, Saint James Church has been a beacon of diversity and social concern with its white, Black, Asian and biracial members. One Sunday evening, radical Black

terrorists sprayed the multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith, who is biracial, saw his wife, Myrtle, die from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. Yet he forgave the killers. "I prayed for those that committed the crime," he told me, "so they, too, can come to meet [the Lord]."

The president of the West African nation of Benin came to the US a few years back with a message for African American leaders: His compatriots were sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. An often-overlooked component of slavery's historical stain is that Black Africans sold other Black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants.

Benin's President Kerekou, who in recent years had made his own commitment to Christ, invited political and church leaders to his nation so his tribal leaders could seek reconciliation with African Americans.

Brian Johnson, an African-American organizer, said the realization that Blacks sold other Blacks into slavery has been difficult for many African Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to hold the White man responsible," he explained as we spoke. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this.... It's not merely a Black-White thing."

The problem is in human hearts, Johnson believes. "All have sinned," he claims, quoting the New Testament.^{12} "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks

of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself.”^[13] True Christianity is not just for whites, and it does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it. Changing corrupt institutions is very important. An ultimate solution to racism involves changing individual hearts.

Notes

1. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 74.

2. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p.115. Quoted in *ibid*. Bracketed words are mine.

3. Quoted in Frazier, *loc. cit.*; quoted in Cone *loc. cit.* Neither emphasis nor bracketed words are mine. Emphasis is likely Frazier’s or Armstrong’s. Bracketed words could be either Frazier’s or Cone’s.

4. Quoted in Frazier, *loc. cit.*; quoted in Cone *loc. cit.*

5. Luke 9:52-53.

6. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 1961, 1966), pp. 958-960. See also John 4:1-45.

7. Luke 10:29 ff.

8. Philemon 1-25.

9. Galatians 3:28 NIV.

10. Ephesians 2:14 NLT.

11. Colossians 3: 12-14 NLT.

12. Romans 3:23 NIV.

13. *World Christian magazine* (February 1989), p. U8.

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The Culture of Disbelief

A new book, *The Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen Carter, may be the catalyst to open up a much needed discussion on the role of religious belief in public life. It has even caught the attention of President Clinton. The author teaches law at Yale University, is an Episcopalian, an African-American, and to a great degree an iconoclast, a nonconformist whose ideas will please neither the right nor the left, the liberal nor the conservative. But, just as it took a Nixon, with his irrefutably conservative credentials, to open the door to better relations with communist China, it may be necessary for a Stephen Carter to help bring back into balance the role of religion in America.

This book is provocative, in an irksome, irritating, vexing way, but also in an alluring, insightful way. Carter's defense of religiously motivated actions in the public square (in government, education, and the marketplace, or wherever people conduct public business) is worth cheering about. Carter argues that our government has trivialized serious religious belief to the point that we are losing the protection once provided by the First Amendment, which was written, according to Carter, to protect religious groups from government interference, not to protect the non-religious from the religious in our society.

The vexing part of Carter's book is his consistent rejection of conservative biblical positions. He argues vehemently for the right of others to hold them, but then declares these positions to be naive, developed by shoddy thinkers, and just plain wrong. His complete confidence in his position, often without stating why, will be very irritating to readers who hold to biblical inerrancy and a biblical worldview.

With that warning said, this is still an important book for anyone interested in the role of religious belief in America. Carter rightfully points out that the Constitution and First Amendment were written for a world in which regulation was expected to be rare and would almost never impinge on religious liberty. Today, we live in a highly regulated welfare state, one which sees no limits to its regulatory powers. There is literally no place to hide for those who are religious and try to act in a way consistent with those beliefs.

Professor Carter makes a powerful argument that governmental agencies are removing religion as an “ground for objection” to its various mandates, whether they be sex education in the schools or housing anti-discrimination laws. In other words, the beliefs or disbeliefs of those running our government are being imposed on Christians via the power of the ever expanding ruling bureaucracy.

Carter responds to this governmental encroachment into the intimate details of our lives by calling those on both sides of the ideological debates to value, not oppose, those who refuse to accede to the authority of others, for it yields the diversity that America needs. His lucid arguments for true religious freedom, especially from his political and religious position, are helpful and well thought out. Carter is willing to speak boldly against the tyranny of secular government, especially when governmental agencies become oppressive.

Again, let me be very clear. This book will be difficult to read for many believers. Professor Carter bends over backwards to make his message palatable to the more politically correct crowd on our college campuses and in government. On the other hand, conservative Christians can benefit from a close reading of this book. If this book has a significant impact, our government could return to (in regard to religious freedoms) a position much closer to that of our Founding Fathers.

God as a Hobby

The most powerful message of *The Culture of Disbelief* is that religion has been trivialized in America. By religion, professor Carter is referring to any worshipping group that believes in a supernatural God and that actually makes demands on its members, in this life, based on its beliefs about the nature and character of God. He notes that "More and more, our culture seems to take the position that believing deeply in the tenets of one's faith represents a kind of mystical irrationality, something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do better to avoid. If you must worship your God, the lesson runs, at least have the courtesy to disbelieve in the power of prayer; if you must observe your sabbath, have the good sense to understand that it ...is just like any other day of the week." According to Mr. Carter, this development is both unfortunate and dangerous to our religious freedoms in America.

This bias has encouraged some of our public institutions to accept religious prejudice as neutrality. The public schools are one of the more obvious illustrations of this bias. One recent example involves a Colorado public school teacher who was told by superiors to remove his Bible from his desk where students might see it. He was told not to read it, even silently, when students were present. He was also ordered to remove books on Christianity from his classroom library, even though books on Native American religious traditions and the occult were allowed to remain. According to Carter, "The consistent message of modern American society is that whenever the demands of one's religion conflict with what one has to do to get ahead, one is expected to ignore the religious demands and act...well...rationally."

Another example of this bias towards religious faith in general is found in modern America's phobia about those who attempt societal change as a result of religious beliefs. An

anti-abortion protestor that is against abortion for religious reasons will conjure up grim pictures of religious wars, inquisitions, and other assorted religious atrocities as examples of people trying to impose their religious will on other people. It is like saying that if those murdered for religious reasons had somehow had a choice, they would have chosen a secular killer: "that those whose writings led to their executions under, say, Stalin, thanked their lucky stars at the last instant of their lives that Communism was at least godless."

Professor Carter's response to liberal America's religious bigotry is to remind them that the civil rights movement "was openly and unashamedly religious in its appeals as it worked to impose its moral vision" on America. One can also remember a time when getting out the evangelical vote for a Democratic Presidential candidate was considered a good thing by many in the press. Jimmy Carter's campaign was never charged with advocating a narrow sectarianism, as was Ronald Reagan's or George Bush's, because his religious sentiments promoted policies that were more in line with the liberal mindset.

Professor Carter recognizes that much of society's current intolerance of those who are religious focuses on those who advocate a conservative set of values that arise from the belief that God has communicated via the Bible truth about human nature and righteous living, truth that is not available to us via reason alone. Mr. Carter disagrees with the conservative view but sees danger in using the power of government to remove the political freedoms of those who hold to it.

Separation of Church and State

In this important book the author makes some interesting observations concerning church and state in America. For example, Carter believes that, "Simply put, the metaphorical separation of church and state originated in an effort to

protect religion from the state, not the state from religion." As Thomas Jefferson declared, religious liberty is "the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights." The First Amendment was written to provide the maximum freedom of religion possible. Philip Schaff once called it "the Magna Carta of religious freedom," and "the first example in history of a government deliberately depriving itself of all legislative control over religion."

How have these founding ideas about church and state been applied recently in our society? Not very well according to Mr. Carter. The Supreme Court, whose duty it is to interpret the Constitution, has arrived at something called the Lemon test, an appropriate name because it is nearly impossible to apply. It includes three criteria for a statute to satisfy the requirements of the First Amendment. First, the law must have a secular purpose; second, it must neither advance nor inhibit religion; and finally, it must not cause excessive state entanglement with religion.

It is apparent to many that this ruling by the Court works in favor of those trying to build an impenetrable wall between religious belief and our government. Professor Carter notes that if this ruling is taken seriously one would have to question the legality of religiously motivated civil rights legislation. Another question is whether or not one can act in a manner that neither advances nor inhibits religion? For instance, does the government advance religion if it grants tax relief to parents who send their children to private schools? If so, does denying the tax relief inhibit religion by causing parents to be taxed twice for their children's education?

Carter notes that even the Court has had difficulty in applying this set of standards, mainly because of the way it has defined what is meant by a secular purpose. The Court often focuses on the motivation for a piece of legislation, rather than its political purpose. In other words, the

criteria that many would like the Court to use in determining secular purpose would be to ask if the legislation is pursuing a legitimate goal of government or not, rather than inquiring into the religious motivation of the bill's sponsors. As Professor Carter writes, "The idea that religious motivation renders a statute suspect was never anything but a tortured and unsatisfactory reading of the [establishment] clause... What the religion clauses of the First Amendment were designed to do was not to remove religious values from the arena of public debate, but to keep them there."

Mr. Carter understands the difficulty and complexity of law and notes that simply removing the Lemon test would not solve our legal inequities regarding religious belief in America. The legal community is very much split over what should replace the test. Yet he argues that we must not give in to the current notion that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment was written to protect the secular from the religious for this would lead to establishing "religion as a hobby, trivial and unimportant for serious people, not to be mentioned in serious discourse. And nothing could be further from the constitutional, historical, or philosophical truth."

The Accommodation of Religion

Although Professor Carter does not agree with positions held by conservative evangelicals on moral issues, he argues eloquently, not only for our right to hold these positions, but to take part in the public debate over them and, if possible, to convince our fellow citizens of the rightness of our policies.

Mr. Carter sees the current culture war as a result of a collision between the ever expanding welfare state and religious autonomy. In its attempt to enforce gender, racial, and sexual preference equity, the government was bound to clash with the discriminatory practices that are part of religious belief. This, in itself, is a remarkable admission

from someone who generally agrees with the policies of the current welfare state. Fortunately, Professor Carter values freedom of religion and fears secular governmental tyranny enough to prefer that we err on the side of freedom rather than government control.

How then should the courts rule when religious groups balk at compliance to government established policies like anti-housing discrimination laws? Recent court cases have tended to ignore the significance of religious belief. Carter, however, contends that religious groups ought to be able to establish when and how they are called to discriminate in public settings, with some limitations. He would place a high standard, that of compelling interest, between government policy and religious observance. In other words, government should not be able to force a Christian couple to rent their apartment to two homosexual men unless the it can prove that it has a compelling interest in the issue. Doing so under the standard Carter proposes would be much more difficult than under current standards. Yet without this high standard, or something similar, government will continue to virtually ignore religious faith in creating its rules and regulations.

Professor Carter is very cognizant of the power government has to control or destroy groups via taxation, regulation, or the threat of secular leveling. That occurs when government tries to force every organization to reflect current government policy within its own internal organizational structure and practice. Unfortunately, Mr. Carter's plan for implementing protection of religious groups is not as satisfying as his defense of religious freedoms. In fact, he comes to the conclusion that satisfying both equality and religious autonomy may not be possible. In one obvious example, that of homosexual employment rights versus the rights of religious groups not to hire homosexuals, Carter's rejection of biblical constraints on homosexual behavior leaves him without direction. Even so, conservative readers will want to note his

fine defense of religiously motivated actions in society.

Carter believes that it is difficult “to see how the law can protect religious freedom in the welfare state if it does not offer exemptions and special protection for religious devotion.” Unfortunately, he never questions the wisdom of the welfare state in general. However, he does see the need for autonomous religious groups that challenge the moral and political orthodoxies of the day, whether they be religiously motivated civil rights groups in the 50s and 60s or anti-abortion groups in the 90s. Government neutrality is a myth, and without religious freedom whatever orthodoxy currently exists in government might be sustained via coercion and intimidation if religious groups are not given sufficient power to act as mediating structures.

Professor Carter’s book is an important one merely because it takes religious belief seriously even though it is sometimes inconsistent and strident in its treatment of conservative evangelicals. Next we will look at another model that some feel is a more biblical approach to the problem of unconstrained government and at what might replace the notion of a welfare state.

Another Model

Although written from a liberal perspective, both politically and theologically, the book argues very effectively for a return to a form of religious freedom that better reflects our Founding Fathers’ thinking. Once the reader gets past the author’s general disregard for what he calls the “Christian Right,” a great deal of helpful material can be garnered for the support of a society which respects religious belief and allows those who are religious full participation in the public affairs of the nation. In light of recent attacks on the role of Christians in politics by the media, this defense by a Yale law professor couldn’t come at a more opportune time.

Professor Carter charges that unless secular liberal theory finds a way to include religious participation in the public moral debate, political disaster may be the result. The outcome will be a narrowly focused elitist theory of government and public life that would indeed inflame the current culture war and drive a greater wedge between those who are religious and those who are not.

Conservative evangelicals should applaud Mr. Carter's view of religious freedom. His emphasis on religious groups acting as mediating structures between the individual and government and on the rights of families to direct the education of their children are a much needed message for our society. All societies need to determine the distribution of power and authority among its citizens. Many supporting the current welfare state argue that government and individuals should possess the bulk of decision-making ability in our political and judicial framework. This leaves out mediating structures, such as the church, which serves the vital role of challenging both political tyranny and individual anarchy. Professor Carter rightly sees the danger in this position. If authority is focused on state power and individual rights, the state will eventually extinguish the voices of individuals it finds antagonistic to its plans.

Mr. Carter is closer to a Calvinistic view of society than the welfare state model many liberals find comforting. Professor Carter seems to endorse the concept of spheres of influence, the idea that government, the church, and the family all have legitimate, in fact, God-given, authority in their respective domains.

Romans 13 and 1 Timothy 2 declare that God's purpose for government is to maintain order by punishing the wrongdoer and thus create a peaceful society in which we might live in all godliness and holiness. Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 3, as well as other passages, lay out the structure and importance of the family in God's plan for human society. The origin and purpose

of the Church is referred to throughout the New Testament. First Timothy 3:15 talks of God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Those with a high view of Scripture believe that God has ordained these structures within society for good reason. If any of these three spheres try to function outside of its God-given role, the society will suffer as a whole.

The value of Professor Carter's book is that he is warning society that it has placed far too much authority and power in the hands of our government at the expense of religious groups and families. This is an important message that counters the often held belief that government is the only agent in our culture that can bring about change.

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