

Einstein letter sold for record sum—Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part article on Albert Einstein and his views on religion. Part 1 was posted June 23.

Albert Einstein was educated in both the Christian and Jewish religions, but he became a convinced atheist at the age of 12 and refused to take part in the Jewish Bar Mitzvah ceremony. His marriage in 1903 was a purely civic and non-religious occasion. He opposed his children receiving religious education at elementary school, saying, “Anyway, I dislike very much that my children should be taught something that is contrary to all scientific thinking.” [8]

As the newly revealed 1954 letter makes clear, Einstein thought the Jewish religion was “childish superstition,” but he did feel a “deep affinity” for the Jewish people. His earlier support for Zionism may be criticised, but he had made clear in his opposition to World War I that he was opposed to all forms of nationalism, and this included Jewish nationalism. He was opposed from the start to the setting up of a Jewish state and to mass emigration into Israel.

In 1939 he wrote, “There could be no greater calamity than a permanent discord between us and the Arab people. Despite the great wrong that has been done us, we must strive for a just and lasting compromise with the Arab people.... Let us recall that in former times no people lived in greater friendship with us than the ancestors of these Arabs.” [9]

He was also one of the signatories to an Open Letter to the *New York Times* in 1948 denouncing the terrorist activities of Menachem Begin and the massacre carried out in the Arab village of Deir Yassin [10].

Einstein’s views on the Jewish question have a very direct relevance today, but neither the *New York Times* nor the *Guardian* sought to explore what he had to say on the matter.

As a young man Einstein’s philosophical development was heavily influenced by the ideas of Ernst Mach. Mach made some important contributions to science, but in philosophy he put forward an extreme empiricism which held that sensations and complexes of sensations were the only permissible objects for scientific research. No assumptions should be made about a real world, or in Kant’s terminology a “thing in itself” that lay behind the sensations. Mach was very influential in the early years of the 20th century. Such was the extent of his influence within the Marxist movement that Lenin found it necessary to write *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to refute his ideas, which he saw as leading to the embrace of reactionary and religious notions. Lenin derisively called Mach’s followers in the socialist movement “God-builders.”

How important was Mach’s influence for Einstein? Gerald Holton, the historian of science, has demonstrated Einstein’s transition from his early sympathy with Mach’s views to his later materialism. Holton argues that for Einstein in his later period “there exists an external, objective, physical reality which we may hope to grasp—not directly, empirically, or logically, or with the fullest certainty, but at least by an intuitive leap, one that is only guided by experience of the totality of sensible ‘facts.’” [11]

Holton shows that although Einstein was influenced by Mach in developing his Special Theory of Relativity in 1905, by 1913 he found that the mathematical development of his General Theory was in contradiction to Mach’s extreme empiricism and so he adopted what he

called a “rational realism.” He wrote later, looking back on this period, that he became a “believing rationalist, that is, one who seeks the only trustworthy source of truth in mathematical simplicity.” [12]

In a talk given in 1918 Einstein wrote that “the general laws on which the structure of theoretical physics is based claim to be valid for every natural phenomena” and that “it ought to be possible to arrive at the description, that is to say, the theory, of every natural process, including life, by means of pure deduction, if that process of deduction were not far beyond the capacity of the human intellect.” [13]

This quote is taken from a talk given in 1918 on the 60th birthday of the famous German physicist Max Planck who was an explicit materialist. Einstein clearly sided with Planck’s materialist views against those of Mach, saying that in the development of physics one theoretical system “always proved itself decidedly superior to all the rest” and that “in practice the world of phenomena uniquely determines the theoretical system.”

Nevertheless Einstein spoke of the scientist, like the painter, the poet and the speculative philosopher, struggling to understand the world, “in order to find in this way the peace and security which he cannot find in the narrow whirlpool of personal experience.” He argued that in discovering the fundamental laws of a scientific theory, “there is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience...”

There is, as Holton notes, a certain “theological undertone” in Einstein’s attitude to science when he maintains, “[T]he state of mind which enables a man to do work of this kind is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover...”

What appears in 1918 as a passing comment seems to have been developed more fully in Einstein’s later ideas on religion. His main writings on the subject, according to by Max Jammer (author of *Einstein and Religion*), date from 1930 to 1941. All these late writings contain the same basic attitude to institutional religion as Einstein expressed in the 1954 letter. Einstein rejected conventional religion with its personal God in all these writings, but he also developed, from 1930 onwards, an idea of a “cosmic” religion, a kind of worship of an impersonal God of the universe.

In his essay “Religion and Science,” written for the *New York Times* magazine in 1930 [14], Einstein gave a historical conception of the growth of religion that would have been widely accepted in intellectual circles at the time, certainly in Europe. Jammer notes several German authors on theology who would have advanced similar views.

Primitive man would have developed religious ideas because of fear—of hunger, of wild beast, sickness and death. With an underdeveloped understanding of causal connections, the human mind would have created imaginary beings that controlled the destiny of individuals or society—beings that had to be prayed to, appeased, and so on. The second stage in the development of religion was the “social or moral conception of God” that “protects, disposes, rewards and punishes” his subjects. Einstein sees this as a step forward and corresponds to the “religions of civilized peoples,” including Judaism and Christianity.

All such religions, whether of the primitive or more developed variety,

have an “anthropomorphic” character, Einstein explains. But beyond these there is a third type of conception of God that is not of a personal character, a “cosmic religious experience.” Such a God is experienced in feeling the “futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvellous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought.”

In putting forward such a God, Einstein admitted he was heavily influenced by his reading of Spinoza, a philosopher he first read in his youth and who is mentioned in many of his letters from the 1920s onwards, and in the new 1954 letter. In 1932, for example, Einstein wrote, “Spinoza was the first to apply with strict consistency the idea of all-pervasive determinism to human thought, feeling and action.” [15]

In his *New York Times* article Einstein wrote that historically “one is inclined to look upon science and religion as irreconcilable antagonists” because “the man who is thoroughly convinced of the universal operation of the law of causality cannot for a moment entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events.... He has no use for the religion of fear and equally little for social or moral religion.”

So when Einstein appears to be saying that science and religion are in some way reconcilable it must be made clear that he is referring to this “cosmic” conception of God and religion, one that would not be acceptable to believers in a personal God or any of the religions that are preached in churches, temples and mosques throughout the world.

Einstein came under considerable attack for rejecting a personal God. Irate clergymen and religious-minded people were incensed by his talks and writings on religion. Even Paul Tillich, the well-known theologian who had been forced to flee from Germany to the United States because of his support for Social Democracy, wrote a detailed argument against Einstein defending the conception of a personal God.

Einstein may have wished to avoid antagonising American public opinion. As an exile, even an illustrious one, he was in a vulnerable position. He insisted, “I’m not an atheist” [16]. But this can hardly be reconciled with his expressed admiration of Spinoza. Spinoza was an atheist. In his influential biography of Spinoza, Steven Nadler writes, “Despite Spinoza’s theological language and what look like concessions to orthodox sentiment (“the Love of God is our greatest blessedness”), there is no mistaking his intentions. His goal is nothing less than the complete desacralization and naturalization of religion and its concepts...” [17]

Einstein’s longstanding friend, the French physicist Maurice Solovine, who translated Einstein’s book *Out of My Later Years* into French in the early 1950s, tried to persuade him not to refer to the “cosmic” conception of religion, justifiably arguing that Einstein’s use of the word religion differed from normal usage. Einstein’s idea of “religion” promoting higher ideals presupposed, he pointed out, “the existence of institutions and people to carry out this task,” which clearly contradicted Einstein’s rejection of institutional religion.

In reply Einstein claimed he could find no other term than “religious” for his feeling of “confidence in the rational nature of reality as it is accessible to human reason.” Otherwise “science degenerates into uninspired empiricism.” [18] It must be said that Einstein’s view of what amounted to a religious experience would hardly satisfy most believers who demand a disembodied deity. Paradoxically Einstein seemed to be insisting that his feeling for the correctness of a materialist view of the world was a religious one.

One must surely look to the tumultuous period through which Einstein lived, and his own connections with the socialist movement, to gain more of an insight into his views. Einstein was a personal friend of Friedrich (Fritz) Adler, a physicist and socialist. In Zurich, before the First World War, Einstein held many discussions with Adler on science, philosophy and politics. He tried to dissuade Adler from giving up his physics career for politics. His father, Victor Adler, was a leader of Austrian Social

Democracy. In 1916 Fritz Adler assassinated the prime minister of Austria for refusing to call a meeting of parliament to discuss the war. Though Einstein disagreed with Adler’s action, he offered to be a character witness in his trial [19].

Einstein’s pacifist opposition to the First World War is well known and though he was never in agreement with Marxism he always regarded himself as a socialist and had hopes in the November 1918 revolution in Germany. Fanja Leziarska, a member of Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartacus group, was a friend of Ilse, daughter of Einstein’s second wife Elsa, and took refuge in Einstein’s house in 1918 after Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered by right-wing militia with the support of the leaders of Social Democracy [20].

Einstein can hardly have been unaffected by the hopes of his friends in this period. The degeneration of social democracy was personified by Adler, who, after being released from jail to be a leader of the workers’ councils in 1918, went on after the defeat of the revolution to become a bourgeois parliamentary leader in Austria.

The fact that socialist politics did not succeed in Germany, that the betrayals of the Social Democrats and later the Stalinists enabled Hitler to come to power, cannot but have had an impact on Einstein’s outlook. It is perhaps here that we should seek the origins of his desire to look for solace in a “cosmic” religion. Once his faith in a mass socialist movement was dashed, Einstein became pessimistic about the possibility of the majority of people ever rising above anthropomorphic conceptions of religion. It was after the defeat of the German revolution that he began to suggest that “only individuals of exceptional endowments, and exceptionally high-minded communities” [21] could rise above, and achieve the higher level of “cosmic” religion that he valued.

It is surely in its historical context that we have to assess Einstein’s attack on atheists. The reference to “opium for the people” suggests that Einstein had received petitions for support of a crude propagandist variety from Stalinist supporters of the Soviet Union. He would no doubt have felt the wave of revulsion towards the politics of the Kremlin that went through left-liberal public opinion after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939.

Einstein never doubted the necessity of socialism. Writing in 1949, after the Cold War had begun and such an affiliation was dangerous, Einstein professed his continuing support for socialism, and, delivering a fairly unambiguous statement of opposition to Stalinism, warned of the dangers of bureaucratism. “The achievement of socialism,” he wrote “requires the solution of some extremely difficult socio-political problems: how is it possible, in view of the far-reaching centralization of economic and political power, to prevent bureaucracy from becoming all-powerful and overweening?” [22]

Einstein’s whole adult life was lived without benefit of religion, which makes the attempt to conscript him as a posthumous partisan for religious fundamentalism entirely unfounded. He would certainly have opposed the attempt of the Templeton Society to impose religion in schools since he refused to have his own children subjected to a religious education. The kind of religious feeling he spoke about has nothing in common with any form of religion, but a great deal in common with the materialist conception of God in Spinoza’s philosophy, which could be equated with material nature.

Concluded

Notes:

[8] *Einstein and Religion* by Max Jammer, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 26-27

[9] *Einstein and Zionism* by Banesh Hoffmann, in *General Relativity and Gravitation*, eds G. Shaviv and J. Rosen, Wiley, 1975, p. 242, cited in *Einstein, Zionism and Israel: Setting the Record Straight* by Dr. Mohammad Omar Farooq, <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/other/einstein.htm>

[10]

http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/study_res/einstein/nyt_letter.htm
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[11] *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein* by Gerald Holton, Harvard, revised ed., 1988, p. 263

[12] *Science and Anti-Science* by Gerald Holton, Harvard, 1993, pp. 65-66

[13] *Ideas and Opinions* by Albert Einstein, Souvenir Press, 1973, reissued 2005, pp. 224-27

[14] *ibid*, pp. 36-40

[15] Jammer, p. 45

[16] *ibid* p. 48

[17] *Spinoza: A Life* by Steven Nadler, Cambridge, 1999, p. 190

[18] Jammer, pp.120, 127-8

[19] *Einstein in Love, A Scientific Romance* by Dennis Overbye, p. 181

[20] *ibid*, pp. 275, 349

[21] Einstein, p. 38

[22] Einstein, p. 158

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