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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Defender of the Faith?

By MARK EDMUNDSON

Late in life — he was in his 80s, in fact — [Sigmund Freud](#) got religion. No, Freud didn't begin showing up at temple every Saturday, wrapping himself in a prayer shawl and reading from the Torah. To the end of his life, he maintained his stance as an uncompromising atheist, the stance he is best known for down to the present. In "The Future of an Illusion," he described belief in God as a collective neurosis: he called it "longing for a father." But in his last completed book, "Moses and Monotheism," something new emerges. There Freud, without abandoning his atheism, begins to see the Jewish faith that he was born into as a source of cultural progress in the past and of personal inspiration in the present. Close to his own death, Freud starts to recognize the poetry and promise in religion.

A good deal of the antireligious polemic that has recently been abroad in our culture proceeds in the spirit of Freud's earlier work. In his defense of atheism, "God Is Not Great," Christopher Hitchens cites Freud as an ally who, he believes, exposed the weak-minded childishness of religion. Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins come out of the same Enlightenment spirit of hostile skepticism to faith that infuses "The Future of an Illusion." All three contemporary writers want to get rid of religion immediately and with no remainder.

But there's more to Freud's take on religion than that. In his last book, written when he was old and ill, suffering badly from cancer of the jaw, Freud offers another perspective on faith. He argues that Judaism helped free humanity from bondage to the immediate empirical world, opening up fresh possibilities for human thought and action. He also suggests that faith in God facilitated a turn toward the life within, helping to make a rich life of introspection possible.

"Moses and Monotheism" was not an easy book for Freud to write or to publish. He began it in the 1930s while he was living in Vienna, and he was well aware that when and if he brought the book out he could expect trouble from the Austrian Catholic Church. The book, after all, insisted on some strange and disturbing things. Most startling, it argued that Moses himself was not a Jew. How did Freud know? First of all, he claimed that Moses is not a Jewish name but an Egyptian one; second, Freud's study of dreams and fairy tales convinced him that the Bible had inverted things. In the Exodus story, Moses' mother, fearing Pharaoh's order to kill all Jewish boys, leaves the infant Moses in a basket on the river's edge, where he is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter. But Freud maintained that the Jews were the ones who had found

him by the river. (In fairy tales and dreams, the child always begins with rich parents and is adopted by poor ones, yet his noble nature wins out — or so Freud insisted.) Freud also said that monotheism was not a Jewish but an Egyptian invention, descending from the cult of the Egyptian sun god Aton.

In March 1938, the Nazis invaded Austria and put Freud and his family in mortal danger. Freud managed to escape from Vienna with the help of the wealthy Princess Marie Bonaparte, whom he adored, and of the government of the United States of America, which he relentlessly disliked. [President Roosevelt](#) even took a measure of interest in Freud's case, but that did not change Freud's mind about the rogue republic at all. America is enormous, he liked to say, but it is an enormous mistake.

Before leaving Vienna, Freud gave the Nazis a parting gift. They had made it clear to him that his emigration was contingent on signing a statement saying that he had not been molested in any way and that he had been able to continue with his scientific work. Freud signed, but then added a coda of his own devising: "I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone."

n London, where Freud arrived in June 1938, he encountered another sort of resistance to finishing and publishing the Moses book. The first person who came to see him at his house on Elsworthy Road was his neighbor, a Jewish scholar named Abraham Yahuda. Yahuda had gotten wind of the contents of the volume and had come to beseech Freud not to publish. Didn't the Jews have enough trouble in the world without one of their number saying that Moses was not Jewish and that — in contrast to the peaceful death depicted in the Bible — Moses had been murdered by the Jews themselves, who resented the harsh laws he had tried to impose on them? Did Freud actually intend to claim that over time guilt for the murder had enhanced Moses' status and his legacy of monotheism, creating in the Jews what Freud liked to call a "reaction formation"? Yahuda was far from being the last of such petitioners. During his early days in London, Freud received no end of entreaties to let the project go.

What did Freud do? He published of course — and not just in German but, as quickly and conspicuously as possible, in English. The reviews were terrible. The private response was often bitter. And Freud was delighted. He reveled in the strong sales figures, shrugged off the nasty reviews and sang his own praises. "Quite a worthy exit," he called the Moses book.

And it was, but not chiefly because of the strange speculations about Moses' identity that worried Yahuda and scandalized the book's first readers. There is a more subtle and original dimension to the book, and perhaps it was that dimension that made Freud so determined to complete and publish it, despite all the resistance. For in "Moses and Monotheism" Freud has something truly fresh to say about religion.

About two-thirds of the way into the volume, he makes a point that is simple and rather profound — the sort of point that Freud at his best excels in making. Judaism's distinction as a faith, he says, comes from its commitment to belief in an invisible God, and from this commitment, many consequential things follow. Freud argues that taking God into the mind enriches the individual immeasurably. The ability to believe in

an internal, invisible God vastly improves people's capacity for abstraction. "The prohibition against making an image of God — the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see," he says, meant that in Judaism "a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea — a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality."

If people can worship what is not there, they can also reflect on what is not there, or on what is presented to them in symbolic and not immediate terms. So the mental labor of monotheism prepared the Jews — as it would eventually prepare others in the West — to achieve distinction in law, in mathematics, in science and in literary art. It gave them an advantage in all activities that involved making an abstract model of experience, in words or numbers or lines, and working with the abstraction to achieve control over nature or to bring humane order to life. Freud calls this internalizing process an "advance in intellectuality," and he credits it directly to religion.

Freud speculates that one of the strongest human desires is to encounter God — or the gods — directly. We want to see our deities and to know them. Part of the appeal of Greek religion lay in the fact that it offered adherents direct, and often gorgeous, renderings of the immortals — and also, perhaps, the possibility of meeting them on earth. With its panoply of saints, Christianity restored visual intensity to religion; it took a step back from Judaism in the direction of the pagan faiths. And that, Freud says, is one of the reasons it prospered.

Judaism, on the other hand, never let go of the great renunciation. The renunciation, according to Freud, gave the Jews remarkable strength of intellect, which he admired, but it also made them rather proud, for they felt that they, among all peoples, were the ones who could sustain such belief.

Freud's argument suggests that belief in an unseen God may prepare the ground not only for science and literature and law but also for intense introspection. Someone who can contemplate an invisible God, Freud implies, is in a strong position to take seriously the invisible, but perhaps determining, dynamics of inner life. He is in a better position to know himself. To live well, the modern individual must learn to understand himself in all his singularity. He must be able to pause and consider his own character, his desires, his inhibitions and values, his inner contradictions. And Judaism, with its commitment to one unseen God, opens the way for doing so. It gives us the gift of inwardness.

Freud was aware that there were many modes of introspection abroad in the world, but he of course thought psychoanalysis was by far the best. He said that the poets were there before him as discoverers of the inner life but that they had never been able to make their knowledge about it systematic and accessible. So throughout the Moses book, Freud subtly identifies himself with the prophet and implies that psychoanalysis may be the most consequential heir of the Jewish "advance in intellectuality." Freud believed that he had suffered for his commitment to psychoanalysis (which did not and does not lack detractors) and clearly looked to Moses as an example of a great figure who had braved resistance to his beliefs, both by Pharaoh in Egypt and by his own people. Moses hung on to his convictions — much as

Freud aspired to do.

Though Freud hoped that mankind would pass beyond religion, he surely took inspiration from the story of Moses, a figure with whom he had been fascinated for many years. (He published his first essay on the prophet in 1914.) Freud wanted to lead people, and he wanted to make conceptual innovations that had staying power and strength: for this there could be no higher exemplar than the prophet.

“Moses and Monotheism” indicates that Freud, irreligious as he was, could still find inspiration in a religious figure. Something similar was true about Freud’s predecessor, Nietzsche. Nietzsche is famous for detesting Christianity, and by and large he did. But he did not detest Jesus Christ — whose spontaneity, toughness and freedom of spirit he aspired to emulate. “There has been only one Christian,” he once said, one person who truly lived up to the standards of the Gospel, “and he died on the cross.”

Schopenhauer, to whom both Nietzsche and Freud were deeply indebted, was himself an unbeliever, as well as being an unrelenting pessimist. To Schopenhauer, life was pain, grief, sorrow and little else. Yet he, too, was able to take inspiration from Christianity, affirming as he did that a faith that had a man being tortured on a cross as its central emblem couldn’t be entirely misleading in its overall take on life.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud were all at times able to recognize religion as being what Harold Bloom has wisely called it: not the opium of the people but the poetry of the people. They read Scripture as though it were poetry, and they learned from it accordingly. They saw that even if someone does not believe in a transcendent God, religion can still be a source of inspiration and of practical wisdom about how to live in the world. To be sure, it often takes hard intellectual work to find that wisdom. (As the proverb has it, “He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him.”) Yet Freud’s late-life turn shows us that there is too much of enduring value in religion — even for nonbelievers — ever to think of abandoning it cold.

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