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A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

From the Summer 2017 issue of Knowing & Doing:



The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C.S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Christian Apologetics Part 1 of 3

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C.S. Lewis is probably the most influential practitioner of Christian apologetics over the last hundred years. According to his Oxford contemporary, the theologian and philosopher, Austin Farrer, Lewis was ‘the most successful apologist our days have seen.’¹ Works such as *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Surprised by Joy*, as well as his classic *Chronicles of Narnia*, have been read by millions of people round the world since they were first published in the 1940s and ‘50s.

In this essay I want to take a step back and look at the Lewis of the 1930s in order to examine some of the groundwork to his thinking that enabled him to become so effective an apologist. The titles I just listed are the famous flower of his life’s work: in what follows we will inspect the stem and indeed the root. Our examination will show that Lewis’s apologetics were successful not simply because the Christianity he presented was reasonable (although reasonable it certainly was, or at any rate was intended to be), but first and foremost because it was presented with imaginative skill and imaginative intent. Lewis had a profound respect for the imagination, and his thinking about and practice of imaginative apologetics constitute one of the main reasons why he is still a relevant, indeed a most timely, voice in the field. In a post-modern world, systematic or abstract or propositional apologetic strategies may often be of limited appeal because of suspicions about the supposed neutrality or utility of ‘reason’. Lewis himself gave considerable thought to the relations between reason and imagination and it is this that I propose to explore. As someone trained in literary history and criticism and equipped with talents as a poet and novelist, Lewis inevitably thought long and hard about the role of imagination, but he also taught philosophy at Oxford for a period and was a (non-professional) theologian of wide reading, so he gave considerable attention also to the claims of reason. When he turned to apologetics, that thinking about imagination and reason naturally informed his whole approach and only if we understand his thinking about both faculties and the way the



inter-relate with each other and with the life of faith will we gain a secure grasp of his effectiveness as an apologist.

Definitions

Apologetics is usually defined as ‘a reasoned defence’. In Lewis’s view, reason could only operate if it was first supplied with materials to reason about, and it was imagination’s task to supply those materials. Therefore, apologetics was necessarily and foundationally imaginative.

In order to provide an easy—and amusing—introduction to Lewis’s thinking on this subject, let me relate the following (untrue) story.

One day I took my car into the repair garage for its annual overhaul. At the end of the repair job, I collected the car and, as I was driving it out of the garage forecourt, realised I had forgotten to check on something, so I stopped and rolled down my window and called over my shoulder to Billy, the car mechanic, and asked, ‘Is my rear indicator light working?’ To which he replied, ‘Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes.’



This little exchange neatly encapsulates Lewis’s definition of imagination. ‘Imagination’ is a notoriously slippery term and different thinkers and writers define it in very different ways. According to Lewis, imagination is simply ‘the organ of meaning’.¹

Billy the car mechanic’s ‘organ of meaning’ was sadly deficient. A flashing phenomenon, as far as he was concerned, could have only one possible meaning: electrical failure. He was able to see the raw data—light on, light off, light on—but was unable to discover the correct meaning of those brute facts. He had sight, but no insight. He focussed on externals and failed to perceive their inner significance.

Not that Billy was entirely without the capacity to perceive meaning. He knew the basic meaning of electrical circuits. He knew that when a light shines a connection has been made and when a light goes out a connection has been broken. But he was unable to find a meaning in the *relationship* between a completed and a broken electrical circuit, imaginatively incapable of perceiving that, in this case, an intermittent light means ‘indicator’, not ‘insecure connection’.

Lewis definition of imagination as ‘the organ of meaning’ appears in an important but much overlooked essay called ‘Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare’, which was first published in 1939. (The odd title may have had something to do with why it has been so overlooked.) Mainly concerned with how metaphors are created and used, the essay also contains some larger scale epistemological observations. As well as defining imagination as the organ of meaning, Lewis defines the opposite of meaning as not error but nonsense. Things must rise up out of the swamp of nonsense into the realm of meaning if the imagination is to get any handle on them. Only then can we begin to judge whether their meanings are true or false. Before something can be either true or false it must mean. Even a lie means something and a lie understood as a lie can be most instructive. Only nonsensical things mean nothing.

Back to Billy and the car. Not every flashing light on a car is meaningful. Sometimes there really are loose connections, whose occasional bursts of luminosity, flickering on and off in no particular rhythm, we should best describe as nonsensical: the connections are arbitrary, random, meaningless. If the connections were regular or patterned, however, we would be inclined to conclude that they were significant, meaningful. But what kind of meaning would they have? A true meaning, showing that the driver was about to make a turning? Or a false meaning, showing that the driver had forgotten to cancel the lever? It is human reason, in Lewis’s view, that judges between meanings, helping us to differentiate those meanings that are true and illuminating from those which are false and deceptive.

To summarise his definitions: reason is ‘the natural organ of truth’; imagination is ‘the organ of meaning’ and meaning itself is ‘the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood’³. Imagination is therefore, for Lewis, ‘the prius of truth’⁴: before something can be either true or false, it must mean.

Meaning appears to mean the relation between the physical and the psychic or psychological, ‘the psycho-physical parallelism (or more)’ which characterises the universe⁵, linking bodies in space and time with spiritual realities (‘spiritual’ meaning not just psychological, but also rational and, ultimately, pneumatological). A true meaning would be a complete, unimpaired, healthy, fruitful psycho-physical relationship.

Imagination in practice

Leaving definitions to one side, let us turn now to Lewis’s understanding of Christianity and look at the role played by imagination in his journey towards acceptance of the faith. It is worth doing this because his theoretical understanding of the relationship between imagination and truth seems to be strongly related to his personal experience, insofar as we can reconstruct it from the history of his Christian conversion.

Lewis’s own imagination was, he said, ‘baptized’ in a certain sense when, in the second half of his teens, he read a book called *Phantastes* by the nineteenth century Scottish writer, George MacDonald. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis explains how his early life had been haunted by powerful, fugitive sensations of longing and beauty, experiences which he labels ‘joy’, similar to what the German romantics would have called *sehnsucht* (yearning). The effect that *Phantastes* had upon him was somehow to make these moments less transitory. He writes:



*Up till now each visitation of Joy had left the common world momentarily a desert ... Even when real clouds or trees had been the material of the vision, they had been so only by reminding me of another world; and I did not like the return to ours. But now [as I read Phantastes] I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow ... In the depth of my disgraces, in the then invincible ignorance of my intellect, all this was given me without asking, even without consent. That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying Phantastes.*⁶

We do not have time to go further into *Phantastes* or George MacDonald and investigate more precisely why this book and its author had such an impact on Lewis’s imagination. We just need to note that it happened. What *Phantastes* did was to awaken Lewis’s imaginative capacity for understanding ‘holiness’, so he said. For the first time, he was able to attach some meaning to the idea of sanctification, the sanctification of all common everyday things, not by throwing them out in order to make room for some transcendent but alien reality, still less by replacing them with an irrational, fantastic never-never land, but by changing their *meaning* from the inside, transforming them, illuminating them with a different light.

‘That night,’ Lewis records, ‘my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took a little longer.’ In fact, it took about another fifteen years for the rest of him to be baptized⁷ and for his whole outlook, not just his imaginative outlook, to be converted.

He became a Christian when he was 32 years old and it is imperative to note that, at the decisive moment, it was his imagination that first had to be addressed; it was through his imagination that his reason and, ultimately, his will were transformed. The organ of meaning had to be enrolled before his ‘natural organ of truth’ could get to

work; and both imagination and reason had to be satisfied before the core part of him, his ‘command centre’, the will, could turn about and receive supernatural truth.

The immediate human cause of his conversion was a long night-time conversation with two good friends, J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, on the subject of Christianity, metaphor, and myth. In a letter to a third friend, Arthur Greeves, Lewis recounted the substance of the conversation and it is clear that questions of meaning—that is to say, of imagination,—were at the root of it.

Lewis’s whole problem with Christianity, at that stage, was fundamentally imaginative. As he wrote to Greeves, ‘What has been holding me back ... has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing what the doctrine *meant*.’⁸ Tolkien and Dyson showed him that Christian doctrines are not the main thing about Christianity. Doctrines are *translations* into concepts and ideas of that which God has already expressed in ‘a language more adequate: namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection’⁹ of Christ. The primary language of Christianity is a lived language, the real, historical, visible, tangible language of an actual person being born, dying, and living again in a new, ineffably transformed way.

When Lewis realised this, he began to gain an understanding of what Christianity really meant, because he was already fascinated—he had been fascinated from childhood,—by stories of dying and rising gods. In many ancient mythologies there are stories of characters who die and go down into the underworld and whose death achieves or reveals something back here on earth: new life in the crops, for instance, or sunrise, or the coming of spring. Lewis had always found the heart of these pagan stories—he mentions those of Adonis, Bacchus, Balder, among others,—to be ‘profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose ‘what it meant’.’¹⁰

The difference between his attitude to Christianity and his attitude to the pagan myths was that, with the latter, he did not try officiously to explain them: these stories he considered to be fruitful enough in their own terms. They were myths that had to be accepted as saying something in their own way, not treated as a kind of allegory and translated into something less, something secondary, mere ‘doctrines’. By accepting that Christianity too was primarily to be understood in its own terms as a story, *before* its translation into a codified doctrinal system, Lewis had moved, we might say, from an analytic to a religious perspective. *Analysis* means literally ‘loosening up’, while *religion* means something like ‘tying back up’,—re-ligamenting, if you like. Doctrines, though useful, are the product of analytical dissection; they recast the original, equivocal, historical material into abstract, less fully realised categories of meaning. In short, doctrines are not as richly meaningful as that which they are doctrines about. By coming to this conclusion, Lewis anticipated by several decades the turn to ‘narrative theology’ that would characterise much later twentieth century theological thinking.

When Lewis understood that the story recounted in the Gospels, rather than the commentary upon and outworking of that story in the Epistles, was the essence of Christianity’s meaning and that the Christ-story could be approached in a way similar to the way he approached pagan myths, it was a huge breakthrough for him. Christianity, he now saw, was a ‘true myth’ whereas pagan myths were ‘men’s myths’.¹¹ In paganism God expressed Himself in an unfocussed way through the images which human imaginations deployed in order to tell stories about the world; but in the story of Christ Lewis located ‘God’s myth’,¹²—the story in which God directly expressed Himself through a real, historical life of a particular man, in a particular time, in a particular place,—Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, crucified under Pontius Pilate outside Jerusalem, circa A.D. 33. That there were certain similarities between pagan myths and the true myth did not lead Lewis to conclude, ‘So much the worse for Christianity’; it led him to conclude ‘So much the better for Paganism.’¹³ Paganism contained a good deal of meaning that was realised, consummated, and perfected in Christ.



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In a sense, Lewis had found in pagan myths what Christ himself had said could be found in the Old Testament story of Jonah. Jesus told the Pharisees: 'No sign will be given this generation except the sign of Jonah: for as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and nights' (Matthew 12:39-40). Jonah's descent and re-ascent are a meaningful prefiguration of Christ's own death and resurrection. For Lewis, pagan myths amounted to a similar sort of Christotypical prefiguration.

A couple of weeks after his conversation with Tolkien and Dyson, Lewis passed from being nearly certain that Christianity was true to being certain, but the important thing to notice, for our present purposes, is that the first hurdle Lewis had to clear before he could accept the truth of Christianity was an imaginative hurdle; his 'organ of meaning' had to be attended to and satisfied. Although imagination, in Lewis's thinking, is a 'lower' thing than reason, it is not for that reason to be ignored; on the contrary, it is to be all the more honoured. 'The highest does not stand without the lowest' was a maxim from *The Imitation of Christ* that he greatly valued¹⁴ and rational assent to Christianity cannot occur unless there is some low 'stuff', some meaningful content, to which the higher faculty of reason may grant assent. Reason cannot operate *without* imagination. ■■

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Notes:

¹ Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (London: A. & C. Black, 1967) 156. Cf. 'almost certainly the most influential religious author of the twentieth century, in English or any other language', according to Robert MacSwain, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 3.

² 'Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare', *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 265.

³ 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', *Selected Literary Essays*, 265.

⁴ Letter to Owen Barfield, 27 May 1928, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume I*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2000) 762.

⁵ 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', *Selected Literary Essays*, 265.

⁶ *Surprised by Joy* (Glasgow, Collins, 1982) 146.

⁷ Lewis had been baptized as an infant (29 January 1899), so 'baptized' here does not mean the literal ritual, but the spiritual realisation in Lewis's own adult consciousness of that ceremonial and sacramental washing.

⁸ Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, *Collected Letters, Volume I*, 976.

⁹ Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, *Collected Letters, Volume I*, 977.

¹⁰ Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, *Collected Letters, Volume I*, 977.

¹¹ Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, *Collected Letters, Volume I*, 977.

¹² Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931, *Collected Letters, Volume I*, 977.

¹³ 'Is Theology Poetry?', *C.S. Lewis, Essay Collection*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000) 15.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Collins, 1984) 75; *The Four Loves* (Glasgow: Collins, 1989) 9, 14, 15, 20, 81, 94

For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.

C.S. Lewis

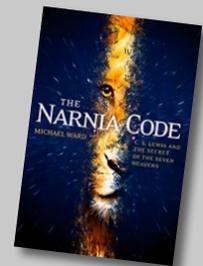


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RECOMMENDED READING

Michael Ward, *The Narnia Code: C. S. Lewis and the Secret of the Seven Heavens* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)

Millions of readers have been captivated by C.S. Lewis's famed *Chronicles of Narnia*, but why? What is it about these seven books that makes them so appealing? For more than half a century, scholars have attempted to find the organizing key—the “secret code”—to the beloved series, but it has remained a mystery. Until now. In *The Narnia Code*, Michael Ward takes the reader through each of the seven Narnia books and reveals how each story embodies and expresses the characteristics of one of the seven planets of medieval cosmology—Jupiter, Mars, Sol, Luna, Mercury, Venus and Saturn—planets which Lewis described as “spiritual symbols of permanent value.” How does medieval cosmology relate to the Christian underpinnings of the series? How did it impact Lewis's depiction of Aslan, the Christlike character at the heart of the books? And why did Lewis keep this planetary inspiration a secret? Originally a ground-breaking scholarly work called *Planet Narnia*, this more accessible adaptation will answer all the questions.



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