

A Fictional Letter From Elie Wiesel to Sigmund Freud,  
Regarding Dr. Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*.  
(My apologies to Mr. Wiesel)

Doktor Freud:

I recently read your response to the problem of religion called *The Future of an Illusion*, and I felt compelled to offer you another interlocutor-type response for your consideration. As one Jew to another, I will assume you understand my references to the Jewish traditions.

I find your opinion that religion is a grand retardation of humanity as biased as your assumption that psychoanalysis is "an impartial instrument."<sup>1</sup> In the opening chapter of your work, you discuss the betterment of humanity by way of civilization in general. In your logic, it would seem that civilization ultimately progresses to a utopia without conflict within humans or between them. This development, according to the later sections of your books, calls for a "turning-away from religion"<sup>2</sup> in order to reach the utopia "in which life will become tolerable to everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone."<sup>3</sup> There is a problem with considering religion as a phase of "blissful hallucinatory confusion" that must be endured to arrive at a more peaceful, perfect religion-less humanity. Your thesis is contradicted by the horrible actions of a religion-less, developed civilization systematically creating a hell for another group of humans.<sup>4</sup>

As a survivor of the Holocaust, I can testify to the base human nature possible within an idealistic, amoral society. Who was it that remained human with the purpose of expanding a tolerable civilization during the Holocaust? Was it the guards who beat children mercilessly? Or was it the intelligent scientists who caused indescribably pain and suffering unnecessarily? No. We, the Jews who survived, "[we] remember the killers and lose our faith in humanity."<sup>5</sup> Is what you are advocating, a faith in humanity reasonable? This faith in humanity must be shaken to the core by the compelling evidence of the Holocaust. For, "then we remember the victims and, though scarred, our faith is restored - it must be... because they remained Jewish-human to the end."<sup>6</sup>

Where were they finding strength and true humanity, "inside the ghettos and death camps... inside the gas chambers?"<sup>7</sup> Was it from a "blissful hallucinatory confusion?"<sup>8</sup> No, they thought of God; "they thought of God; "they could speak of God, to God."<sup>9</sup> It was not logic that kept them from despair but prayer, even prayers in the form of protests. While I was a child in the camps, "even when I [spoke] against God, I [spoke] to God."<sup>10</sup> I watched as men gathered in the camps for Rosh Hashanah and "thousands of voices repeated the benediction; thousands of men prostrated themselves like trees before a tempest. 'Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!'"<sup>11</sup> As I saw this, I could only protest. "How could I say to Him: 'Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory?'"<sup>12</sup> ... "Nevertheless, everything I [did was] done from within faith and not from outside."<sup>13</sup>

The logical end to your argument is that my faith in God "bears a large share of the blame for [a] relative atrophy"<sup>14</sup> of civilization, and it is preventing our people from furthering a beautiful "communal life."<sup>15</sup> For you, religion is an illusion, but I am utterly convinced that your argument, as your very own interlocutor pointed out, "is surely an illusion: in this decisive respect human nature is hardly likely to change... peoples which do not grow up under the pressure of a religious system... approach no nearer to your ideal than the rest."<sup>16</sup> Sadly, the German people were not guided by a higher logic to protest the intolerance shown toward the Jews and other people groups for illogical reasons. Even we Jews could not believe the Germans allowed this to happen. "I did not believe that they could burn people in our age, that humanity would never tolerate it..."<sup>17</sup>

I do not lay the blame of the Holocaust at your feet; neither do I accuse you of agreeing with it or causing it indirectly. You would have been with our people in the ghettos and the camps. I hope you will consider the implications of an outright condemnation of religion and look deeply into the assumptions that drive you to label religion as the delusion that must be dispelled for the greater good of humanity.

Elie Wiesel

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Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Doubleday Anchor, 1964. p. 47.
  - <sup>2</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 55.
  - <sup>3</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 63.
  - <sup>4</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 56.
  - <sup>5</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Day*. Hill and Wang, 2006.
  - <sup>6</sup> Wiesel. *Ibid.*
  - <sup>7</sup> Wiesel. *Ibid.*
  - <sup>8</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Doubleday Anchor, 1964. p. 56.
  - <sup>9</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Day*. Hill and Wang, 2006.
  - <sup>10</sup> Carol Rittner (ed.), *Elie Wiesel: Between Memory and Hope*, 1990.
  - <sup>11</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1961. p. 64.
  - <sup>12</sup> Wiesel. *Ibid.* p. 64.
  - <sup>13</sup> Carol Rittner (ed.), *Elie Wiesel: Between Memory and Hope*, 1990.
  - <sup>14</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 60.
  - <sup>15</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 7.
  - <sup>16</sup> Freud. *Ibid.* p. 65.
  - <sup>17</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1961. p. 30.