# 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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