

**Armand M. Nicoli, *The Question of God:
C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex
and the Meaning of Life,*
Review by Lydia Newell
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Letter from Across the Pond

by Lydia Newell

Deus Illuminatio Mea:

**A View and Review of *The Question of God:
C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud***

Deus Illuminatio Mea: “The Lord is my light” C S. Lewis would have agreed; Freud would not. Many Oxonians probably give little thought to the Latin crest that directly aligns intellectual illumination with divine inspiration, but the connection is apt enough when considered in the light of Dr. Armand Nicholi ‘s new book and television broadcast *The Question of God: C S Lewis and Sigmund Freud*.¹ Nicholi anchors his book with the basic proposition that we either believe that the universe is random, with no organizing force, or we believe that “an intelligence” guides the universe, illuminating and ordering the cosmos. The medieval University was founded upon this latter choice. Yet in recent centuries, academe has also become the traditional locus of scientific methods that prioritize empirically observable facts over intuition or faith. In his 2002 book, based on a popular course he taught at Harvard, Dr. Nicholi explores this tension through the lives and works of C S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud.

The historical rift between theism and the Academy takes centre stage in the PBS series inspired by Nicholi ‘s book. Broadcast in early September in the United States, *The Question of God* will likely be at the forefront of American discussions about Lewis this Fall. Freud and Lewis, in Nicholi ‘s view, are an apt pair because of their strong academic ties and the intensity of their personal dealings with religion. Few individuals, according to Nicholi, “have influenced the moral fabric of the West” as greatly as these Freud and Lewis. Though some reviewers dispute this claim, citing Freud ‘s “diminishing influence,” Dr. Nicholi ‘s choice conjures up an immediate understanding of the extremes he is trying to compare.

Drawing on similar personal philosophical incidents in Freud ‘s and Lewis’s early lives, Nicholi compares their reactions to the fully materialist, rational educations they both received in their fields. Freud, becoming enamored of the “certainties of scientific observation,” was convinced that research is the only way to “find anything out.” Since he could not empirically prove the “question of God,” Freud

reasoned that it is not a scientific question. Later, this agnosticism turned into a determined atheism; he labeled religion “the common obsessional neurosis of mankind.”

Lewis, after the death of his mother and his misery at boarding school, also removed religious involvement from his life. When he first studied with his tutor Dr. Kirkpatrick (“Kirk”), Lewis was impressed by the force of Kirk’s relentlessly logical mind. Following in the footsteps of his admired tutor, Lewis became a full-fledged atheist. From these early adult experiences, Dr. Nicholi draws a comparison of University life between these two men. After unhappy events tainted their conceptions of the spiritual worldview, both Lewis and Freud sought to dissociate themselves from the faiths of their fathers. Striking out on their own, feeling far more at home at University than with their parents, both men also struck out on their own philosophically.

This formation of one’s worldview is of supreme concern throughout the PBS series. Nicholi structures his narrative around the formative events in Freud’s and Lewis’s childhoods - arguing that a rather Freudian antagonism with fathers is a major source of both men’s discomfort with theism as young adults. The death of Lewis’s mother - and that event’s subsequent effect upon his father - and Freud’s disappointment in his father all play key roles, for Nicholi, in shaping such spiritual decisions. The show highlights Lewis’s search for a mother-figure, first in Mrs. Moore, and later, by his own admission, throughout his life. “There was still,” Lewis writes, “too much of Mummy’s lost little boy in me,” Simon Jones intones as Lewis. Director Catherine Tatge seems to emphasize, at least in the early segments of her show, the relationships between Lewis and Freud and their parents. Many of the Lewis quotations are from *Surprised by Joy*, as that piece offers immediate information on Lewis’s journey toward conversion. Freud’s writings illustrate the converse: regression from any theistic view, Jewish or otherwise.

The most striking segments of the series are the re-enactments of Lewis and Freud, performed by Simon Jones and Peter Eyre, respectively. Such moments demonstrate, with engaging clarity, the incidents that appear in both men’s later works. Images of Lewis’s first encounter with nature - his first memory of *joy* - and Freud’s experience of attending Mass with his Catholic nanny are captivating. The biographical re-enactments and commentary proved far more effective than the panel discussions. Images and quotes reinforced my previous readings of both figures and offered some new information. Of course, some early twentieth-century footage of Oxford was an added bonus. Tatge’s direction usually elicits pleasing images,

particularly in the sections on Lewis and nature; the whole production is visually appealing.

Tatge's adaptation essentially mirrors the format of Nicholi's book. There is one important addition, however, which essentially shapes the tone of the entire broadcast. Between the re-enacted segments about the lives of Freud and Lewis, we see Dr. Nicholi himself, leading a discussion panel of seven men and women. Judging from Dr. Nicholi's discussion panel, he is particularly focused on the intellectual dimensions to faith (or lack thereof) and its relationship to science. In other reviews, this conversation panel is usually a contested topic; some viewers notice a slight preference on the "Freud side" - that is, for the materialist atheism he represents in this pairing.

This bias was occasionally evident, but it was also difficult to tell whether this was a result of Tatge's editing or whether conversation simply turned out that way. One weak point of the panel section is that we are never told *why* we should attribute particular insights to these seven people. Nicholi's panel includes two of his former students - now a doctor and a lawyer - a Jungian analyst, a writer, an independent film maker, another lawyer, and a publisher. The captions range from vague ("writer and journalist") to specific ("editor of *Skeptic* magazine"), but it is not clear whether Dr. Nicholi intended this panel to be a random sampling of the general population or an experts' convention. Though they seemed to be in the minority, the two avowedly atheistic panelists - a lawyer and the aforementioned editor of *Skeptic* - were often the most vocal (or received the most screen time from Tatge). Though these conversations were interesting, they offered no further insights about Freud or Lewis, and were, for many reviewers, the weakest parts of the series.

Nicholi's discussion questions, however, do lead to the emergence of relevant and powerful themes; though the ensuing discussion often digresses quickly, motifs include the tensions between science and religion - and whether there should be such tension or not - and the credibility of individual experience. The spiritual and the material definitions of reality also came into play, naturally, because the materialist scope of reality requires the dismissal of personal "religious" experience. Other inquiries arise: the relationship of childhood upbringing and social surroundings with spiritual preference, initial or specific factors that influence panelists in one direction or another, and definitions or expectations of God. "No matter what your faith or what you believe," the narrator insists, "the way each of us understands the meaning of life comes down to one ultimate question 'Does God Really Exist?'" Yet the deep disconnection of ideas that runs through the show creates an unsettled feeling. By the end of the panel discussions, no member seems to have radically

changed worldviews. Rather, the atheist contingent essentially stay on the offensive, but none of the speakers seems to truly absorb what the opposing speakers says. The stalemate is only accentuated by Dr. Nicholi's final statement, which equates Freud and Lewis with two different parts of the psyche. Lewis, he says, emblemizes the human need and capacity for love, obedience, and generally being "brought out of ourselves," while Freud is the part of us that shakes a fist in defiance. Though this conclusion neatly ties up the four-hour series, we are not left with a truly satisfying end. *The Question of God* raises vital and enduring questions, but sometimes overwhelms the viewer by its plethora of hypothetical answers. *Deus Illuminatio Mea?* "Maybe," the series replies.

Lydia Newell

1. For full transcripts and video footage of *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud*, see the website:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/>