Fr. Frank Schuster

I think it’s time to share with you again a couple of my favorite atheists. Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Feuerbach were two very influential atheists of the past 150 years or so. Before I talk about them, I’d like to share with you my one atheist joke.

An atheist was taking a walk through the woods pondering the marvels of evolution. As he was walking alongside the river he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look. He saw a 7-foot grizzly charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was closing. He accidentally tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up but saw the bear right on top of him, raising his right paw to strike him. At that instant the Atheist cried out "Oh God, save me!"

Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. Even the river stopped moving. As a bright light shone upon the man, a voice came out of the sky, "You deny my existence for all of these years; teach others I don't exist. Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer?"

The atheist looked directly into the light "I suppose you are right. It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask you to treat me as Christian now, but could you do me a favor and make the bear a Christian?" “Very well," said the voice. The light went out. The river ran again. And the sounds of the forest resumed.

And then miraculously a profound peace came over the bear, so much so that the bear dropped to his knees and folded his paws in prayer. The atheist’s relief was short lived however as the bear prayed, “Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.”

And so, back to my two favorite atheists: Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Feuerbach. You may remember that Sigmund Freud dismissed all religion as a mass neurosis. For Freud, God was what he called a sugar daddy that people could run to so to be comforted from the fear of death. Like Marx who characterized religion as opium for the people, Freud pointed to the phenomenon: when “God” lets people down by allowing grim
tragedy to strike in their lives, people sober up from the opium of religion realizing the truth that there is no god. Feuerbach, on the other hand, argued that God was a mere projection of the ego, a projection of our best self. Feuerbach would make us look at the “surprising” phenomenon that our beliefs in God never contradict our most cherished beliefs or morals, regardless of what others might think. For example, if I am a democrat or a republican how surprising it is that God always agrees with my politics! How remarkable it is that God agrees with everything I stand for and justifies everything that I do. And this, for Feuerbach, is proof that God is a fake, merely the projection of the ego or the collective self justifying ego of a masses manifested by the latest poll.

Now, my take on Freud and Feuerbach is this, if the God as described in the bible really is a sugar daddy or a self justifying projection, I would be all for Freud and Feuerbach. This couldn’t be farther from the case, though. I can’t find their god in the bible. In my mind, what Freud and Feuerbach are arguing against isn’t God at all but rather humanity’s inclination to discard God in favor of a golden calf, so to speak. For me, atheists like Freud and Feuerbach are raising the same complaint Jeremiah raised to his contemporaries. When religion gets distorted and off track, a real need to go back to revelation and scripture develops. And what do we find today?

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus for help. She isn’t named. Whenever you encounter someone who is not named in Scripture is an invitation to allow ourselves to become that person for a moment. She seeks Jesus out day and night because her daughter is tormented by a demon. She recognizes in Jesus her only hope. She wants to have a relationship with this man whom she believes can save her daughter. What happens? Does she have a sugar daddy moment with our Lord a la Freud? Does she encounter with a self justifying projection of her ego a la Feuerbach? No and no!

This woman is startled to discover that Jesus is displeased with her. I mean, “Yikes!” There isn’t a warm and fuzzy moment here. Quite the opposite, Jesus begins his relationship with her by telling her that her life is all wrong and that she doesn't even belong to his fold. What a nightmare, can you imagine, to think that an encounter with the Lord would end up with me being accused of not being acceptable to Him! Say it isn’t so!
And the interesting thing is St. Paul had a similar experience. Paul thought his life was perfect. He was a zealous Pharisee, riding his horse to Damascus oblivious that he was riding blindly to perdition. What Paul needed was to be physically blinded by the Lord, knocked off his high horse so to speak, before Paul could finally understand that his life was all wrong, he was going the wrong way. An encounter with Christ demands conversion.

But unless you think the Canaanite woman and Paul are anomalies, read the Gospels sometime and count how many times Jesus tells his disciples that they are just not getting it. In fact, when you read the Gospels, notice how often the disciples come across a can short of a six pack not getting what Jesus was trying to say and do. You and I are not off the hook either. There have only been two people in the world without sin. You and I aren’t them. Jesus calls us to *metanoia*, to repentance. I think it is spiritually healthy to look up that word every so often and contemplate what that means in our life.

And so, the Canaanite woman encounters the Lord and is shocked to discover the Lord doesn’t like what he sees. But then notice the moment of grace. Notice how this Canaanite woman responds. Instead of despairing and going away empty handed, she perseveres in faith. She perseveres and says something very remarkable and humble, demonstrating conversion of heart. She accepts the Lord as the objective criterion of how she should live her life and demonstrated through her humility and bold perseverance, her hope that this new objective criterion will be a new start for her and her daughter. And an amazing reversal in her relationship with the Lord occurs: Jesus says, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish".

My friends, just like it is difficult for a patient to be healed by a doctor, unless they come to a place of truth and honesty about their disease, Jesus will find it difficult to heal us unless we enter into an honest relationship with him. This is why the Church opposes relativism, is skeptical of opinion polls (Jesus never operated by them), and holds tight to the objective time tested truths as handed down to us through scripture and tradition. You see, the Church is interested in a real relationship with the Lord, not a fake one based on the latest public survey. It is true that our conscience can carry us a long way, but because of our inclination to sin, we need to be informed by something that is
bigger than us, a lot older than us, and rooted in the Word of God for us, even if I struggle with it at times.

When I find myself struggling with age old objective truths handed down to us from previous generations, I find that my relationship to the Lord becomes more real because I am talking through my struggles with God in my prayers, accepting the admonition to grow. Prayer becomes a conversation with someone “Other”, a relationship that recognizes who it is I am talking to, it is an “I and Thou” relationship, in the words of Jewish theologian Martin Buber, not an “I and you”, or worse, an “I and me” conversation with that voice that strangely tells me everything my sinful heart wants to hear.

Now, after the reversal of fortune in the Gospel reading, something beautifully ironic happens. Jesus was sent to heal the house of Israel, and although Israel had the age old covenants and prophets heralding the coming of the Messiah, the Israelites just didn’t get it. This poor Canaanite woman is proclaimed by Jesus to have more faith than all of Israel.

What a reversal of fortune: she starts out in the story an outcast and the story ends with her becoming an evangelist, someone with a rich and wonderful relationship with Jesus, and an example to others of what a Christian should look like. Nothing in life could have been better for her than her encounter with the Lord, as difficult as that conversion process was. Again, she isn’t given a name. This is an invitation for us to see ourselves in this Canaanite woman for a moment.

And so, what is the challenge this week? First off, whatever relationship you currently have with God right now, if it is a place of love and peace for you, this is a good starting point. I want that for everybody. The challenge this week however is to meditate on the question, how mature is my relationship with the Lord? And here is a quick test brought to you by the insights of Freud and Feuerbach. Do I lose faith in God when tragedy strikes rather than turn to Him for strength in good times and in bad? Does the God I pray to agree with everything I say and do? Does the God I pray to expect no change or growth for me in the spirit life, regardless of what I may have learned from Scripture or the Church, thinking I know better? If we said yes to any one of these
questions: Houston we have a problem! We are likely praying to the God of Freud and Feuerbach and not to the God revealed to us in Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

The Good News is God wants all to be saved through a real relationship with Him. We are challenged to learn from the humility and bold perseverance of the Canaanite Woman, who opened her heart to an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, and through the process of conversion, discovered how rich and wonderful life can be, and so can we!