

Reflections

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The Great Iconoclast



In their book *The Surprising Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, Jerry Root and Mark Neal note a statement by Lewis in his book *A Grief Observed* that “Reality is Iconoclastic.” They argue that it is “Lewis’s biggest idea,” one “alluded to in every book he wrote.” They observe that an iconoclast is “somebody who breaks idols” and explain that in stating reality is iconoclastic, “Lewis reminds us that God, in divine mercy, kicks out the walls of any temples we may build because God wants to give us more of himself.”¹ An excerpt from Lewis’s book, written while he was mourning the death of his wife, follows.

It doesn’t matter that all the photographs of H. are bad. It doesn’t matter—not much—if my memory of her is imperfect. Images, whether on paper or in the mind, are not important for themselves. Merely links. Take a parallel from an infinitely higher sphere. Tomorrow morning a priest will give me a little round, thin, cold, tasteless wafer. Is it a disadvantage—is it not in some ways an advantage—that it can’t pretend the least *resemblance* to that with which it unites me?

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I need Christ, not something that resembles Him. I want H., not something that is like her. A really good photograph might become in the end a snare, a horror, and an obstacle. Images, I must suppose, have their use or they would not have been so popular. (It makes little difference whether they are pictures and statues outside the mind or imaginative constructions within it.) To me, however, their danger is more obvious. Images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are ‘offended’ by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not. But the same thing happens in our private prayers.

All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her foursquare and independent reality. And this, not any image or memory, is what we are to love still, after she is dead. But ‘this’ is not now imaginable. In that respect H. and all the dead are like God. In that respect loving her has become, in its measure, like loving Him. In both cases I must stretch out the arms and hands of love—its eyes cannot

here be used—to the reality, through—across—all the changeful phantasmagoria of my thoughts, passions, and imaginings. I mustn’t sit down content with the phantasmagoria itself and worship that for Him, or love that for her.

Not my idea of God, but God. Not my idea of H., but H. Yes, and also not my idea of my neighbour, but my neighbour. For don’t we often make this mistake as regards people who are still alive—who are with us in the same room? Talking and acting not to the man himself but to the picture—almost the *précis*—we’ve made of Him in our own minds? And he has to depart from it pretty widely before we even notice the fact. In real life—that’s one way it differs from novels—his words and acts are, if we observe closely, hardly ever quite ‘in character’, that is, in what we call his character. There’s always a card in his hand we didn’t know about.²

Let us be thankful that we worship a God whose greatness and love are beyond measure.



“Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.”
PSALM 145:3 (NIV)

¹ Jerry Root and Mark Neal, *The Surprising Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2015), p. 60.

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1961), pp. 51-53 (some paragraphs combined).

