

Freud vs. God

Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious by Paul C. Vitz.
New York: Guilford Press, 1988.

BETWEEN 1953 and 1957, Ernest Jones, friend and disciple of Freud, published his "official" biography, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. A three-volume study that borders on hagiography, it proclaims that Freud "went through life from beginning to end as a natural atheist... who saw no reason for believing in the existence of any supernatural Being and who felt no emotional need for such a belief." Jones's portrait of Freud, which has become etched on the minds of many, is that of a secularized Jew who accepted his ethnic identity but rejected all things associated with the basic beliefs of God's Chosen People. The standard interpretation of the Father of Psychoanalysis, accordingly, is that of a pessimistic free-thinker, an unrepentant atheist, a scientist-humanist, a skeptical realist. What, then, should be made of the substantial number of pro-religious comments, concerns, and relationships scattered throughout Freud's life and writings?

Persistently, and even obsessively, Freud had a life-long, deep involvement with matters religious. His concern with Judaism has been treated rather extensively, but not his personal and often positive relationship with Christianity. Such neglect is due to a large extent to an almost reflexive acceptance of Freud as anti-religious, in part to the fact that many of his letters and other biographical materials have only recently become available, and in large measure to an antipathy towards things Christian within contemporary psychological scholarship. Despite this neglect, anyone reasonably familiar with Freud's life and thought will grant that his relationship to Christianity was not of sim-

ple, uncomplicated rejection. Freud may have been a public atheist, but he certainly was not a simple, "natural" atheist.

This brilliant study, more than likely, will find a place among the most important works dealing with Freud's projection of his own dynamics into his theories. In essence, it demonstrates that Freud was deeply ambivalent about Christianity, and that such ambivalence brought into play strong opposing psychological forces. Since so much of the anti-religious character of Freud's thought has been well established and documented, what Paul Vitz has done is emphasize the other side of the coin. He develops the claim that Freud had a strong attraction to Christianity. A corollary emphasis treats of Freud's unconscious hostility toward the Faith, which, as Vitz details, was a consequence of a curious preoccupation with the Devil, Damnation, and the Anti-Christ. Analysis of all these substantial Christian—and anti-Christian—elements of Freud's thought furnishes a new framework for understanding major aspects of his personality and allows for a critical evaluation of his psychology of religion.

Biographical materials presented in Chapters One through Six contain references to the question of Freud's theories of religious belief, and they show in depth and detail

G.A. Cevasco is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University, New York. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, his publications include ten books and monographs as well as many essays and reviews. His latest book, *The Sitwells*, is a recent addition to the Twayne English Author Series.

how an early religious milieu directed the course of his life. The seventh and final chapter makes full use of the theoretical significance of biographical matters and addresses directly Freud's critique of religion. The purpose of such an approach, as Vitz so well puts it, "is more than just to fill out the life history of Freud . . . ; it is to show how the curious and sometimes traumatic events in the life of one small Jewish boy growing up in Central Europe over 100 years ago have cast a very long shadow over the religious life of the modern West."

Throughout his closely reasoned seven chapters, Vitz raises many questions. How important was the Christian milieu in which young Sigmund grew up? Was he secretly baptized? Did Christianity form part of the bedrock of his psyche and later contribute to his theories of psychoanalysis? When he was a child in Czechoslovakia did his Catholic nanny, who served as wet nurse and substitute mother, inculcate rudiments of the Faith? Why, all his life, was he so attracted to the solemn feasts of Easter and Pentecost? What led to the rejection of his father? Was young Sigmund sexually seduced?

Vitz investigates other puzzling aspects of Freud's life hitherto passed over by his biographers. To what extent, for example, did Franz Bretano influence Freud's thinking? Bretano, it must be recalled, had been ordained a priest in 1864, but after a personal crisis influenced by the First Vatican Council's declaration of papal infallibility, he was laicized in 1873. When Freud met Bretano at the University of Vienna, he was a prominent philosopher who did much to initiate phenomenology. Bretano was still a believer

who spoke of the Church with affection and reverence.

In his biography, Jones implies that the connection between Bretano and Freud was of minimal significance, but Vitz offers serious reasons to disagree with Jones and details meticulously the impact of Bretano upon Freud. Vitz also delves into several other perplexing issues, the most important of which are Freud's involvement with cocaine, his avid interest in literature, and the inception of his psychoanalytical theorizing. At every point, Vitz turns introspective eyes back onto Freud in order to expose the psychological motives for his rejection of God. Vitz even questions if Freud made a Faustian pact with the Devil.

Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious is a challenging contribution to scholarship. Anyone with even a slight interest in Freudian thought will find this study rewarding. The more serious student of the conflict between psychology and religion should declare this volume required reading. That Freud disproved religion, Vitz makes clear, is an overstated and oversimplified judgment bandied about by superficially educated and tragically uninformed individuals.

Vitz maintains, in fine, that Freud's anti-religious views were basically an expression of his own unconscious needs and traumatic childhood experiences: "Freud's religious neurosis was deeply satisfied by his theory that religion is an illusion." This explanation of Freud's rejection of religion, obviously, is not an interpretation restricted only to him. The analysis is general enough to have applicability to the misguided motives of many intellectuals today.