FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Faith of the Fatherless
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Professor of psychology at New York University, an atheist himself for twenty years, Paul Vitz effectively counters Freud's assertion that religious belief reflects a father complex. His argument that atheism reflects a different sort of father complex falters on the same ground.

Organized around vignettes of notable atheists and believers, the book contrasts the two groups according to the presence or absence of a good father-son relationship (few women appear). Nietzsche, Russell and Sartre lost their fathers early; Hobbes, Voltaire, Freud and H. G. Wells had abusive or weak fathers. Good paternal fortune is claimed for atheists, including Pascal, Kierkegaard, Schweitzer, Buber, etc. Vitz calls the latter a control group, but that does not necessarily make it so. Vitz has read and condensed many appealing biographies for this study. His biases are clear, and a different gallery of subjects, both atheists and believers, might be assembled to challenge his thesis.

The author blames the rise of atheism in modern times on moral decline and meaninglessness. Though noting that ninety percent of Americans still profess belief in God, he deplores the disappearance of God in public discourse: "we have become a nation of public and practical atheists." He concludes the book with a caution against ad hominem judgments based on psychology, yet leaves us, as Freud did, with a rather simplistic explanation of belief based on one major factor in family life.

Some major figures are missing. One, James Leuba, an influential American psychologist and religious skeptic, researched scientists? religious beliefs in the early part of the century. Before him, William James wrote Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), expressing a pragmatic view of religion. Otto Rank, who defected from Freud's inner circle, deals with the cultural aspects of Vitz's argument in Psychology and the Soul (1930; new translation, 1998).

To his credit, Vitz rebuts Freud's wholesale pathologizing of religion. He falls prey, however, to the opposite trap, pathologizing atheism, without ever showing that atheists are morally deficient, or that jails, for example, are disproportionately filled with them. Nonetheless he brings an energetic curiosity to bear on a stimulating topic. Is religious belief a product of our

relations with our fathers? The answer: a resounding “maybe.”

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