

## The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis's Journey to Faith

A Book Review by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

Having read *Planets in Peril*, David Downing's award-winning book on C.S. Lewis's space trilogy, I looked forward to reading his new book, *The Most Reluctant Convert*, the fascinating story of C.S. Lewis's journey to faith. I was not disappointed. The same qualities found in Downing's previous book are evident here—a thorough knowledge of C.S. Lewis, a clear writing style, and many helpful insights that are unique to Downing.



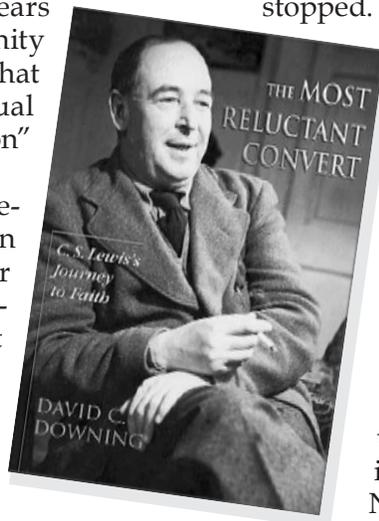
Dr. Art Lindsley

Downing starts his work with two contrasting quotes from C.S. Lewis. At age seventeen, Lewis wrote to longtime friend Arthur Greeves, "I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best." Fifteen years later, Lewis wrote to Arthur, "Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things' . . . namely, the actual incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection" (p. 11).

C.S. Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898. He had an idyllic early childhood. He and his older brother Warren played together, invented games, and read many books that lined the hallways and the attic. When he was four years old, he pointed to himself and said, "He is Jacksie," and refused to answer to any other name. Downing says that, "These carefree years held an almost mythic status in the mind of the adult Lewis" (p. 25). "Childhood" throughout his life is viewed as good and filled with joy. "Nurse" and "nursery" are associated with Lizzie Endicott (his nurse), as that which is simple, true, and good. His sense of joy described in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* took on great significance in his life.

The death of Lewis's mother while he was still young (age 9) ended the settled happiness of his childhood. He describes his loss of security in the imagery that "the great continent had sunk like Atlantis." There were now only "islands" of joy in the midst of an unsettled "sea."

Tragically, when Lewis's mother died, he in effect lost his father as well. Perhaps out of an inability to cope with the loss of his wife, Albert Lewis sent his two boys to a boarding school, whose headmaster, "Oldie," was later certified as insane. Lewis had gone to church some in his early life and continued in boarding school, but his sincere efforts soon ended. Lewis had gotten the idea that when you prayed you needed to mean what you said. When he said his evening prayers, he was always analyzing whether they were said rightly. Inevitably, they were not sincere enough, so he would start again and again and again. He would, he says, have gone crazy, had he not stopped.



This was the beginning of his "atheist" phase. Even though it is never wise to reduce people to psychological explanations, it is nevertheless accurate to say that psychological issues are contributing factors. Downing mentions Paul Vitz's book, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, in which Vitz turns the tables on the normal psychological charge of religious belief as a "crutch" to meet emotional needs. Vitz argues that such a view is a double-edged sword that can also be used to explain atheists' unbelief. He studies such militant atheists as Voltaire, Hume, Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, and others. He concludes that atheism of the strong

or intense type is to a substantial degree caused by the psychological needs of its advocates, usually related to defective father figures. Downing says that while you can take this kind of analysis only so far, it could be posited that at least one factor contributing to Lewis's emergent atheism might be the loss of his mother and his now absent and more volatile father.

Certainly there were many other factors drawing Lewis toward atheism. One was the lure of the occult. Lewis indicated that if the wrong person had come along he might have ended up a sorcerer or a lunatic. Another factor Lewis had to face was the problem of evil. He dwelt on the “Argument from Undesign” stated well by Lucretius. Had God designed the world, it would not be a world so frail and faulty as we see (p. 53).

Similar to atheist Bertrand Russell, Lewis came to believe in the meaninglessness of life and that we need to build our lives on the basis of “unyielding despair.” Lewis’s way of stating it was, “Nearly all I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real, I thought grim and meaningless” (p. 63). In his imagination, he loved to read about truth, goodness, and beauty, but in his reason he held to a rather dark view of life. One of his prep school friends says Lewis was a “riotously amusing atheist.” However, this tension between reason and imagination, between the hemispheres of his brain, continued to increase.

Once, before embarking on a long train ride, Lewis purchased a copy of George MacDonald’s book *Phantastes*. He was surprised by what happened during his reading. Something came off the pages and “baptized his imagination.” Although he couldn’t put this quality into words at that time, he later came to describe it as holiness.

Another experience that finally cured his lure toward the occult was Lewis’s personal observation of the decline of Dr. John Askins, Mrs. Moore’s brother. (Mrs. Moore, mother to Lewis’s college roommate “Paddy,” lived with Lewis and his brother after Paddy was killed in World War I) Askins had been wounded in World War I and never recovered physically or spiritually. Dr. Askins had become a psychoanalyst after the war and developed an obsession with spiritualism and contacting the dead. During one fourteen-day period, Lewis had to “hold him while he kicked and wallowed on the floor, screaming out that devils were tearing him and that he was at that moment falling into hell” (p. 112). While atheist Lewis was aware that there could be physical causes for Askins’ problems, he could not separate the man’s state from his passionate pursuit of the occult. Lewis decided to stick to the “beaten path, the approved road.” Walter Hooper says, “It would be difficult to exaggerate the effect of this experience on Lewis” (p. 113).

On the intellectual side of things, G.K. Chesterton had a significant influence on Lewis. As Lewis read *The Everlasting Man*, he appreciated Chesterton’s humor and was surprised by the power of his presentation. He began to feel that “Christianity was very

sensible ‘apart from its Christianity’” (p. 130). Lewis also found that he was drawn to many other authors that had this strange Christian twist—Spenser, Milton, Johnson, MacDonald, and others. In contrast, those with whom he theoretically agreed—Voltaire, Gibbon, Mill, Wells, and Shaw—seemed thin and “tinny.” On top of this, some of the brightest, most intelligent at Oxford were also “supernaturalists.” People like Neville Coghill, Hugo Dyson, and J.R.R. Tolkien were kindred spirits and also Christians. One by one, the arguments that were obstacles to faith were removed.

Once while riding on a bus in Oxford, Lewis had the sense that he was “holding something at bay, or shutting something out” (p. 131). He could either open the door or let it stay shut, but to open the door “meant the incalculable.” He finally submitted himself to God, the most “dejected and reluctant convert” in all England. This belief in God happened in 1929, but it was not until 1931 that he surrendered himself to Christ.

When Lewis finally came to Christ, he at last resolved the “dialectic of desire” he had been struggling with since childhood. Downing points out that Lewis’s first experience at Oxford was highly symbolic. When he exited the Oxford railway station for the first time, he was loaded down with luggage. Mistakenly, he started walking down the street in the wrong direction. As he kept walking, he grew disappointed at the rather plain houses and shops he found. Only when he reached the edge of town did he turn around to see the beautiful spires and towers that constitute Oxford. In telling this story, Lewis says, “This little adventure was an allegory of my whole life.” Boyhood was a “fall” from the joys of childhood. Growing up was even more of following the wrong way. The “path less taken” was a return to wonder and glory and a rejection of the mundane inanities of modern life (p. 153). He needed to look back in order to go forward. Good only comes by “undoing evil;” a wrong sum can be put right.

His faith changed his direction from “self-scrutiny” to “self-forgetfulness.” He rejected the “unsmiling concentration on the self” and was “taken out of my self” to love God and others (p. 156). Downing says: “The real story of Lewis’s conversion, then, is not about dramatic changes in a man’s career but about dramatic changes in the man.”

Walter Hooper calls Lewis the “most thoroughly converted man I ever met.” His journey from atheist to “reluctant convert” to influential writer, perhaps the most highly regarded Christian writer of our time, was something beyond even his imagination (p. 160).

While I have tried to capture a few of Downing's insights, it is, of course, much better to read the book yourself. Perhaps your appetite has been whetted to take up this book that combines clarity of style, depth of scholarship, and insights about Lewis's life. Enriching reading awaits you.

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