

New PBS documentary examines Lewis, Freud and their views about God_100404

October 1, 2004

Posted: 10/01/04

New PBS documentary examines Lewis, Freud and their views about God

By Ted Parks

Associated Baptist Press

BOSTON (ABP)-The British Christian and the Austrian atheist both were shaken by war and personal tragedy that left them clinging to the bitter end to their acceptance-or rejection-of the divine.

The ideas of C. S. Lewis, a leading 20th century Christian apologist, and Sigmund Freud, psychiatrist and architect of modern secular thought, are juxtaposed in a new PBS documentary that allows the two intellectual giants to address anew life's most perplexing questions.

Titled "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud & C. S. Lewis," the two-part, four-hour PBS show is based on a book of the same title by Harvard professor and practicing psychiatrist Armand Nicholi. The series also is available on videocassette and DVD from PBS Home Video.

Though Freud, who worked in Vienna, and Lewis, who taught literature at Oxford and Cambridge, were born a generation apart, the documentary brings the two together by putting their words on the lips of actors dramatizing key moments of their lives. And contemporary panelists—believing and unbelieving—bring the thought of Freud and Lewis to bear on modern questions in the film through nine roundtable discussions moderated by Harvard's Nicholi.

The unusual linking of the Viennese psychiatrist with the Oxford don grew out of a Harvard course where Nicholi at first taught only the philosophy of Freud.

Nicholi said that, while students responded favorably to the class, they said it struck them as “unbalanced.” As counterweight to the denials of Freud, Nicholi introduced the affirmations of Lewis. With the change, “the class discussion ignited,” Nicholi says in a PBS study guide accompanying the series.

In a recent interview, the Harvard professor linked his interest in Lewis with his own professional struggle with suffering.

At Bellevue, Nicholi happened on a copy of Lewis' “The Problem of Pain” in a hospital library. He then read Lewis's book and found it helpful as he confronted tragedy as a physician.

While the documentary contrasts how Lewis and Freud understood the world, it also shows certain parallels in their personal lives. Both experienced the devastation of World War I. Both men lost beloved family members, Freud a daughter, Lewis his wife.

But despite the parallels, Freud and Lewis explained human existence and the role of the divine in vastly different ways.

Freud saw a heavenly Father as the mere human projection of an earthly

one. For the Viennese psychiatrist, the Father and the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, were “the idealized parents of childhood,” commented Harold Blum, executive director of the Sigmund Freud Archives and one of several experts interviewed in the film.

Lewis, on the other hand, argued for a divine origin to human concepts of good and bad. He reasoned that people's shared sense of right and wrong reflects a universal "moral law" given by a divinely moral lawgiver. Rather than the product of human development, that law had to come from some transcendent outside source, Lewis believed.

While Freud and Lewis lived and wrote in the past, Nicholi believes they still speak to a postmodern world that dethrones reason and discounts knowledge of absolute truth.

He also believes that revisiting Freud can help people of faith better understand how their secular neighbors think.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.