

## 2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 4

# Freud & Humanist Judaism

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### Introduction

In studying Freud, we should not forget that he was a Jew and remained so all his life. His Jewishness<sup>1</sup> was not orthodox but his writings against 'religion' were more gentle in case of Judaism and more consciously bitter towards Roman Catholic

Christianity<sup>2</sup> (Myers, 2001-2004: n. p.). In this lecture, we want to examine the part Freud's Jewishness played in Freud's life and work. Evidence will be presented that Freud combines a commitment to Jewishness with a strong connection to Enlightenment reason becoming a precursor to 20<sup>th</sup> century humanist Judaism which has no belief in the biblical God.



**Bust of Freud by Oscar Nemon 1931**

<sup>1</sup> Discussion of Jewishness does not mean anyone is anti-Semitic; in my own case, I bear no ill-will towards Jews being myself partly Jewish through a great grandmother on my father's side.

<sup>2</sup> See Vitz (1988) for a more nuanced view.

## 1. Freud's Jewishness

Sigmund Freud's Jewishness has been described by a Jewish Freud historian as 'being impossible to overemphasize . . . since it is the single most important part of his background' (Roazen, 1971: 47).

### **a) Character of Jewishness: miraculous, superior**

But, importantly, Jewishness for Freud meant neither a racial identity nor a religion. For him Jewishness was something 'miraculous', something 'inaccessible to analysis' (Szasz, 1978: 144). These phrases are important for three reasons: first, they suggest that the world can be divided into things accessible and explained by psychoanalysis and those things, like Jewishness, that cannot be; second, they suggest the superiority (the miraculous nature) of Jewishness to other ethos types.

Lastly, most importantly, Jewishness is implicitly understood to be superordinate to analysis because the latter finds the former 'inaccessible'. Jewishness is unique because it cannot be reduced to the mechanisms suggested by analysis. In other words, Freud's Jewishness, is a religion out of which his science of psychoanalysis is generated. Analysis may be said to be a 'Jewish' science bearing in mind the specific meaning of Jewishness outlined above.

This conclusion is supported from another context where Freud says that Jewishness is beyond words and cannot be defined. Freud, in replying to the question of what he had retained of Jewishness if he had rejected both its religion and its national ideals, says, he has never repudiated his people,' and that he 'feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature'(Frosh, 2003: n. p.).



Martha Bernays, who became Freud's wife, had come from an Orthodox family and found some difficulty in making the transition to Freud's non-observant attitude. However, she had been promised by Freud that 'even if the *form* wherein the old Jews were happy no longer offers us any shelter, something of the *core*, of this meaningful and life-affirming Judaism will not be absent from our home' (Freud, cited in Szasz, 1978: 143, emphasis mine). Despite his problems with Orthodoxy, Freud was able to say in his

*Autobiography*, 'My parents were Jews, and I have remained a Jew myself (Freud, cited in Szasz, 1978: 142.)

Freud even regarded Jews as being better fitted for science because Jews 'lack the mystical element' (Szasz, 1978) which presumably might lead them away into fruitless speculation or into occultism.<sup>3</sup> Freud had wanted to be a scientist and had worked with the famous Ernest Brücke who had warned him that Freud's neurophysiological work would not support him as a married man (Vitz, 1988: 61). This occurrence particularly galled Freud believing in the ability of Jews to do superior science.

### **b) Anti-Gentilism**

Freud was born (1856) into a city, Freiberg<sup>4</sup> (Moravia) dominated by Catholicism (90% of population) with only 3% Jewish and an equal number of Protestants. About 1860, the family moved to Vienna where Freud stayed for most of the remainder of his life (Vitz, 1988: 3). The Jews were heavily outnumbered in Vienna as well. One can appreciate that Jews felt swamped by the Gentile Roman Christian presence.

Sigmund, at about 10, remembers his father, Jakob, telling him of an incident where a Gentile had ordered him (as a Jew) to get out of his way and had knocked his hat into the gutter (Vitz, 1988: 36). He father had accepted the scorn much to Sigmund's shame. Jakob was 'not a strong and manly figure' (Vitz, 1988: 36) who could stand up to the anti-Semites and Sigmund described his father's actions as 'unheroic'. Subsequently, the human figures that Freud most identified with during his life were all 'heroic': Alexander the Great, William the Conqueror, Napoleon, Hannibal, Oliver Cromwell, Moses, Jacob, Jesus, St Paul and many others (Vitz 1988: 145) some of whom had defended Jews against Gentiles (e. g., Oliver Cromwell)<sup>5</sup> or were Jews themselves.

Freud resolved never to let Gentiles treat him with such scorn. On one occasion, Freud's son, Martin, describes Freud's outrage when a group of Gentiles intimidated

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<sup>3</sup> This comment is inaccurate given the existence of a strong mystical tradition in Judaism, viz. the *Kabbalah* and the *Zohar*.

<sup>4</sup> Now called Pribor, in the Czech Republic.

<sup>5</sup> Freud named one of his sons after Cromwell.

the family along a road. Freud ferociously drove them apart with vehement fury by swinging his stick (Wright, 2003)!

Thomas Szasz, a well-known Jewish libertarian and psychiatrist, claimed that Freud spent his life seeking vengeance on the Jew-rejecting Gentiles<sup>6</sup> while inflating the importance of Jewishness (Myers, 2001-2004: n. p.; Szasz, 1978: n. p.). For example, in a celebrated comment to the Protestant Pastor Pfister, Freud said, ‘Incidentally, why was it that none of all the pious ever discovered psychoanalysis? Why did it have to wait for a completely godless Jew?’ (Szasz, 1978: 144).

Freud seemed to be always aware of his Jewishness and of the anti-Semitism around him declaring that ‘anti-Semitism was practically ubiquitous in either latent or manifest form; the broad masses in England were anti-Semitic, “as everywhere”’ (Szasz, 1978: n. p.). He appears to have developed a ‘them and us’ mentality. To one of his Jewish supporters, Karl Abraham, he writes of the ‘suppressed anti-Semitism of the Swiss’<sup>7</sup> and in another letter speaks of the being careful ‘not to concede too much to racial preference and therefore neglect that more alien Aryan [Jung]’ (Myers, 2001-2004: n. p.).

Although, Freud did not keep the rituals of the Jewish religion he was a member of the B’nai B’rith Society, a Jewish fraternal organisation to which he gave lectures and spent every ‘other Tuesday evening among my Jewish brethren’ (Myers, 2001-2004: n. p.). He was a supporter of Zionism and according to his son, would accept no royalties on Hebrew and Yiddish translations of his writings (Myers, 2001-2004).

Bakan (1958/2004) argued that because anti-Semitism was also rife in Vienna at that time that Freud reasoned that since science had rejected him along with the Gentile world then his only recourse was to align himself with his Jewish heritage. Evidence suggests that Freud did toy with the idea of becoming a Christian<sup>8</sup> even if the possibility of its happening was remote (Vitz, 1988: 80-81). However, according to Bakan, Freud’s eventual alignment would not be with traditional Jewish Rabbinitism

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<sup>6</sup> Freud seemed to have a life-long obsession regarding anti-Semitism.

<sup>7</sup> Almost certainly, Carl Jung and his circle are being referred to.

<sup>8</sup> Jews sometimes converted to improve their social status.

(the study of the Law) but the more heterodox mystical Judaism (Bakan, 1958/2004: 195). Nonetheless, this lecture will later suggest a more credible way to understand Bakan's material.

### c) Jewish Mysticism

Obvious parallels exist between the spirit of Jewish mystical structure and psychoanalysis.

#### i) Initiation into hidden meaning



Bakan (1958/2004) hypothesised that psychoanalysis could be illuminatingly explained by Freud's Jewish roots, particularly Jewish mysticism. For example, in the mystical Kabbalah tradition, knowledge is received orally from a teacher and involves one's own experience. It cannot be gained by merely reading a book. The same can be said for psychoanalysis. Only by undergoing an analysis can someone be initiated into its secrets.

Although the Kabbalah is now written down, this form was created only to save it from dying out. However, to preserve its true mystical character its real nature is not to be found on the surface. Its real character can only be found by devoted searching *below the surface*. Latent meaning exists below the manifest, surface content (Bakan, 1958/2004: 35).

This Kabbalistic theme is the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis. Things are never what they appear to be. Truth must always be sought *below the surface*. Szasz (1978) mentions that a defining principle of psychoanalysis is 'that everything is something other than what it seems to be or than what the authorities say it is' (p. 140).

#### ii) Sexuality

Freud's sexuality views appeared to be unconventional to the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois or middle-classes even though the development of Romanticism had produced an overturning of sexual mores. Nevertheless, Freudian thought is not so strange when viewed against the background of Jewish thought. 'Never in the Jewish tradition was

sexual asceticism made a religious value' (Bakan, 1958/2004: 272). Both rabbinic and mystical Judaism took the command to be fruitful and multiply equally seriously.

The mystics even ascribed sexuality to God Himself believing that sexual union between man and woman symbolised the relation between God and the Shekinah (presence of God) (Bakan, 1958/2004: 272). The Bible's use of the same word for knowledge and sexual union (e. g., Gen 3: 1) suggested the view that knowledge itself had 'a deeply erotic character' (Bakan, 1958/2004: 272). Hence, even at the point that Christians, for example, find Freud to be most heterodox, an agreement can be found with Judaism.

### iii) Mosaic law

Freud's Jewishness was essentially opposed to biblical law and to the rabbinic tradition which expounded the law. For Freud, Law leads to guilt and guilt precipitates neuroses. In spirit, both mysticism and psychoanalysis are a protest against any central place being given to Law. According to Bakan (1958/2004),

What Freud opposes is religion in the Mosaic tradition, most fully expressed in Jewish orthodoxy. His resistance to law, and his tendency towards the violation of the commandment against idolatry, as manifested in his jocular yet passionate "having of other god before" the Mosaic God, expressed his rebellion against orthodox Jewish religion. The "grubby old gods"<sup>9</sup> [as he referred to them in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess] lessened Moses' magic power (p. 136).

Freud was to argue in his last work, *Moses and Monotheism* that Moses was not even a Jew (Israelite) but an Egyptian! Hence, he made a Gentile *responsible for the Law, for human guilt, for the pain of neurosis!* Neurosis arises when disharmony occurs among the id, ego and superego, particularly when the latter is overly harsh because of its being shaped by an excess of Mosaic Law (Bakan, 1958/2004: 170).

The Law was obviously damaging for modern living particularly for post-enlightenment humankind. However, psychoanalysis, says Bakan (1958/2004: 158), has taken on a *religious* duty within Western society by absolving sins against the Mosaic code. The analyst 'stands first as a representative of the superego [the voice

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<sup>9</sup> Freud had a collection of some Eastern gods. [My footnote.]

of communal morality]. . . [but] second, as a *nonpunishing* superego' (p. 158, italics in original).

It is crucial that the patient regards the therapist as superego because the threat of punishment originates from there. Therefore, transference is essential for successful therapy where the patient regards the analyst as her parent. However, in this relationship the analyst does not punish. Bakan (1958/2004) states, 'The psychoanalyst listens to the patient's discussion of her deepest "sins" and does not blame' (p. 159). If anything, the analyst blames her parents (!) for their treatment of the patient as an infant or child.

Psychoanalysis seeks to modify the image of the Jew by slaying the law. Freud, 'the godless Jew', liberates humankind by lifting the yoke of the law off their necks and, in a sense, only a Jew could have done this (Bakan, 1958/2004: 159) because presumably a Gentile fashioned the yoke in the first place.

#### **iv) Torah & interpretation**

As we know, the *Torah* (the Law, primarily the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures) begins as a *written* text not as oral tradition. (Contrast this difference to Kabbalah above.) However, in Kabbalistic thought, the Messiah (a human person) is thought of as Torah (Bakan, 1958/2004: 246)! Later, holy men are also regarded as Torah. Bakan believes that Freud took this idea a step further in regarding *each person* as torah, each person needs interpreting and psychoanalysis is the hermeneutic. This idea is also found in the *Zohar*, a well-known mystical interpretation of the *Torah*, which suggests this metaphor of persons as 'texts' requiring interpretation (Bakan, 1958/2004: 247).

#### **v) Assessment**

Bakan's thesis is a fascinating one but also has a number of flaws not least of which is that no evidence exists that Freud ever had contact with the Kabbalah or mystical tradition as such. Moreover, the fact that interesting parallels exist between psychoanalysis and Jewish mysticism is not to demonstrate that any direct link existed between the two.

However, putting aside Bakan's thesis regarding Freud and the mystical tradition Bakan gives a fascinating insight into how Freud may have viewed the role of psychoanalysis *vis a vis* the Law.

**vi) Helpful points**

- Freud's major quarrel is with the Mosaic Law embodied in the superego
- Mosaic Law is understood to engender guilt; we can never fulfil its demands
- Guilt is the root of neurosis
- Hence, analysis brings healing by modifying (reducing) the demands of the Law/superego. Analyst is a more benign super-ego.

According to Bakan (1958/2004: 25) what Freud did was to effectively secularise Jewish mystical thought. This proposition about mysticism is hard to sustain as it stands. However, we can build on Bakan's insight regarding secularisation by proposing that Freud effectively joined a loose body of Jews who were intent on secularising Judaism in general, which may have included aspects of its mystical tradition. Examination of the above considerations suggests the viability of their being placed within *Humanist Judaism*<sup>10</sup> which combined both Freud's fierce commitment to his Jewish roots while embracing the spirit of the Enlightenment thereby secularising the place and neutralising of the Law in human life.

In passing, we can observe how Bakan's work helps us to understand how Freud, in effect, destabilised both Rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity<sup>11</sup> because of their acceptance of the place of the Law.<sup>12</sup>

**d) Defeat of Christianity**

Freud, 'the godless Jew',<sup>13</sup> made an idol of his Jewishness and established 'a great movement, by which in a sense, he sought to undermine Gentile [Christian] values' (Roazen, 1971: 55). In breaking with the 'orthodox' Jewish tradition, Freud took into his thought prominent ideas from the surrounding Christian culture and secularised

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<sup>10</sup> Such groups calling themselves by similar names exist in the U. S. and presumably elsewhere too.

<sup>11</sup> Each of these understood that place differently but they were united on the importance of the Law for showing man its sinful state.

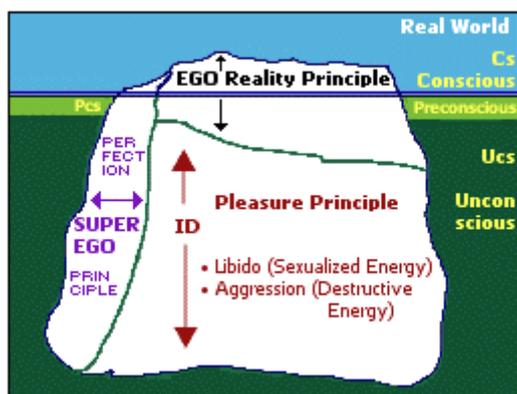
<sup>12</sup> However, Freud did not reject the notion of Law altogether, just the notion of divine law.

<sup>13</sup> A phrase he used of himself.

them. Most importantly for our purposes, he secularised grace turning it into man's work.

Freud was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin<sup>14</sup> but Freud was pessimistic about talk of human progress. However, (Webster, 2002: n. p.) argues that Freud can be understood to accept the Judæo-Christian view that humankind is moving 'from the realm of the flesh towards the realm of the spirit' (Webster, 2002). This analysis may appear strange because of the popular notion that Freud wanted sexuality to be liberated. However, for Freud, 'the moral self was the conscious, the evil self was the unconscious' (Freud, cited in Webster, 2002: n. p.). The id needed to be subordinate to the ego.<sup>15</sup> The following diagram below is a reminder of the various components of the psyche as understood by Freud.

Freud was not interested in liberating sexuality to allow sexuality to dominate but so sexuality could be guided by 'a higher agency . . . We try to replace pathological



process with rejection [of the id's wishes] (Freud, cited in Webster, 2002: n. p.). Sublimation, converting the sexual drive into something cultural, is the highest ideal. This program is not one of objective science as such but an ethical one. Webster says that Freud begins essentially where St Augustine begins,

the doctrine of original sin. We are corrupt at our very core and require healing. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?'<sup>16</sup> could well be a brief summary of Freudianism.

Before World War 1, Freud also lived in a complacent time of optimism in the power of the rational to contain the negative aspects of human vice (the animal nature).

<sup>14</sup> *Origin of Species* was published in 1859.

<sup>15</sup> This viewpoint is strikingly different from that of Jung's. For Jung, the id=the personal unconscious but the collective unconscious and the conscious ego needed to work together towards what Jung called 'individuation'. (See lectures 6 & 7.)

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 17: 9. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? (NRSV).

Freud's views undercut that optimism and became accepted among many (as we know from Freud's invitation to lecture at Clark University, USA, in 1909).

Webster (2002) asserts that Freud believed that we can 'reconcile ourselves, through the power of human reason, to the self-image which is, in emotional terms, abhorrent and degrading'. At this point, Webster spoils his analysis by failing to understand that Christianity is not essentially about the use of human reason to control evil (as he alleges Jonathan Swift<sup>17</sup> believed). Christians, in fact, believe that God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit has already defeated evil in the death of the Son of God.<sup>18</sup> This point clearly divides Freud and all types of humanism clearly from Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

Also, completely missing from Freud is any notion of the image of God. Fallen humanity has both nobility and wretchedness according to Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the Christian mathematical prodigy. However, for Pascal, unlike Freud, 'there is a corruption in [people's] nature which renders them' in need of a Redeemer 'who can free [them] for it' (Pascal's *Pensees* or '*Thoughts*').

### e) Summary

- The character of the Id may be said to share some affinity with the notion of original sin
- However, whereas for Freud 'salvation' comes from human help, for the Christian (and the orthodox Jew) help comes from the name [character] of the Lord
- Freud may be said to share some characteristics with Christianity but *grace* divides them both
- Freud subverts both Christianity and Orthodox Judaism by failing to provide a proper place for the Law as the revealer of human evil and appealing to reason rather than to external grace to cope with human sin.

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<sup>17</sup> Writer of the classic *Gulliver's Travels*.

<sup>18</sup> Col 2:13 ¶ And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, *I say*, did he make alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses; 14 having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; 15 having despoiled the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

<sup>19</sup> When C. L. Lewis was asked the difference among all the different religions of the world and Christianity he answered, 'Oh, that's easy. It's grace.'

## 2. Freud's deeper commitment

Examination of Freud's Jewishness and the parallels between his thought and Jewish mysticism lead us to suggest that while Freud clung tenaciously to the first, the intimations of the second (mysticism) can be much more credibly explained by his commitment to a secular, enlightenment 'religion' shaping and being shaped by a scientific *weltanschauung* (world view). This Humanistic Judaism was Freud's way of dealing with the scourge of anti-Semitism.

### **a) Between two cultures**

Eminent writer, Marthe Roberts propounded the illuminating thesis that Freud was a Jew caught between 'traditional Judaism' and 'German bourgeois, humanistic culture' (Homans, 1995: 144). Roberts argued that Freud's father's generation was a transitional one which had moved a step away from Judaism: no longer observant but still possessing deep respect for the Jewish tradition. Roberts contended that Freud spent his life trying to resolve the tension between these two worldviews while moving more and more into humanistic (Gentile) culture.

Sigmund Freud's father, Jakob, may have been married twice before he married



Amalie, Sigmund's mother who was 20 years his junior. He became a grandfather at about the same time as he married again and was somewhat of a grandfatherly figure in his family, loved by everybody (Vitz, 1988: 36). Freud's parents, Jakob<sup>20</sup> and

Amalie had been married by a liberal Rabbi (Vitz, 1988: 33). Liberal Judaism was a direct result of a collision between Judaism and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment which wanted to sweep away past tradition using reason.

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<sup>20</sup> Freud's father gave him a bible (OT, translated and edited by a leading Reform scholar) on his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday showing that the Scriptures were still revered even by Liberals. This bible was to play a decisive role in his life, being the basis for some of his important writings. One study has determined that Freud makes some 488 allusions or references to Bible passages in his letters and writings (Pfrimmer cited in Vitz, 1988: 44)!

According to Vitz (1988: 36), Jakob was a happy contented man but, in his son's eyes, lacked drive to get ahead. This lack of aggressiveness was not uncommon among male Jews who regarded such forcefulness as Gentile pleasures and not fitting for a scholarly Jewish man. That Freud should despise this manner in his father only shows how far he had departed from the ideals of even Reform Judaism. Two other factors reduced Jakob's stature for Sigmund. Jakob seemed unable to adequately support his family so that the family was always painfully aware of the lack of money. Also, evidence exists that Amalie and one of Jakob's sons, Philipp, by a former marriage had an affair (Vitz, 1988: 39-45). These situations showed the weakness of Jakob's position. Finally, he took his family to Vienna dominated by the Gentile, outwardly Christian but inwardly humanist culture in order to escape the after-effects of the alleged affair and to improve his financial position.

In matters of the Jewish faith, Roberts noted that Jakob asked of his children vague allegiance to Judaism<sup>21</sup> while simultaneously 'implicitly consent[ing] to their desire to break with the tradition (Homans, 1995: 145). Every indication suggests that Freud did just that.

### **b) Humanistic Judaism**

Goldhamer (1998-2001: n. p.) stated that she cannot talk *about* God much less pray *to* him. She lists 10 positive beliefs that of Humanistic Judaism, actually mentioning Freud (in point 7) as a Jew despite his lack of belief. For her, 'the essence of Judaism is the experience of the Jewish people', and human life involves 'the power and responsibility to shape our lives, independent of a supernatural power or authority' (point 1).

However, examination of her point 1 above reveals the dogmatic starting point of her religion. I am not criticising for the nature of this starting point but for her failure to recognise –as do secularists in general— that she has not divorced herself from religion; she just has a different religion from those who are Orthodox. Hence, discussion of issues such as abortion, homosexuality, terrorism, globalism, and Western materialism will be necessarily coloured by one's starting point.

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<sup>21</sup> In a corresponding way, Jung's father, a Protestant, could be similarly described. This paternal attitude had a similar result.

Freud imagined, as do many others, that not believing in the biblical God means that one is without a religion, that one is being completely rational by allowing science to show us the truth. But, on what basis is one to accept the revelations of science as the truth? Science cannot be used as the basis for establishing science in this position. That would be to 'beg the question'. If science cannot be used, what supports science's claim to be infallible revelation. Science is needs to be supported by something that is non-scientific?!

Although that is true to the extent that those who have left their traditions often have no visible cultic<sup>22</sup> practices as such (e.g., they do not attend church, synagogue or mosque), human life is inherently religious because it rests on some commitment to a presumed Absolute, unquestioned and unsupported.

The efforts of modern secularism to force 'religion' into some private sphere are themselves based on a religiously fuelled view that declares dogmatically that belief can be restricted in this way. Why is that the case? Who said? Part of the problem the West faces with the upsurge in Islamic opposition to Western global interests is because we fail to understand that for Islam, religion is all of life. One cannot segregate one area of life from another.

### **3. Summary and Conclusions**

Although, it is alleged that Freud was a 'godless Jew', we cannot allow his statement to reject the Bible's teaching that we stand before God as believers by his grace or as believers who have repudiated his love and have sought after other gods. Israel was never condemned because she had no gods at all. As John Calvin said, the human heart is an idol-making factory. We are made to worship and worship we do in one way or another. On that basis, Freud was an adherent to the religion of Humanistic Judaism.

Freud's therapy emerges from his religion. It comprises a superintending fiercely Jewish identity enfolding a robust commitment to human reason, recognition of the

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<sup>22</sup> Used in a technical, neutral sense in this context.

evil inherent in man, scepticism concerning the goodness of the Law, lack of any notion of divine grace and a suspicion of appearances.

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