

Thoughts on Reading:

*The Question of God,
C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud
Debate God, Love, Sex and
the Meaning of Life*

**Dr. Armand M. Nicholl, Jr.
(Free Press, New York, 2002)**

I purchased this book because of its title. It promised to reveal how two very influential people saw reality. Did it keep its promise? Yes.

Did I like the book? Not really. Not because of how it is written, however, it is quite well done in fact. I simply didn't identify with either Freud's or Lewis' views.

So why is almost every page dog-eared, with some having two corners folded down for emphasis. I couldn't help myself.

I actually identified with a lot of what both characters said about specific situations, and with how they reacted to specific circumstances. It reminded me of my own thoughts and reactions. But that doesn't mean that I particularly liked my own thoughts and reactions, I just recognized them.

Lewis was an atheist before his conversion to Christianity. I like the very nice job the book did comparing and contrasting the attitude toward death of both atheists. Freud was obsessed with and revolted at the idea of death. He took the death of loved ones very, very hard. Yet at the end he asked to be

ethanized, and was. His last book is about a man who made a pact with the devil to give him his desires before taking him. He seemed obsessed with the idea of the devil. Of course both God and the devil were reactions were adult projections of the youthful ambivalence of a boy toward his father. He really, really feared the nothingness promised by death.

On the contrary, Lewis, though an atheist like Freud, appreciated death as an escape door for when life became unbearable. A very different attitude. After his conversion he came to see life as a temporary trial to be ended by death, which meant passing into God's presence. This gave him great comfort in dealing with death around him. He counseled others on their grief. In fact (and this is something I really do like about the man) anyone who wrote him asking for advice got a reply whether he ever heard of them or not. The man had feelings and respect, even love, for others and encouraged them to be whole. By contrast Freud, though a healer by profession, saw others in a negative light and himself as morally (and in other ways) superior to them.

Freud reminded me of one of my grandchildren. When she comes over she is immediately concerned about when the visit will end and she has to return home. I try to tell her to enjoy the things we are doing. But even while we are engaged in our favorite computer game or playing games at Chuck E. Cheese's pizza parlor, she will come up and say something like "do I really have to go home tonight?" And even if she is spending the night the question is typically "do I really have to go home tomorrow?" Why? Because at gramma and grampa's she gets spoiled with games and adventure outings, and gets undivided attention. It is a special time.

Freud was obsessing about the time of his death, it turns out, even while very much alive and well. He dreaded death and looked for omens indicating he would die soon. He did not lose himself in life but always stood a head above it looking for its time-boundary. Just like my granddaughter can't seem to have fun without worrying about it ending. I am trying to get her to lose herself in the moment when she is having fun. It stretches time!

Both Freud and Lewis experienced serious suffering during their lives. Both men saw severe suffering around them. Both reacted strongly to that suffering. Lewis while an atheist thought, like Freud, that it was evidence for there not being a God. Lewis, while a Christian, explained it as something we would understand differently if we could only understand God's perspective. That is called exercising faith, I believe.

Though Freud was an atheist he was fascinated with the devil as a symbol. But he felt evil in humans explained all the evil there was. Lewis as a believer felt that evil was something we chose, that God gave freedom of choice, which is meaningless if there is no choice. He was careful to point out that the devil was an angel that opted for evil, given freedom to choose. Humans similarly motivated ended up being ruled by that being, a fellow creature of God.

I was intrigued by Lewis' conversion story. He is careful to describe it as an intellectual conversion, but the story also involved a more mystical component. Nevertheless, he recounts being stung by the idea planted in his head by a fellow scientist he greatly admired that it seemed like scholarly research was showing that the Bible had a very solid historical foundation and pedigree. This started him on his path toward doubting his atheism.

Contact with other name brand persons who had strong faith led him to finally read scripture, including the New Testament in Greek. It was during this reading of Jesus' words in Greek that it dawned on him that this was not a made-up story, it was too rough and simplistic for that. This was rough and simple people writing down what they actually saw and heard, hence believed.

Reading this made me wonder what would have happened had Lewis lived until today, and was reading recent scholarship on the very earliest Christians and their beliefs? But, we will never know

One reason I read the book with close interest is that it was Lewis who, I thought, missed the point about Courtly Love, the Medieval Religion of Love. He called it a heresy. Nicholl never mentions this opinion, although he does several times says that Lewis warned against making love into a religion, into a God.

Lewis was into the four words for love in the Greek language, and broke them out showing their differences, with some overlap between categories. Nicholl contrasted this with Freud's assertion that all love is sexual. Lewis, aware of this assertion, vehemently disagreed. When Freud says sexual, he is not talking adult copulation type sexual, that is one extreme aspect only.

Freud and Lewis were on slightly different wavelengths where love was concerned. I like my friend Rumi's take, even though it was more like Freud's, but he said there is only one love, and it is a wide spectrum stretching from the crassest desire for the body of another to the sublime experience of becoming one with God.

Nicholl clearly favors the world view of Lewis over Freud. At least he shows that of the two, one was a much happier person than the other, and he backs this up from his own clinical experience. Believers are happier, more capable of coping with pain and adversity, and more forgiving of their own foibles.

What did I learn about the existence of God from this book? Nothing, really. What did I learn about the nature of reality from this book? Only that it is defined within each of us by our world view, which in turn is a combination of our thought processes and our sought after and inadvertent experiences.

So, these are my impressions just as I finished this book. Am I going to go through the double-dog-eared pages, at least, to give some examples of what struck me? I may, later, but for now I am very happy to put this book away and start on another one. One that promises to bring more enlightenment on the subject of the nature of reality and existence than was brought to me by these two remarkable characters.