

THE APOLOGETICS OF
A TALKING FAUN:

A Sketch of C. S. Lewis



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C.S. LEWIS***

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MMXI

“WELL, AT ANY RATE, WE NOW HAVE LESS CHANCE OF DYING OF CANCER,” quipped Jack in response to the news of Hitler’s invasion of Poland. It was August 1939. C.S. Lewis, known to his friends simply as “Jack,” along with his brother Warnie, Robert Havard, and Hugo Dyson had just returned from a boating trip on the Thames River. The four men now dined at the Clarendon Hotel with the knowledge that their country would soon be at war.

The clash with Germany launched Lewis onto an international platform calling upon his clear and simple presentation of the gospel. His apologetic approach, tailor-made for men at war, took its toll on the evangelist and found new expression after the fall of the Führer.

Lewis’ faith was forged in fellowship. J.R.R. Tolkien, along with Dyson, walked Jack down the pathway to faith in Christ in 1931. They, along with select others, took on the name “The Inklings.” First a student led organization; now an elite, invite-only, tight-knit circle of friends. It was, undoubtedly, one of history’s most potent brain trusts. They met twice a week for the consumption of alcohol, the smoking of tobacco, and the exchange of important ideas. But none of those ideas would be timelier, or more influential, than those belonging to C.S. Lewis.

Months before, Tolkien read to the group an excerpt from his new work, “The Fellowship of the Ring.” In return, Lewis shared from a manuscript commissioned by Geofrey Bles on the topic of pain. *The Problem of Pain*, published in 1940, is perhaps his most influential work; not because it is the most widely known or read, but because it opened the door for everything else. Lewis dedicated the book to the Inklings and penned these words in his introduction, “I have believed myself to be re-stating ancient and orthodox doctrines.” Re-stating age-old truths in compelling new ways became the hallmark of his apologetic.

MERE CHRISTIANITY WAS BORN IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME. Britain, on the brink of war, was in need of a popularizer of Christian thought: a beacon of gospel light. As Lewis’ first biographer said of him, “If Christianity revives in England and America it will not be the work of one man – and perhaps not really the work of man at all. But the odds are that it will bear the strong traces of the Gospel according to C.S. Lewis.” While Lewis lamented this line, the title of the biography could not have been more appropriate: *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Sceptics*.

It was a dark time. Literally. The windows at the Kilns (Lewis' home) were covered with dark fabric at night to hide the exposed light from potential German bombers. This proved to be unnecessary as Hitler preserved Oxford with the plan to make it his capital should Germany successfully capture England. London, on the other hand, received no mercy.

Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, delivered a prophetic speech shortly after the invasion of Poland by the title "Creed or Chaos." These words frame the events that would follow. Hitler brought chaos: Within a few months of Sayers' presentation, Germany initiated 76 consecutive nights of intense bombing focused on London. Lewis brought creed: The British Broadcast Company, based out of London, invited the Oxford don to deliver a series on simple Christianity.

"Despite the chaos," writes former BBC radio journalist Justin Phillips, "London continued to function as a commercial centre." Radio programs were broadcasted from war-torn London without interruption, even while taking several direct hits from the German *Luftwaffe* to their various offices. Lewis visited the BBC for his first microphone test in May 1941. Shortly thereafter London received the worst night of bombing to date, with over 1,400 casualties. Two days later, Lewis completed and sent the outline for the first of his radio talks.

In a darkened chapel back in Oxford Lewis could barely make out his sermon notes. In a baritone voice that would soon be amplified across Europe, he delivered a homily

entitled "None Other Gods: Culture in Wartime." As a former soldier and atheist during his service in WWI, he understood the challenge before him. He would defend Christianity in the midst of a bloody battle. Prophetically, in his sermon, he said, "The intellectual life is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us." The road appointed for Lewis would lead him back to London on many occasions.

His goal in the radio addresses was to present the core of Christian belief; an endeavor he considered to be "pre-evangelism." This strategy seemed appropriate since James Welch, director of BBC's religious broadcasting, estimated that two-thirds of their listeners were generally indifferent to the faith. According to one study of British soldiers, less than twenty-five percent of the troops knew the meaning of Easter. Lewis had his work cut out for him.

In London he addressed the world from behind a microphone. And across the UK he ministered to weary men and women of the Royal Air Force lecturing on the weekends—what he called his "war work." At home in Oxford he led the Socratic Club by moderating debates on the Christian faith. It was apologetics on every front. And it took its toll. As he described, "One felt all the time as if one had just played a game of football — aching all over." As an athlete is not without opponents, Lewis was not without his share of critics.

SOME WITHIN OXFORD'S ACADEMIC GUILD VIEWED LEWIS' SUCCESS WITH SUSPICION AND CONDESCENSION. Time Magazine's 1947 cover story captured this sentiment: "Outside his own Christian circle, Lewis is not particularly popular with his Oxford colleagues. Some resent his large student following. Others criticize his 'cheap' performances on the BBC. . . . But their most serious charge is that Lewis' theological pamphleteering is a kind of academic heresy." His heresy was Christianity. And his methodology for presenting it and defending it was undergoing a transformation in post-war England.

At the Socratic Club, shortly after the Time interview, Lewis' apologetics were challenged publicly. His book *Miracles* contained the argument that naturalism is self-refuting. Female philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe took issue with Lewis' logic. Blowing a smoke ring from her cigar, she appeared confident she had won the debate.

Lewis' friend, and fellow Inkling, George Sayer, summarized the event with these words:

"He [Lewis] told me he had been proved wrong . . . The debate had been a humiliating experience, but perhaps it was ultimately good for him . . . 'I can never write another book of that sort,' he said to me of Miracles. And he never did."

As a result of the exchange, Lewis rewrote portions of *Miracles* and changed one chapter title from "The Self Contradiction of Naturalism" to "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism." It should be noted, however, that Lewis was refining his argument, not retreating from it.

In contrast to Sayer, Anscombe provides a very different perspective of the event:

The fact that Lewis rewrote that chapter, and rewrote it so that it now has these qualities, shows his honesty and seriousness. The meeting of the Socratic Club at which I read my paper has been described by several of his friends as a horrible and shocking experience, which upset him very much. Neither Dr. Havard (who had Lewis and me to dinner a few weeks later) nor Professor Jack Bennett remembered any such feelings on Lewis' part."

While Sayer's account of the evening appears overstated, he was right about one thing: Lewis never wrote another direct apologetic work. He focused the rest of his writing career on literary, fictional, biographical, and devotional material. The loyal fan of Lewis' work should not despair—if Lewis was falling back from his arguments it could mean only one thing: Aslan was on the move.

HIS LUCID DEFENSE OF THE FAITH PROVED MOST SUCCESSFUL DURING THE WAR YEARS, BUT MUST IT TAKE A NEW FORM IN PEACE TIME? Was a new strategy now in order? One of Lewis' first public sermons provides a helpful framework for considering such questions:

"...we may come to love knowledge – our knowing – more than the thing known: to delight not in the exercise of our talents but in the fact that they are ours, or even in the reputation they bring us. Every success in the scholar's life increases this danger. If it becomes irresistible, he must give up his scholarly work. The time for plucking out the right eye has arrived."

Perhaps Lewis had come to such a time as this. Over Easter in 1945, a month before victory would be declared in Europe, Lewis told a group of youth workers, "I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate." This was not a sign of surrender, but a word of caution and encouragement for emerging apologists:

"That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another's continual help — oremus pro invicem [Let us pray for each other]."

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If they were reticent of how to pray for Lewis they might have consulted his poem, "Apologist's Evening Prayer," penned in the midst of his early popularity, which voiced a similar concern:

*From all my lame defeats and oh! much more
From all the victories that I seemed to score;
From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.
Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead
Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.
From all my thoughts, even from my thoughts of Thee,
O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free.
Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye,
Take me from all my trumpery lest I die.*

IF LEWIS WAS AT ALL DISCOURAGED IN HIS EARLIER EVANGELISTIC ENDEAVORS, IT COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO HIS LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE LONG-REACHING INFLUENCE OF HIS APOLOGETIC WORK. Only eternity will tell the true tale of Lewis' legacy.

Mere Christianity has emerged as timeless classic for believers, a reliable guide for seekers, and a formidable opponent for antagonists. This single work has contributed to countless life transformations. By way of example, the founder of Domino's Pizza, and former owner of the Detroit Lions, upon reading Lewis' description of pride as the "Great Sin," was compelled to give his fortune to charity. Lewis' impact has also reverberated through the scientific guild: World-renowned scientist, Francis Collins, as a result of Lewis' moral argument for God, renounced his atheism and embraced the gospel.

While *Mere Christianity* was published in 1952, it was actually a collection of his radio talks from the war. Before the ink would dry on the printed page, his approach had already taken on a new genre. In Lewis' post-war writings one will find his witness, not so much in didactic prose, but in a magical world of talking animals.

"But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world," Lewis wrote of the power of using fiction to present truth, "stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons?" Lewis thought so. And henceforth he focused his creative efforts on smuggling theology behind enemy lines.

That's why Lewis explained to Carl F. H. Henry, in a letter written in 1955, why he must decline the invitation to write for the first issue of *Christianity Today*:

"I wish your project heartily well, but can't write you articles. My thought and talent (such as they are) now flow in different, though I trust not less Christian, channels, and I do not think I am at all likely to write more directly theological pieces . . . If I am now good for any thing it is for catching the reader unawares - thro' fiction and symbol. I have done what I could in the way of frontal attacks, but I now feel quite sure those days are over."

The close of the war brought with it an end to Lewis' direct theological and apologetic writings. Though Britain was at peace, Lewis would continue to fight another battle until his death in 1963. Like the deep magic of Narnia, this was not a battle with flesh and blood but with powers and principalities. From radio talks to talking fauns, the excellent life of C.S. Lewis was devoted to the advancement of the gospel.

And though dead, yet still he speaks.

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A great resource for evaluating the debate with G.E.M. Anscombe and Lewis' revision of *Miracles* is available at: www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendices.pdf.


**SERIOUS THOUGHTS FROM
A PSEUDO-INTELLECTUAL**



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