

C. S. Lewis

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# CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS

by  
C. S. LEWIS

Edited by  
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## THE PSALMS

The dominant impression I get from reading the Psalms is one of antiquity. I seem to be looking into a deep pit of time, but looking through a lens which brings the figures who inhabit that depth up close to my eye. In that momentary proximity they are almost shockingly alien; creatures of unrestrained emotion, wallowing in self-pity, sobbing, cursing, screaming in exultation, clashing uncouth weapons or dancing to the din of strange musical instruments. Yet, side by side with this, there is also a different image in my mind: Anglican choirs, well laundered surplices, soapy boys' faces, hassocks, an organ, prayer-books, and perhaps the smell of new-mown graveyard grass coming in with the sunlight through an open door. Sometimes the one, sometimes the other, impression grows faint, but neither, perhaps, ever quite disappears. The irony reaches its height when a boy soloist sings in that treble which is so beautifully free from all personal emotion the words whereby ancient warriors lashed themselves with frenzy against their enemies; and does this in the service of the God of Love, and himself, meanwhile, perhaps thinks neither of that God nor of ancient wars but of 'bullseyes' and the Comics. This irony, this double or treble vision, is part of the pleasure. I begin to suspect that it is part of the profit too.

How old the Psalms, as we now have them, really are is a question for the scholars. I am told there is one (No. 18) which might really have come down from the age of David himself; that is, from the tenth century B.C. Most of them, however, are said to be 'post exilic'; the book was put together when the Hebrews, long exiled in Babylonia, were repatriated by that enlightened ruler, Cyrus of Persia. This would bring us down to the sixth century. How much earlier material the book took in is uncertain. Perhaps for our present purpose it does not greatly matter. The whole spirit and technique and the characteristic attitudes in the Psalms we have might be very like those of much older sacred poetry which is now lost. We know that they had

such poetry; they must have been already famous for that art when their Babylonian conquerors (see No. 137) asked them for a specimen. And some very early pieces occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. Deborah's song of triumph over Sisera in Judges V might be as old as the battle that gave rise to it back in the thirteenth century. If the Hebrews were conservative in such matters then sixth century poems may be very like those of their ancestors. And we know they were conservative. One can see that by leaping forward six centuries into the New Testament and reading the *Magnificat*. The Virgin has something other (and more momentous) to say than the old Psalmists; but what she utters is quite unmistakably a psalm. The style, the dwelling on Covenant, the delight in the vindication of the poor, are all perfectly true to the old model. So might the old model have been true to one yet older. For poetry of that sort did not, like ours, seek to express those things in which individuals differ, and did not aim at novelty. Even if the Psalms we read were all composed as late as the sixth century B.C., in reading them I suspect that we have our hands on the near end of a living cord that stretches far back into the past.

In most moods the spirit of the Psalms feels to me more alien than that of the oldest Greek literature. But that is not an affair of dates. Distance in temper does not always coincide with distance in time. To most of us, perhaps to all of us at most times (unless we are either very uneducated or very holy or, as might be, both) the civilization that descends from Greece and Rome is closer, more congenial, than what we inherit from ancient Israel. The very words and concepts which we use for science, philosophy, criticism, government, grammar, are all Graeco-Roman. It is this, and not Israel, that has made us, in the ordinary sense, 'civilized'. But no Christian can read the Bible without discovering that these ancient Hebrews, generally so remote, may at any moment turn out to be our brothers in a sense in which no Greek or Roman ever was. What a dull, remote thing, for example, the Book of Proverbs seems at a first glance: bearded Orientals uttering endless platitudes as if in a parody of the *Arabian Nights*. Compared with Plato or Aristotle—compared even with Xenophon—it is not *thought* at all. Then, suddenly, just as you are going to give it up, your eye falls on the words, 'If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he be thirsty give him water to drink' (xxv, 21).

One rubs one's eyes. So they were saying that already. They knew that so long before Christ came. There is nothing like it in Greek, nor, if my memory serves me, in Confucius. And this is the sort of surprise we shall often get in the Psalms. These strange, alien figures may at any moment show that, in spiritual descent (as opposed to cultural) it is they, after all, who are our ancestors and the classical nations who are alien. Conversely, in reading the classics we sometimes have the opposite surprise. Those loved authors, so civilized, tolerant, humane, and enlightened, every now and then reveal that they are divided from us by a gulf. Hence the eternal, roguish tittering about pederasty in Plato or the hard pride that makes Aristotle's *Ethics* in places almost comic. We begin to doubt whether any one of them (even Virgil himself) if we could recall him from the dead might not, in the first hour's conversation, let out something that would utterly estrange us.

I do not at all mean that the Hebrews were just 'better' than the Greeks and the Romans. On the contrary we shall find in the Psalms expressions of a cruelty more vindictive and a self-righteousness more complete than anything in the classics. If we ignore such passages and read only a few selected favourite Psalms, we miss the point. For the point is precisely this: that these same fanatic and homicidal Hebrews, and not the more enlightened peoples, again and again—for brief moments—reach a Christian level of spirituality. It is not that they are better or worse than the Pagans, but that they are both better and worse. One is forced to recognize that, in one respect, these alien poets are our predecessors, and the only predecessors we can find in all antiquity. They have something the Pagans have not. They know something of which Socrates was ignorant. This Something does not seem to us to arise at all naturally from what else we can see of their character. It looks like something that has been given them from outside; in fact, like what it professes to be, a revelation. Their claim to be the 'Chosen' people is strong.

We may, indeed, be surprised at the choice. If we had been allowed to see the world as it was, say, in the fifteenth century B.C., and asked to guess which of the stocks then existing was going to be entrusted with the consciousness of God and with the transmission of that blood which would one day produce a body for the incarnation of God Himself, I do not think many of us would

have guessed right. (I think the Egyptians would have been my own favourite.)

A similar strangeness meets us elsewhere. The raw material out of which a thing is made is not always that which would seem most promising to one who does not understand the process. There is nothing hard, brittle, or transparent about the ingredients of glass. Again, to come nearer to the present matter, do not our own personal ancestors, our family, seem at first rather improbable? Later, as we begin to recognize the heredity that works in us, we understand. But surely not at first. What young man feels 'These are exactly the sort of people whose son (or grandson, or descendant) I might be expected to be'? For usually, in early life, the people with whom one seems to have most in common, the people who share one's interests, the 'men of one's own totem', are not one's relatives, so that the idea of having been born into the wrong family is an attractive myth. (We are delighted when the hero, in *Siegfried*, forces the dwarf to confess that he is not his son.) The thing one is made out of is not necessarily like oneself (still less, like one's idea of that self) and looks at first even more unlike than it really is. It may be so with the origins of our species. The Evolutionists say we descend from 'anthropoids', creatures akin to apes. Is it (at first sight) the descent we would have chosen? If an intelligence such as ours had looked at the pre-human world and been told that one of the species then in existence was to be raised to rational and spiritual status and at last behold its Creator face to face, would he have picked the winner? Not unless it realized the importance of its hand-like paws; just as one would not guess the ingredients of glass unless one knew some chemistry. So we, because of something we do not know, are bewildered to find the ancient Hebrews 'chosen' as they were.

From this point of view there is no better psalm to begin with than No. 109. It ends with a verse which every Christian can at once make his own: the Lord is 'the prisoner's friend', standing by the poor (or friendless) to save him from unjust judges. This is one of the characteristic notes of the Psalms and one of the things for which we love them. It anticipates the temper of the *Magnificat*. It is hardly to be paralleled in Pagan literature (the Greek gods were very active in casting down the proud, but hardly in raising the humble). It will commend itself even to a modern unbeliever



of good will; he may<sup>m</sup> call it wishful thinking, but he will respect the wish. In a word, if we read only the last verse we should feel in full sympathy with this psalmist. But the moment we look back at what precedes that verse, he turns out to be removed from us by infinite distances; or, worse still, to be loathsomely akin to that in us which it is the main business of life to purge away. Psalm 109 is as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written. The poet has a detailed programme for his enemy which he hopes God will carry out. The enemy is to be placed under a wicked ruler. He is to have 'an accuser' perpetually at his side: whether an evil spirit, a 'Satan', as our Prayer Book version renders it, or merely a human accuser—a spy, an *agent provocateur*, a member of the secret police (v. 5). If the enemy attempts to have any religious life, this, far from improving his position, must make him even worse: 'let his prayer be turned into sin' (v. 6). And after his death—which had better, please, be early (v. 7)—his widow and children and descendants are to live in unrelieved misery (vv. 8–12). What makes our blood run cold, even more than the unrestrained vindictiveness, is the writer's untroubled conscience. He has no qualms, scruples, or reservations; no shame. He gives hatred free rein—encourages and spurs it on—in a sort of ghastly innocence. He offers these feelings, just as they are, to God, never doubting that they will be acceptable: turning straight from the maledictions to 'Deal thou with me, O Lord God, according unto thy Name: for sweet is thy mercy' (v. 20).

The man himself, of course, lived very long ago. His injuries may have been (humanly speaking) beyond endurance. He was doubtless a hot-blooded barbarian, more like a modern child than a modern man. And though we believe (and can even see from the last verse) that some knowledge of the real God had come to his race, yet he lived in the cold of the year, the early spring of Revelation, and those first gleams of knowledge were like snow drops, exposed to the frosts. For him, then, there may have been excuses. But we—what good can we find in reading such stuff?

One good, certainly. We have here an uninhibited expression of those feelings which oppression and injustice naturally produce. The psalm is a portrait: under it should be written 'This is what you make of a man by ill-treating him.' In a modern child or savage the results might be exactly the same. In a modern,

Western European adult—especially if he were a professing Christian—they would be more sophisticated; disguised as a disinterested love of justice, claiming to be concerned with the good of society. But under that disguise, and none the better for it in the sight of God, the feelings might still be there. (I am thinking of a total stranger who forwarded to me a letter written to her in denigration of myself by another total stranger, because, as she said, ‘she felt it her duty’.) Now in a case of what we ordinarily call ‘seduction’ (that is, sexual seduction) we should think it monstrous to dwell on the guilt of the party who yielded to temptation and ignore that of the party who tempted. But every injury or oppression is equally a temptation, a temptation to hatred, and in that sense a seduction. Whenever we have wronged our fellow man, we have tempted him to be such a man as wrote Psalm 109. We may have repented of our wrong: we do not always know if he has repented of his hatred. How do accounts now stand between us if he has not?

I do not know the answer to that question. But I am inclined to think that we had better look unflinchingly at the sort of work we have done; like puppies, we must have ‘our noses rubbed in it’. A man, now penitent, who has once seduced and abandoned a girl and then lost sight of her, had better not avert his eyes from the crude realities of the life she may now be living. For the same reason we ought to read the psalms that curse the oppressor; read them with fear. Who knows what imprecations of the same sort have been uttered against ourselves? What prayers have Red men, and Black, and Brown and Yellow, sent up against us to their gods or sometimes to God Himself? All over the earth the White Man’s offence ‘smells to heaven’: massacres, broken treaties, theft, kidnappings, enslavement, deportation, floggings, lynchings, beatings-up, rape, insult, mockery, and odious hypocrisy make up that smell. But the thing comes nearer than that. Those of us who have little authority, who have few people at our mercy, may be thankful. But how if one is an officer in the army (or, perhaps worse, an N.C.O.)? a hospital matron? a magistrate? a prison-warden? a school prefect? a trade-union official? a Boss of any sort? in a word, anyone who cannot be ‘answered back’? It is hard enough, even with the best will in the world, to be just. It is hard, under the pressure of haste,

uneasiness, ill-temper, self-complacency, and conceit, even to continue intending justice. Power corrupts; the 'insolence of office' will creep in. We see it so clearly in our superiors; is it unlikely that our inferiors see it in us? How many of those who have been over us did not sometimes (perhaps often) need our forgiveness? Be sure that we likewise need the forgiveness of those that are under us.

We may not always receive it. They may not be Christians at all. They may not be far enough on the way to master that hard work of forgiveness which we have set them. Bitter, chronic resentment, unsuccessfully resisted or not resisted at all, may be burning against us: the spirit, essentially, of Psalm 109.

I do not mean that God hears and will grant such prayers as that psalmist uttered. They are wicked. He condemns them. All resentment is sin. And we may hope that those things which our inferiors resent were not really half so bad as they imagine. The snub was unintentional; the high-handed behaviour on the bench was due to ignorance and an uneasy awareness of one's own incapacity; the seemingly unfair distribution of work was not really unfair, or not intended to be; the inexplicable personal dislike for one particular inferior, so obvious to him and to some of his fellows, is something of which we are genuinely unconscious (it appears in our conscious mind as discipline, or the need for making an example). Anyway, it is very wicked of them to hate us. Yes; but the folly consists in supposing that God sees the wickedness in them apart from the wickedness in us which provoked it. They sin by hatred because we tempted them. We have, in that sense, seduced, debauched them. They are, as it were, the mothers of this hatred: we are the fathers.

It is from this point of view that the *Magnificat* is terrifying. If there are two things in the Bible which should make our blood run cold, it is one; the other is that phrase in Revelation, 'The wrath of the lamb'. If there is not mildness in the Virgin Mother, if even the lamb, the helpless thing that bleats and has its throat cut, is not the symbol of the harmless, where shall we turn? The resemblance between the *Magnificat* and traditional Hebrew poetry which I noted above is no mere literary curiosity. There is, of course, a difference. There are no cursings here, no hatred, no self-righteousness. Instead, there is mere statement. He has

scattered the proud, cast down the mighty, sent the rich empty away. I spoke just now of the ironic contrast between the fierce psalmists and the choir-boy's treble. The contrast is here brought up to a higher level. Once more we have the treble voice, a girl's voice, announcing without sin that the sinful prayers of her ancestors do not remain entirely unheard; and doing this, not indeed with fierce exultation, yet—who can mistake the tone?—in a calm and terrible gladness.

I am tempted here to digress for a moment into a speculation which may bring ease to us in one direction while it alarms us in another. Christians are unhappily divided about the kind of honour in which the Mother of the Lord should be held, but there is one truth about which no doubt seems admissible. If we believe in the Virgin Birth and if we believe in Our Lord's human nature, psychological as well as physical (for it is heretical to think Him a human body which had the Second Person of the Trinity *instead of* a human soul) we must also believe in a human heredity for that human nature. There is only one source for it (though in that source all the true Israel is summed up). If there is an iron element in Jesus may we not without irreverence guess whence, humanly speaking, it came? Did neighbours say, in His boyhood, 'He's His Mother's Son'? This might set in a new and less painful light the severity of some things He said to, or about, His Mother. We may suppose that she understood them very well.

I have called this a digression, but I am not sure that it is one. Two things link the Psalms with us. One is the *Magnificat*, and one, Our Lord's continued quotations from them, though not, to be sure, from such Psalms as 109. We cannot reject from our minds a book in which His was so steeped. The Church herself has followed Him and steeped our minds in the same book.

In a word, the Psalmists and we are both in the Church. Individually they, like us, may be sometimes very bad members of it; tares, but tares that we have no authority to pull up. They may often be ignorant, as we (though perhaps in different ways) are ignorant, what spirit they are of. But we cannot excommunicate them, nor they us.

I do not at all mean (though if you watch, you will certainly find some critic who says I meant) that we are to make any concession to their ferocity. But we may learn to see the good

thing which that ferocity is mixed with. Through all their excesses there runs a passionate craving for justice. One is tempted at first to say that such a craving, on the part of the oppressed, is no very great merit; that the wickedest men will cry out for fair play when you give them foul play. But unfortunately this is not true. Indeed at this very moment the spirit which cries for justice may be dying out.

Here is an alarming example. I had a pupil who was certainly a socialist, probably a Marxist. To him the 'collective', the State, was everything, the individual nothing; freedom, a bourgeois delusion. Then he went down and became a schoolmaster. A couple of years later, happening to be in Oxford, he paid me a visit. He said he had given up socialism. He was completely disillusioned about state-control. The interferences of the Ministry of Education with schools and schoolmasters were, he had found, arrogant, ignorant, and intolerable: sheer tyranny. I could take lots of this and the conversation went on merrily. Then suddenly the real purpose of his visit was revealed. He was so 'browned-off' that he wanted to give up schoolmastering; and could I—had I any influence—would I pull any wires to get him a job—in *the Ministry of Education*?

There you have the new man. Like the psalmists he can hate, but he does not, like the psalmists, thirst for justice. Having decided that there is oppression he immediately asks: 'How can I join the oppressors?' He has no objection to a world which is divided between tyrants and victims; the important thing is which of these two groups you are in. (The moral of the story remains the same whether you share his view about the Ministry or not.)

There is, then, mixed with the hatred in the psalmists, a spark which should be fanned, not trodden out. That spark God saw and fanned, till it burns clear in the *Magnificat*. The cry for 'judgement' was to be heard.

But the ancient Hebrew idea of 'judgement' will need an essay to itself.

## II

The Day of Judgement is an idea very familiar, and very dreadful, to Christians. 'In all times of our tribulation, in all time of our

wealth, in the hour of death, and in the day of judgement, Good Lord deliver us.' If there is any concept which cannot by any conjuring be removed from the teaching of Our Lord, it is that of the great separation; the sheep and the goats, the broad way and the narrow, the wheat and the tares, the winnowing fan, the wise and foolish virgins, the good fish and the refuse, the door closed on the marriage feast, with some inside and some outside in the dark. We may dare to hope—some dare to hope—that this is not the whole story, that, as Julian of Norwich said, 'All will be well and all manner of thing will be well.' But it is no use going to Our Lord's own words for that hope. Something we may get from St Paul: nothing, of that kind, from Jesus. It is from His own words that the picture of 'Doomsday' has come into Christianity.

One result of this is that the word 'judgement' in a religious context immediately suggests to us a criminal trial; the Judge on the bench, the accused in the dock, the hope of acquittal, the fear of conviction. But to the ancient Hebrews 'judgement' usually suggested something quite different.

In the Psalms judgement is not something that the conscience-stricken believer fears but something the downtrodden believer hopes for. God 'shall judge the world in righteousness' and 'be a defence for the oppressed' (ix, 8-9). 'Judge me, O Lord', cries the poet of Psalm 35. More surprisingly, in 67 even the 'nations', the Gentiles, are told to 'rejoice and be glad' because God will 'judge the folk righteously'. (Our fear is precisely lest the judgement should be a good deal more righteous than we can bear.) In the jubilant 96th Psalm the very sky and earth are to 'be glad', the fields are to 'be joyful' and all the trees of the wood 'shall rejoice before the Lord' because 'He cometh to judge the earth'. At the prospect of that judgement which we dread there is such revelry as a Pagan poet might have used to herald the coming of Dionysus.

Though our Lord, as I have said, imposed on us the modern, Christian conception of the Day of Judgement, yet His own words elsewhere illuminate the old Hebraic conception. I am thinking of the Unjust Judge in the parable. To most of us, unless we had that parable in mind, the mention of a wicked judge would instantly suggest someone like Judge Jeffries: a roaring, interrupting, bloodthirsty brute, bent on hanging a prisoner, bullying

the jury and the witnesses. Our hope is that we shall *not* be judged by him. Our Lord's Unjust Judge is a wholly different character. You want him to judge you, you pester him to judge you. The whole difficulty is to get your case heard. Obviously what Our Lord has in view is not a criminal trial at all but a civil trial. We are looking at 'justice' from the point of view not of a prisoner but of a plaintiff: a plaintiff with a watertight case, if only she could get the defendant into court.

The picture is strange to us only because we enjoy in our own country an unusually good legal profession. We take it for granted that judges do not need to be bribed and cannot be bribed. This is, however, no law of nature, but a rare achievement; we ourselves might lose it (shall certainly lose it if no pains are taken for its conservation); it does not inevitably go with the use of the English language. Over many parts of the world and in many periods the difficulty for poor and unimportant people has been not only to get their case fairly heard but to get it heard at all. It is their voices that speak in the continual hope of the Hebrews for 'judgement', the hope that some day, somehow, wrongs will be righted.

But the idea is not associated only with courts of law. The 'Judges' who give their name to a most interesting historical book in the Old Testament were not, I gather, so called only because they sometimes exercised what we should consider judicial functions. Indeed the book has very little to say about 'judging' in that sense. Its 'judges' are primarily heroes, fighting men, who deliver Israel from foreign tyrants: giant-killers. The name which we translate as 'judges' is apparently connected with a verb which means to vindicate, to avenge, to right the wrongs of. They might equally well be called champions, avengers. The knight errant of medieval romance who spends his days liberating, and securing justice for, distressed damsels, would almost have been, for the Hebrews, a 'judge'.

Such a Judge—He who will at last do us right, the deliverer, the protector, the queller of tyrants—is the dominant image in the Psalms. There are, indeed, some few passages in which a psalmist thinks of 'judgement' with trembling: 'Enter not into judgement with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified' (143, 2), or 'If thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark

what is done amiss: O Lord, who may abide it?' (130, 3). But the opposite attitude is far commoner: 'Hear the right, O Lord' (17, 1), 'Be thou my Judge' (26, 1), 'Plead thou my cause' (35, 1), 'Give sentence with me, O God' (43, 1), 'Arise, thou Judge of the world' (94, 2). It is for justice, for a hearing, far more often than for pardon, that the psalmists pray.

We thus reach a very paradoxical generalization. Ordinarily, and of course correctly, the Jewish and the Christian church, the reign of Moses and the reign of Christ, are contrasted as Law against Grace, justice against mercy, rigour against tenderness. Yet apparently those who live under the sterner dispensation hope for God's judgement while those who live under the milder fear it. How does this come about? The answer, by and large, will be plain to all who have read the Psalms with attention. The psalmists, with very few exceptions, are eager for judgement because they believe themselves to be wholly in the right. Others have sinned against them; their own conduct (as they frequently assure us) has been impeccable. They earnestly invite the divine inspection, certain that they will emerge from it with flying colours. The adversary may have things to hide, but they have not. The more God examines their case, the more unanswerable it will appear. The Christian, on the other hand, trembles because he knows he is a sinner.

Thus in one sense we might say that Jewish confidence in the face of judgement is a by-product of Jewish self-righteousness. But that is far too summary. We must consider the whole experience out of which the self-righteous utterances grow: and secondly, what, on a deeper level, those utterances really mean.

The experience is dark and dreadful. We must not call it the 'dark night of the soul' for that name is already appropriate to another darkness and another dread, encountered at a far higher level than (I suppose) any of the psalmists had reached. But we may well call it the Dark Night of the Flesh, understanding by 'the flesh' the natural man. For the experience is not in itself necessarily religious and thousands of unbelievers undergo it in our own time. It arises from natural causes; but it becomes religious in the psalmists because they are religious men.

It must be confessed at the outset that all those passages which



paint this Dark Night can be regarded, if we wish, as the expressions of a neurosis. If we choose to maintain that several psalmists wrote in, or on the verge of, a nervous breakdown, our theory will cover all the facts. That is, the psalmists assert as true about their own situation all those things which a patient, in a certain neurotic condition, wrongly believes to be true of his. For our present purpose, I think this does not matter much. Neurosis is a thing that occurs; we may have passed, or may yet have to pass, through that valley. It concerns us to see how certain believers in God behaved in it before us. And neurosis is, after all, a relative term. Who can say that he never touches the fringes of it? Even if the Psalms were written by neurotics, that will not make them wholly irrelevant.

But of course we cannot be at all sure that they were. The neurotic wrongly believes that he is threatened by certain evils. But another man (or the neurotic himself at another time) may be really threatened with those same evils. It may be only the patient's nerves that make him so sure that he has cancer, or is financially ruined, or is going to hell; but this does not prove that there are no such things as cancer or bankruptcy or damnation. To suggest that the situation described in certain psalms must be imaginary seems to me to be wishful thinking. The situation does occur in real life. If anyone doubts this let him consider, while I try to present this Dark Night of the Flesh, how easily it might be, not the subjective impression, but the real situation of any one of the following:

1. A small, ugly, unathletic, unpopular boy in his second term at a thoroughly bad English public school.
2. An unpopular recruit in an army hut.
3. A Jew in Hitler's Germany.
4. A man in a bad firm or government office whom a group of rivals are trying to get rid of.
5. A Papist in sixteenth-century England.
6. A Protestant in sixteenth-century Spain.
7. An African in Malan's Africa.
8. An American socialist in the hands of Senator McCarthy or a Zulu, noxious to Chaka, during one of the old, savage witch-hunts.

The Dark Night of the Flesh can be objective; it is not even very uncommon.

One is alone. The fellow-recruit who seemed to be a friend on the first day, the boys who were your friends last term, the neigh-

bours who were your friends before the Jew-baiting began (or before you attracted Senator McCarthy's attention), even your connections and relatives, have begun to give you a wide berth. No one wishes to be seen with you. When you pass acquaintances in the street they always happen to be looking the other way. 'They of mine acquaintance were afraid of me; and they that did see me without conveyed themselves from me' (31, 13). Lovers, neighbours, kinsmen stand 'afar off' (38, 11). 'I am become a stranger unto my brethren' (69, 8). 'Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me: and made me to be abhorred of them' (88, 7). 'I looked also upon my right hand and saw there was no man that would know me' (142, 4).

Sometimes it is not an individual but a group (a religious body or even a whole nation) that has this experience. Members fall off; allies desert; the huge combinations against us extend and harden daily. Harder even to bear than our dwindling numbers and growing isolation, is the increasing evidence that 'our side' is ineffective. The world is turned upside down by bad men and 'What hath the righteous done?', where are our counter-measures? (11, 3). We are 'put to rebuke' (12, 9). Once there were omens in our favour and great leaders on our side. But those days are gone: 'We see not our tokens, there is not one prophet more' (74, 10). England in modern Europe and Christians in modern England often feel like this.

And all round the isolated man, every day, is the presence of the unbelievers. They know well enough what we are believing or trying to believe ('help thou my unbelief') and regard it as total illusion. 'Many one there be that say of my soul, There is no help for him in his God' (3, 2). As if God, supposing He exists, had nothing to do but look after *us*! (10, 14); but in fact, 'There is no God' (14, 1). If the sufferer's God really exists 'let Him deliver him' now! (22, 8). 'Where is now thy God?' (42, 3).

The man in the Dark Night of the Flesh is in everyone else's eyes extremely funny; the stock joke of that whole school or hut or office. They can't see him without laughing: they make faces at him (22, 7). The drunks work his name into their comic songs (69, 12). He is a 'by-word' (44, 15). Unfortunately all this laughter is not exactly honest, spontaneous laughter such as a man with some oddity of voice or face might learn to bear and even, in the

end, to join in. These mockers do not laugh *although* it hurts him nor even without caring whether it hurts or not; they laugh *because* it will hurt. Any humiliation or miscarriage of his is jam to them; they crow over him when he's down—'when my foot slipped, they rejoiced greatly against me' (38, 16).

If one had a certain sort of aristocratic and Stoic pride one might perhaps answer scorn with scorn and even (in a sense) rejoice, as Coventry Patmore rejoiced, to live 'in the high mountain air of public obloquy'. If so, one would not be completely in the Dark Night. But the sufferer, for better or worse, is not—or if he once was, is now no longer—that sort of man. The continual taunts, slights, and humiliations (partly veiled or brutally plain according to the *milieu*) get past his defences and under his skin. He is in his own eyes also the object they would make him. He has no come-back. Shame has covered his face (69, 7). He might as well be a dumb man; in his mouth are no reproofs (38, 13). He is 'a worm and no man' (22, 6).

## THE LANGUAGE OF RELIGION

I have been asked to talk about religious language and the gist of what I have to say is that, in my opinion, there is no specifically religious language. I admit of course that some things said by religious people can't be treated exactly as we treat scientific statements. But I don't think that is because they are specimens of some special language. It would be truer to say that the scientific statements are in a special language. The language of religion, which we may presently have to distinguish from that of theology, seems to me to be, on the whole, either the same sort we use in ordinary conversation or the same sort we use in poetry, or somewhere between the two. In order to make this clearer, I am afraid I must turn away from the professed subject of my paper for some time and talk about language

I begin with three sentences (1) It was very cold (2) There were 13 degrees of frost (3) 'Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers was a-cold; The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass, And silent was the flock in woolly fold: Numb'd were the Beadsman's fingers.' I should describe the first as Ordinary language, the second as Scientific language, and the third as Poetic language. Of course there is no question here of different languages in the sense in which Latin and Chinese are different languages. Two and three are improved uses of the same language used in one. Scientific and Poetic language are two different artificial perfections of Ordinary: artificial, because they depend on skills; different, because they improve Ordinary in two different directions. Notice also that Ordinary could advance a little towards either so that you could pass by degrees into Scientific or Poetic. For 'very cold' you could substitute 'freezing hard' and, for 'freezing hard', 'freezing harder than last night'. That would be getting nearer to the Scientific. On the other hand you could say 'bitterly cold' and then you would be getting nearer the Poetic. In fact you would have anticipated one of the terms used in Keats's description.

The superiority of the Scientific description clearly consists in giving for the coldness of the night a precise quantitative estimate which can be tested by an instrument. The test ends all disputes. If the statement survives the test, then various inferences can be drawn from it with certainty: e.g., various effects on vegetable and animal life can be predicted. It is therefore of use in what Bacon calls 'operation'. We can take action on it. On the other hand it does not, of itself, give us any information about the quality of a cold night, does not tell us what we shall be feeling if we go out of doors. If, having lived all our lives in the tropics, we didn't know what a hard frost was like, the thermometer reading would not of itself inform us. Ordinary language would do that better—'Your ears will ache'—'You'll lose the feeling in your fingers'—'You'll feel as if your ears were coming off.' If I could tell you (which unhappily I can't) the temperature of the coldest water I ever bathed in, it would convey the reality only to the few who had bathed in many temperatures and taken thermometer readings of them. When I tell you 'It was so cold that at first it felt like scalding hot water', I think you will get a better idea of it. And where a scientific statement could draw on no experience at all, like statements about optics made to a student born blind, then, though it might retain its proper virtues of precision, verifiability, and use in operation, it would in one sense convey nothing. Only in one sense, of course. The blind student could, presumably, draw inferences from it and use it to gain further knowledge.

I now turn to the Poetic. Its superiority to Ordinary language is, I am afraid, a much more troublesome affair. I feel fairly sure what it does not consist in: it does not consist either in discharging or arousing more emotion. It may often do one of these things or both, but I don't think that is its *differentia*. I don't think our bit of Keats differs from the Ordinary 'It was very cold' primarily or solely by getting off Keats's chest more dislike of cold nights, nor by arousing more dislike in me. There is, no doubt, some mere 'getting off the chest' in the exclamation 'Ah' and the catachresis 'bitter'. Personally, I don't feel the emotion to be either Keats's or mine. It is for me the imagined people in the story who are saying 'Ah' and 'bitter'; not with the result of making me share their discomfort, but of making me imagine how very cold it was. And

the rest is all taken up with pictures of what might have been observed on such a night. The invitation is not to my emotions but to my senses. Keats seems to me to be simply conveying the quality of a cold night, and not imposing any emotions on me (except of course the emotion of pleasure at finding anything vividly conveyed to the imagination). He is in fact giving me all that concrete, qualitative information which the Scientific statement leaves out. But then, of course, he is not verifiable, nor precise, nor of much use for operation.

We must not, however, base our view on a single passage, which may have been unfairly chosen. Let us begin at quite another point. One of the most obvious differences between all the poetry I have ever read and all the straight prose (I say 'straight' to exclude prose which verges on the poetic) is this simple one, hardly ever stated: the poetry contains a great many more adjectives. This is perfectly obvious. From Homer, who never omits to tell us that the ships were black and the sea salt, or even wet, down to Eliot with his 'hollow valley' and 'multi-foliate rose', they all do it. Poets are always telling us that grass is green, or thunder loud, or lips red. It is not, except in bad poets, always telling us that things are shocking or delightful. It does not, in that direct way, attempt to discharge or excite emotion. On the contrary, it seems anxious to bombard us with masses of factual information which we might, on a prose view, regard as irrelevant or platitudinous.

[Here pages 4 and 5 of the manuscript are missing. Page 6 begins as follows:]

[In order to] discharge an emotion it is not necessary that we should make it clear to any audience. By 'expression' I mean that sort of utterance which will make clear to others how we are feeling. There are, of course, any number of intermediate stages between discharge and expression: but perfect expression in the presence of the perfect hearer would enable him to know exactly how you were feeling. To what extent this involves arousing the same emotion, or a replica of it in him—in other words, to what extent the perfect expression would be emotive—I don't know. But I think that to respond to expression is in principle different from having an emotion aroused in one, even though

the arousing of some sort of phantom emotion may always be involved. There seems to me to be a difference between understanding another person's fear because he has expressed it well and being actually *infected* by his fear as so often happens. Or again, there seems to be a difference between understanding the feelings of Shakespeare's Troilus before his assignation and being infected by similar feelings, as the writer of pornography intends to infect us.

But the really important point is the third<sup>1</sup> one. Even if Poetic language often expresses emotion and thereby (to some undefined extent) arouses emotion, it does not follow that the expression of emotion is always its sole, or even its chief function. For even in Ordinary language one of the best ways of describing something is to tell what reactions it provoked in us. If a man says, 'They kept their rooms terribly over-heated. Before I'd been in there five minutes, I was dripping', he is usually not concerned, as an end in itself, with giving us autobiographical fact that he perspired. He wants to make us realize how hot it was. And he takes the right way. Indeed in the last resort there is hardly any other way. To say that things were blue, or hard, or cool, or foul-smelling, or noisy, is to tell how they affected our senses. To say that someone is a bore, or a decent chap, or revolting, is to tell how he affected our emotions. In the same way, I think that Poetic language often expresses emotion not for its own sake but in order to inform us about the object which aroused the emotion. Certainly it seems to me to give us such information. Burns tells us that a woman is like a red, red rose, and Wordsworth that another woman is like a violet by a mossy stone half hidden from the eye. Now of course the one woman resembles a rose, and the other a half-hidden violet, not in size, weight, shape, colour, anatomy, or intelligence, but by arousing emotions in some way analogous to those which the flowers would arouse. But then we know quite well what sort of women (and how different from each other) they must have been to do so. The two statements do not in the least reduce to mere expressions of admiration. They tell us what kind of admiration and therefore what kind of woman. They are even, in their own proper way, verifiable or

[<sup>1</sup> Apparently referring to an enumeration of points Lewis made in the missing pages.]

falsifiable: having seen the two women we might say 'I see what he meant in comparing her to a rose' and 'I see what he meant in comparing her to a violet', or might decide that the comparisons were bad. I am not of course denying that there are other love poems (some of Wyatt's, for example) where the poet is wholly concerned with his own emotions and we get no impression of the woman at all. I deny that this is the universal rule.

Finally we have those instances where Poetic language expresses an experience which is not accessible to us in normal life at all, an experience which the poet himself may have imagined and not, in the ordinary sense, 'had'. An instance would be when Asia, in *Prometheus Unbound*, says 'My soul is an enchanted boat.' If anyone thinks this is only a more musical and graceful way of saying 'Gee! this is fine', I disagree with him. An enchanted boat moves without oar or sail to its destined haven. Asia is at that moment undergoing a process of transfiguration, almost of apotheosis. Effortless and unimpeded movement to a goal desired but not yet seen is the point. If we were experiencing Asia's apotheosis we should feel like that. In fact we have never experienced apotheosis. Nor, probably, has Shelley. But to communicate the emotion which would accompany it is to make us know more fully than before what we meant by apotheosis.

This is the most remarkable of the powers of Poetic language: to convey to us the quality of experiences which we have not had, or perhaps can never have, to use factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience—as two or more roads on a map show us where a town that is off the map must lie. Many of us have never had an experience like that which Wordsworth records near the end of *Prelude* XIII; but when he speaks of 'the visionary dreariness' I think we get an inkling of it. Other examples would be (for me) Marvell's 'green thought in a green shade', and (for everyone) Pope's 'die of a rose in aromatic pain'. Perhaps the most astonishing is in the *Paradiso* where Dante says that as he rose from one sphere of the Ptolemaic universe to the next, he knew that he had risen only by finding that he was moving forward more quickly.<sup>1</sup>

It must be remembered that I have been speaking simply of

[<sup>1</sup> I cannot find this in the *Paradiso*. It may be, however, a conflation of several passages. See *Paradiso* viii, 13; x, 35; and xiv, 85.]



Poetic language not of poetry. Poetry of course has other characteristics besides its language. One of them is that it is very often fiction; it tells about people who never really lived and events that never really took place. Hence Plato's jibe that the poets are liars. But surely it would be a great confusion to attach the note of fiction to every specimen of Poetic *language*. You just can't tell whether Keats's description is of a winter night that really occurred or of one he imagined. The use of language in conveying the quality of a real place, a person, or thing is the same we should need to convey the quality of a feigned one.

My long, and perhaps tedious, digression on Poetic language is now almost at an end. My conclusion is that such language is by no means merely an expression, nor a stimulant, of emotion, but a real medium of information. Which information may, like any other, be true or false: true as Mr Young<sup>1</sup> on weirs, or false as the bit in *Beowulf* about the dragon sniffing along the path. It often does stimulate emotion, by expressing emotion, but usually in order to show us the object to which such emotion would be the response. A poet, Mr Robert Conquest, has put something like my view:

Observation of real events includes the observer, 'heart' and all;  
(The common measurable features are obtained by omitting this part.)

But there is also a common aspect in the emotional

Shared by other members of the species; this is conveyed by 'art'.

The poem combines all these . . .<sup>2</sup>

Because events, as real events 'really' are and feigned events would 'really' be if they occurred, cannot be conveyed without bringing in the observer's heart and the common emotional reaction of the species, it has been falsely concluded that poetry represented the heart for its own sake, and nothing but the heart.

[<sup>1</sup> Lewis is referring, I believe, to the Rev Canon Andrew Young, whose poems, he felt, were something like a combination of Wordsworth and Marvell. An interesting reference to 'weirs' is found in Young's poem, 'The Slow Race'. For discussion on other possibilities see my letter, 'A C. S. Lewis Mystery', *The Spectator* (28 October 1966), p. 546.]

[<sup>2</sup> 'Excerpts from a Report to the Galactic Council', *The Listener*, vol. LII (14 October 1954), p. 612.]

But I must not go too far. I think Poetic language does convey information, but it suffers from two disabilities in comparison with Scientific. (1) It is verifiable or falsifiable only to a limited degree and with a certain fringe of vagueness. Not all men, only men of some discrimination, would agree, on seeing Burn's mistress that the image of 'a red, red rose' was good, or (as might be) bad. In that sense, Scientific statements are, as people say now, far more easily 'cashed'. But the poet might of course reply that it always will be easier to cash a cheque for 30 shillings than one for 1,000 pounds, that the scientific statements are cheques, in one sense, for very small amounts, giving us, out of the teeming complexity of every concrete reality only 'the common measurable features'. (2) Such information as Poetic language has to give can be received only if you are ready to meet it half-way. It is no good holding a dialectical pistol to the poet's head and demanding how the deuce a river could have hair, or thought be green, or a woman a red rose. You may win, in the sense of putting him to a *non-plus*. But if he had anything to tell you, you will never get it by behaving in that way. You must begin by trusting him. Only by so doing will you find out whether he is trustworthy or not. *Credo ut intelligam* (it is time some theological expression came in) is here the only attitude.

Now, as I see it, the language in which we express our religious beliefs and other religious experiences, is not a special language, but something that ranges between the Ordinary and the Poetical. But even when it begins by being Ordinary, it can usually, under dialectical pressure, be found to become either Theological or Poetical. An example will best show what I mean by this trichotomy. I think the words 'I believe in God' are Ordinary language. If you press us by asking what we mean, we shall probably have to move in one of two directions. We might say 'I believe in incorporeal entity, personal in the sense that it can be the subject and object of love, on which all other entities are unilaterally dependent.' That is what I call Theological language, though far from a first-class specimen of it. In it we are attempting, so far as is possible, to state religious matter in a form more like that we use for scientific matter. This is often necessary, for purposes of instruction, clarification, controversy and the like. But it is not the language religion naturally speaks. We are applying

precise, and therefore abstract, terms to what for us is the supreme example of the concrete. If we do not always feel this fully, that, I think, is because nearly all who say or read such sentences (including unbelievers) really put into them much that they know from other sources—tradition, literature, etc. But for that, it would hardly be more information than ‘There are 15 degrees of frost’ would be to those who had never experienced frost.

And this is one of the great disadvantages under which the Christian apologist labours. Apologetics is controversy. You cannot conduct a controversy in those poetical expressions which alone convey the concrete: you must use terms as definable and univocal as possible, and these are always abstract. And this means that the thing we are really talking about can never appear in the discussion at all. We have to try to prove *that* God is in circumstances where we are denied every means of conveying *who* God is. It is faintly parallel to the state of a witness who has to try to convey something so concrete as the known character of a friend under cross-examination. Under other conditions he might possibly succeed in giving you a real impression of him; but not under hostile cross-examination. You remember Hamlet’s speech to Horatio, ‘Horatio thou art e’en as just a man’, etc. But you could never have had it in a witness-box.

That, then, is one way in which we could go on from ‘I believe in God’—the Theological: in a sense, alien to religion, crippling, omitting nearly all that really matters, yet, in spite of everything, sometimes successful.

On the other hand, you could go on, following the spontaneous tendency of religion, into poetical language. Asked what you meant by God, you might say ‘God is love’ or ‘the Father of lights’, or even ‘underneath are the everlasting arms’. From what has gone before, you will understand that I do not regard these poetical expressions as merely expressions of emotion. They will of course express emotion in any who utters them, and arouse emotion in any who hears them with belief. But so would the sentence ‘Fifty Russian divisions landed in the South of England this morning.’ Momentous matter, if believed, will arouse emotion whatever the language. Further, these statements make use of emotion, as Burns makes use of our emotions about roses. All this is, in my view, consistent with their being essentially

informative. But, of course, informative only to those who will meet them half way.

The necessity for such poetic expressions is closely connected with the grounds on which they are believed. They are usually two: authority, and religious experience.

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God because He said so. The other evidence about Him has convinced them that He was neither a lunatic nor a quack. Now of course the statement cannot mean that He stands to God in the very same physical and temporal relation which exists between offspring and male parent in the animal world. It is then a poetical statement. And such expression must here be necessary because the reality He spoke of is outside our experience. And here once more the religious and the theological procedure diverge. The theologian will describe it as 'analogical', drawing our minds at once away from the subtle and sensitive exploitations of imagination and emotion with which poetry works to the clear-cut but clumsy analogies of the lecture-room. He will even explain in what respects the father-son relationship is *not* analogical to the reality, hoping by elimination to reach the respects in which it is. He may even supply other analogies of his own—the lamp and the light which flows from it, or the like. It is all unavoidable and necessary for certain purposes. But there is some death in it. The sentence 'Jesus Christ is the Son of God' cannot be all got into the form 'There is between Jesus and God an asymmetrical, social, harmonious relation involving homogeneity.' Religion takes it differently. A man who is both a good son and a good father, and who is continually urged to become a better son and a better father by meditation on the Divine Fatherhood and Sonship, and who thus comes in the end to make that Divine relation the norm to which his own human sonship and fatherhood are still merely analogical, is best receiving the revelation. It would be idle to tell such a man that the formula 'is the Son of God' tells us (what is almost zero) that an unknown X is in an unknown respect 'like' the relation of father and son. He has met it half way. Information has been given him: as far as I can see, in the only way possible.

Secondly, there is religious experience, ranging from the most ordinary experiences of the believer in worship, forgiveness,

dereliction, and divine help, up to the highly special experiences of the mystics. Through such experience Christians believe that they get a sort of verification (or perhaps sometimes falsification) of their tenets. Such experience cannot be conveyed to one another, much less to unbelievers, except by language which shares to some extent the nature of Poetic language. That is what leads some people to suppose that it can be nothing but emotion. For of course, if you accept the view that Poetic language is purely emotional, then things which can be expressed only in Poetic language will presumably be emotions. But if we don't equate Poetic language with emotional language, the question is still open.

Now it seems to me a mistake to think that our experience in general can be communicated by precise and literal language and that there is a special class of experiences (say, emotions) which cannot. The truth seems to me the opposite: there is a special region of experiences which can be communicated *without* Poetic language, namely, its 'common measurable features', but most experience cannot. To be incommunicable by Scientific language is, so far as I can judge, the normal state of experience. All our sensuous experience is in this condition, though this is somewhat veiled from us by the fact that much of it is very common and therefore everyone will understand our references to it at a hint. But if you have to describe to a doctor any unusual sensation, you will soon find yourself driven to use pointers of the same nature (essentially) as Asia's enchanted boat. An army doctor who suspected you of malingering would soon reduce you to halting and contradictory statements; but if by chance you had not been malingering he would have cut himself off from all knowledge of what might have turned out an interesting case.

But are there, as I have claimed, other experiences besides sensation (and, of course, emotion) which are in this predicament? I think there are. But, frankly, I am now getting into very deep water indeed. I am almost sure I shall fail to make myself clear, but the attempt must be made.

It seems to me that imagining is something other than having mental images. When I am imagining (say, Hamlet on the battlements or Heracles' journey to the Hyperboreans) there are images in my mind. They come and go rapidly and assist what I regard

as the real imagining only if I take them all as provisional make-shifts, each to be dropped as soon as it has served its (instantaneous) turn. If any one of them becomes static and grows too clear and full, imagination proper is inhibited. A too lively visual imagination is the reader's, and writer's, bane; as toys, too elaborate and realistic, spoil children's play. They are, in the etymological sense, the *offal* (the off-fall) of imagination: the slag from the furnace. Again, thinking seems to me something other than the succession of linked concepts which we use when we successfully offer our 'thought' to another in argument. That appears to me to be always a sort of translation of a prior activity: and it was the prior activity which alone enabled us to find these concepts and links. The possibility of finding them may be a good test of the value of that previous activity; certainly the only test we have. It would be dangerous to indulge ourselves with the fancy of having valuable profundities within us which (unfortunately) we can't get out. But, perhaps, in others, where we are neutrals, we are sometimes not quite wrong in thinking that a sensible man, unversed in argument, has thought better than his mis-handling of his own case suggests. If we lend him a helping hand and he replies 'Of course! That's it. That is what I really meant to say', he is not always a hypocrite. Finally, in all our joys and sorrows, religious, aesthetic, or natural, I seem to find things (almost indescribably) thus. They are *about* something. They are a by-product of the (logically) prior act of *attending to* or *looking towards* something.<sup>1</sup> We are not really concerned with the emotions: the emotions *are* our concern about something else. Suppose that a mother is anxious about her son who is on active service. It is no use going to her with the offer of some drug or hypnotism or spell that would obliterate her anxiety. What she wants is not the cessation of anxiety but the safety of her son (I mean, on the whole. On one particular wakeful night, she might, no doubt, be glad of your magic.) Nor is it any use offering her a magic which would prevent her from feeling any grief if her son were killed: what she dreads is not grief but the death of her son. Similarly, it is no use offering me a drug which will give me over again the feelings I had on first hearing the overture to *The Magic Flute*. The feelings, by themselves—the flutter in the

<sup>1</sup> *Looking towards* is neither more nor less metaphorical than *attending to*.

diaphragm—are of very mediocre interest to me. What gave them their value was the thing they were about. So in our Christian experiences. No doubt we experience sorrow when we repent and joy when we adore. But these were by-products of our attention to a particular Object.

If I have made myself at all clear (but I probably have not) you see what, for me, it adds up to. The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors, and the use of those emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it. I am not in the least talking about the Unconscious as psychologists understand it. At least, though it cannot be fully introspected, this region is, in many of us, very far from unconscious. I say 'in many of us'. But I sometimes wonder whether we may not be survivals. Evolution may not have ceased; and in evolution a species may lose old powers as well as acquire—possibly in order to acquire—new ones. There seem to be people about to whom imagination means only the presence of mental images (not to mention those like Professor Ryle who deny even that); to whom thought means only unuttered speech; and to whom emotions are final, as distinct from the things they are about. If this is so, and if they increase, then all real communications between them and the earlier type of man will finally be impossible.

Something like this may be happening. You remember Wells's *Country of the Blind*. Now its inhabitants, being men, must have descended from ancestors who could see. During centuries a gradual atrophy of sight must have spread through the whole race; but at no given moment, till it was complete, would it (probably) have been equally advanced in all individuals. During this intermediate period a very interesting linguistic situation would have arisen. They would have inherited from their unblind ancestors all the visual vocabulary—the names of the colours, words like 'see' and 'look' and 'dark' and 'light'. There would be some who still used them in the same sense as ourselves: archaic types who saw the green grass and perceived the light coming at dawn. There would be others who had faint vestiges of sight, and who used these words, with increasing vagueness, to describe sensations so evanescent as to be incapable of clear discrimination.

(The moment at which they begin to think of them as sensations in their own eyeballs, not as externals, would mark an important step.) And there would be a third class who has achieved full blindness, to whom *see* was merely a synonym for *understand* and *dark* for *difficult*. And these would be the vanguard, and the future would be with them, and a very little cross-examination of the archaic type that still saw would convince them that its attempt to give some other meaning to the old visual words was merely a tissue of vague, emotive uses and category mistakes. This would be as clear to them as it is clear to many modern people that Job's words 'But now mine eye hath seen thee: wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes' are, and can be, nothing but the expression of an emotion.<sup>1</sup>

As I say, this sometimes crosses my mind. But I am full of doubts about the whole subject, and everything I have said is merely tentative. Perhaps I should also point out that it is not apologetics. I have not tried to prove that the religious sayings are true, only that they are significant: if you meet them with a certain good will, a certain readiness to find meaning. For if they should happen to contain information about real things, you will not get it on any other terms. As for proof, I sometimes wonder whether the Ontological Argument did not itself arise as a partially unsuccessful translation of an experience without concepts or words. I don't think we can initially argue from the *concept* of Perfect Being to its existence. But did they really, inside, argue from the experienced glory that it could not be generated subjectively?

[<sup>1</sup> An interesting variation of this same theme is found in Lewis's poem, 'The Country of the Blind', *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Bles, 1964), pp. 33-34.]



PETITIONARY PRAYER:  
A PROBLEM WITHOUT AN ANSWER

The problem I am submitting to you arises not about prayer in general but only about that kind of prayer which consists of request or petition. I hope no one will think that he is helping to solve my problem by reminding me that there are many other and perhaps higher sorts of prayer. I agree that there are. I here confine myself to petitionary prayer not because I think it the only, or the best, or the most characteristic, form of prayer, but because it is the form which raises the problem. However low a place we may decide to give it in the life of prayer, we must give it some place, unless we are prepared to reject both Our Lord's precept in telling us to pray for our daily bread and His practice in praying that the cup might pass from Him. And as long as it holds any place at all, I have to consider my problem.

Let me make clear at once where that problem does not lie. I am not at all concerned with the difficulty which unbelievers sometimes raise about the whole conception of petitioning God, on the ground that absolute wisdom cannot need to be informed of our desires, or that absolute goodness cannot need to be prompted to beneficence, or that the immutable and impassible cannot be affected by us, cannot be to us as patient to agent. All these difficulties are, no doubt, well worth most serious discussion, but I do not propose to discuss them here. Still less am I asking why petitions, and even the fervent petitions of holy men, are sometimes not granted. That has never seemed to me to be, in principle, a difficulty at all. That wisdom must sometimes refuse what ignorance may quite innocently ask seems to be self-evident.

My problem arises from one fact and one only; the fact that Christian teaching seems at first sight to contain two different patterns of petitionary prayer which are inconsistent: perhaps inconsistent in their theological implications, but much more obviously and pressingly inconsistent in the practical sense that no man, so far as I can see, could possibly follow them both at

the same moment. I shall call them the A Pattern and the B Pattern.

The A Pattern is given in the prayer which Our Lord Himself taught us. The clause 'Thy will be done' by its very nature must modify the sense in which the following petitions are made. Under the shadow—or perhaps I should rather say, in the light—of that great submission nothing can be asked save conditionally, save in so far as the granting of it may be in accordance with God's will. I do not of course mean that the words 'Thy will be done' are merely a submission. They should, and if we make progress they will increasingly, be the voice of joyful desire, free of hunger and thirst, and I argue very heartily that to treat them simply as a clause of submission or renunciation greatly impoverishes the prayer. But though they should be something far more and better than resigned or submissive, they must not be less: they must be that *at least*. And as such they necessarily discipline all the succeeding clauses. The other specimen of the A Pattern comes from Our Lord's own example in Gethsemane. A particular event is asked for with the reservation, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thine.'

It would seem from these passages that we are directed both by Our Lord's command and by His example to make all our petitionary prayers in this conditional form; well aware that God in His wisdom may not see fit to give us what we ask and submitting our wills in advance to a possible refusal which, if it meets us, we shall know to be wholly just, merciful, and salutary. And this, I suppose, is how most of us do try to pray and how most spiritual teachers tell us to pray. With this pattern of prayer—the A Pattern—I myself would be wholly content. It is in accordance both with my heart and my head. It presents no theoretical difficulties. No doubt my rebellious will and my turbulent hopes and fears will find plenty of practical difficulty in following it. But as far as my intellect goes it is all easy. The road may be hard but the map is clear.

You will notice that in the A Pattern, whatever faith the petitioner has in the existence, the goodness, and the wisdom of God, what he obviously, even as it were by definition, has not got is a sure and unwavering belief that God will give him the particular thing he asks for. When Our Lord in Gethsemane asks

that the cup may be withdrawn His words, far from implying a certainty or even a strong expectation that it will in fact be withdrawn, imply the possibility that it will not be; a possibility, or even a probability, so fully envisaged that a preparatory submission to that event is already being made.

We need not, so far as I can see, here concern ourselves with any special problems raised by the unique and holy Person of Him who prayed. It is enough to point out that if we are expected to imitate Him in our prayers, then, though we are doubtless to pray with faith in one sense, we are not to pray with any assurance that we shall receive what we ask. For real assurance that we shall receive it seems to be incompatible with the act of preparing ourselves for a denial. Men do not prepare for an event which they think impossible. And unless we think refusal impossible, how can we believe granting to be certain?

And, once again, if this were the only pattern of prayer, I should be quite content. If the faith which is demanded of us were always a faith in the goodness of God, a faith that whether granting or denying He equally gave us the best, and never a faith that He would give precisely what we ask, I should have no problem. Indeed, such a submissive faith would seem to me, if I were left to my own thoughts, far better than any confidence that our own necessarily ignorant petitions would prevail. I should be thankful that we were safe from that cruel mercy which the wiser Pagans had to dread, *numinibus vota exaudita malignis*. Even as it is I must often be glad that certain past prayers of my own were not granted.

But of course this is not the actual situation. Over against the A Pattern stands the B Pattern. Again and again in the New Testament we find the demand not for faith in such a general and (as it would seem to me) spiritual sense as I have described but for faith of a far more particular and (as it would seem to me) cruder sort: faith that the particular thing the petitioner asks will be given him. It is as if God demanded of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess, and which if He had possessed it, would have been erroneous.

What springs first to mind is, of course, the long list of passages in which faith is required to those whom Our Lord healed.

Some of these may be, for our present purpose, ambiguous. Thus in Matt. ix, 22, the words 'Your faith has healed you' to the woman with the haemorrhage will be interpreted by some as a proposition not in theology but in medicine. The woman was cured by auto-suggestion: faith in any charm or quack remedy would on that view have done as well as faith in Christ—though, of course, the power in Christ to evoke faith even of that kind might have theological implications in the long run. But such a view, since it will not cover all the instances, had better not be brought in for any, on the principle of Occam's razor. And surely it can be stretched only by extreme efforts to cover instances where the faith is, so to speak, vicarious. Thus the relevant faith in the case of the sick servant (Matt. viii, 13) is not his own but that of his master the Centurion; the healing of the Canaanite child (Matt. xv, 28) depends on her mother's faith.

Again, it might perhaps be maintained that in some instances the faith in question is not a faith that this particular healing will take place but a deeper, more all-embracing faith in the Person of Christ Himself; not, of course, that the petitioners can be supposed to have believed in His deity but that they recognized and accepted His holy, or at the very least, His numinous, character. I think there is something in this view; but sometimes the faith seems to be very definitely attached to the particular gift. Thus in Matt. ix, 28, the blind men are asked not 'Do you believe in Me?' but 'Do you believe that I can do this?' Still, the words are 'that I can' not 'that I will', so we may pass that example over. But what are we to say of Matt. xiv, 31, where Peter is called *ὀλιγόπιστε*, because he lost his faith and sank in the waves. I should perhaps say, at this point, that I find no difficulty in accepting the walking on the water as historical. I suspect that the distinction often made between 'Nature' miracles and others seems plausible only because most of us know less about pathology and psychology than about gravitation. Perhaps if we knew all, the Divine suggestion of a single new thought to my mind would appear neither more nor less a 'Nature' miracle than stilling the storm or feeding the five thousand. But that is not a point I wish to raise. I am concerned only with the implications of *ὀλιγόπιστε*. For it would seem that St Peter might have had any degree of faith in the goodness and power of God and even in the Deity

of Christ and yet been wholly uncertain whether he could continue walking on the water. For in that case his faith would surely have told him that whether he walked or whether he sank he was equally in God's hands, and, submitting himself in the spirit of the Gethsemane prayer, he would have prepared himself, so far as infirmity allowed, to glorify God either by living or by drowning, and his failure, if he failed, would have been due to an imperfect mortification of instinct but not to a lack (in that sense) of faith. The faith which he is accused of lacking must surely be faith in the particular event: the continued walking on water.

All these examples, however, might be dismissed on the ground that they are not, in one strict sense of the word, examples of prayer. Let us then turn to those that are.

Whether you will agree to include Matt. xxi, 21, I don't know. Our Lord there says *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε*, 'If you have faith with no hesitations or reservations, you can tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea and it will.' I very much hope that no one will solemnly remind us that Our Lord, according to the flesh, was an Oriental and that Orientals use hyperboles, and think that this has disposed of the passage. Of course Orientals, and Occidentals, use hyperboles, and of course Our Lord's first hearers did not suppose Him to mean that large and highly mischievous disturbances of the landscape would be common or edifying operations of faith. But a sane man does not use hyperbole to mean nothing: by a great thing (which is not literally true) he suggests a great thing which is. When he says that someone's heart is broken he does not mean that this organ is literally fractured, but he does mean that the person in question is in very great anguish. Only a windbag says 'His heart is broken' when he means 'He is somewhat depressed.' And if all Orientals were doomed by the mere fact of being Orientals to be windbags (which of course they are not) the Truth Himself, the Wisdom of the Father, would not and could not have been united with the human nature of an Oriental. (The point is worth making. Some people make allowances for local and temporary conditions in the speeches of Our Lord on a scale which really implies that God chose the time and place of the Incarnation very injudiciously.) Our Lord need not mean the words about the mountain literally; but at the very least they must mean doing some mighty

work. The point is that the condition of doing such a mighty work is unwavering, unhesitating faith. Indeed He goes on in the very next sentence to make the same statement without any figures of speech at all: *πάντα ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσητε ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ πιστεύοντες λήψεσθε.*<sup>1</sup>

Can we even here take *πιστεύοντες* to mean 'having a general faith in the power and goodness of God'? We cannot. The corresponding passage in Mark,<sup>2</sup> though it adds a new difficulty, makes this point at least embarrassingly plain. The words are *πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ αἰτεῖσθε πιστεύετε ὅτι ἐλάβετε καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν*. The tense, present or (worse still) aorist, is of course perplexing. I hope someone will explain to us what either might represent in Aramaic. But there is no doubt at all that what we are to believe is precisely that we get 'all the things' we ask for. We are not to believe that we shall get either what we ask or else something far better: we are to believe that we shall get those very things. It is a faith, unwavering faith in that event, to which success is promised.

The same astonishing—and even, to my natural feelings, shocking—promise is repeated elsewhere with additions which may or may not turn out to be helpful for our present purpose.

In Matt. xviii, 19, we learn that if two (or two or three) agree in a petition it will be granted. Faith is not explicitly mentioned here but is no doubt assumed: if it were not, the promise would be only the more startling and the further (I think) from the pattern of Gethsemane. The reason for the promise follows: 'For where two or three are gathered together *εἰς τὸ ἔμῳ ὄνομα*, there am I in their midst.' With this goes John xiv, 13, 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do this': not this or something far better, but 'whatever you ask'.

I have discovered that some people find in these passages a solution of the whole problem. For here we have the prayer of the Church (as soon as two or three are gathered together in that

[<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxi, 22: 'And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.']

[<sup>2</sup> Mark xi, 23-4: 'Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea", and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will.']

Name) and the presence of Christ in the Church: so that the prayer which is granted by the Father is the prayer of the Son, and prayer and answer alike are an operation within the Deity.

I agree that this makes the promises less startling; but does it reconcile them with the A Pattern? And does it reconcile them with the facts? For surely there have been occasions on which the whole Church prays and is refused? I suppose that at least twice in this century the whole Church prayed for peace and no peace was given her. I think, however we define the Church, we must say that the whole Church prayed: peasants in Italy and popes in Russian villages, elders at Peebles, Anglicans in Cambridge, Congregationalists in Liverpool, Salvationists in East London. You may say (though I would not) that some who prayed were not in the Church; but it would be hard to find any in the Church who did not pray. But the cup did not pass from them. I am not, in principle, puzzled by the fact of the refusal: what I am puzzled by is the promise of granting.

And this at once raises a question which shows how frighteningly practical the problem is. *How* did the Church pray? Did she use the A Pattern or the B? Did she pray with unwavering confidence that peace would be given, or did she humbly follow the example of Gethsemane, adding 'if it be Thy will . . . not as I will, but as Thou wilt', preparing herself in advance for a refusal of that particular blessing and putting all her faith into the belief that even if it were denied, the denial would be full of mercy? I am disposed to believe that she did the latter. And was that, conceivably, her ghastly mistake? Was she like the *διακρινόμενος*, the man of doubtful faith who, as St James tells us,<sup>1</sup> must not suppose that he will receive anything? Have all my own intercessory prayers for years been mistaken? For I have always prayed that the illnesses of my friends might be healed 'if it was God's will', very clearly envisaging the possibility that it might not be. Perhaps this has all been a fake humility and a false spirituality for which my friends owe me little thanks; perhaps I ought never to have dreamed of refusal, *μηδὲν διακρινόμενος*?

[<sup>1</sup> James i, 6-8: 'But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.']

Again, if the true prayer is joined with the prayer of the Church and hers with the prayer of Christ, and is therefore irresistible, was not it Christ who prayed in Gethsemane, using a different method and meeting with denial?

Another attempted solution runs something like this. The promise is made to prayers in Christ's name. And this of course means not simply prayers which end with the formula 'Through Jesus Christ Our Lord' but prayers prayed in the spirit of Christ, prayers uttered by us when, and in so far as, we are 'in' Him. Such prayers are the ones that can be made with unwavering faith that the blessing we ask for will be given us. And this may be supported (though I suspect it had better not be) from I John v, 14, 'Whatever we ask Him according to His will, He will hear us.' But how are we to hold this view and yet avoid the implication (*quod nefas dicere*) that Christ Himself in Gethsemane failed to pray in the spirit of Christ, since He neither used the form which that spirit is held to justify nor received the answer which that spirit is held to insure? As for the Johannine passage, would we dare to produce it in this context before an audience of intelligent but simple inquirers. They come to us (this often happens) saying that they have been told that those who pray in faith to the Christian God will get what they ask: that they have tried it and not got what they asked: and what, please, is our explanation? Dare we say that when God promises 'You shall have what you ask' He secretly means 'You shall have it if you ask for something I wish to give you'? What should we think of an earthly father who promised to give his son whatever he chose for his birthday and, when the boy asked for a bicycle gave him an arithmetic book, then first disclosing the silent reservation with which the promise was made?

Of course the arithmetic book may be better for the son than the bicycle, and a robust faith may manage to believe so. That is not where the difficulty, the sense of cruel mockery, lies. The boy is tempted, not to complain that the bicycle was denied, but that the promise of 'anything he chose' was made. So with us.

It is possible that someone present may be wholly on the side of the B Pattern: someone who has seen many healed by prayer. Such a person will be tempted to reply that most of us are in fact grievously wrong in our prayer-life: that miracles are accorded to



unwavering faith: that if we dropped our disobedient lowliness and pseudo-spiritual timidity blessings we never dreamed of would be showered on us at every turn. I certainly would not hear such a person with scepticism, still less with mockery. I believe in miracles, here and now. But if this is the complete answer, then why was the A Pattern of prayer ever given at all?

I have no answer to my problem, though I have taken it to about every Christian I know, learned or simple, lay or clerical, within my own Communion or without. Before closing I have, however, one hesitant observation to make.

One thing seems to be clear to me. Whatever else faith may mean (that is, faith in the granting of the blessing asked, for with faith in any other sense we need not at this point be concerned) I feel quite sure that it does not mean any state of psychological certitude such as might be—I think it sometimes is—manufactured from within by the natural action of a strong will upon an obedient imagination. The faith that moves mountains is a gift from Him who created mountains. That being so, can I ease my problem by saying that until God gives me such a faith I have no practical decision to make; I must pray after the A Pattern because, in fact, I cannot pray after the B Pattern? If, on the other hand, God even gave me such a faith, then again I should have no decision to make; I should find myself praying in the B Pattern. This would fall in with an old opinion of my own that we ought all of us to be ashamed of not performing miracles and that we do not feel this shame enough. We regard our own state as normal and theurgy as exceptional, whereas we ought perhaps to regard the worker of miracles, however rare, as the true Christian norm and ourselves as spiritual cripples. Yet I do not find this quite a satisfactory solution. I think we might get over the prayer in Gethsemane. We might say that in His tender humility Our Lord, just as He refused the narcotic wine mingled with myrrh, and just as He chose (I think) to be united to a human nature not of iron nerves but to a nature sensitive, shrinking, and unable not to live through torture in advance, so He chose on that night to plumb the depths of Christian experience, to resemble not the heroes of His army but the very weakest camp followers and unfits; or even that such a choice is implied in those unconsciously profound and involuntarily blessed words ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot

save.' But some discomfort remains. I do not like to represent God as saying 'I will grant what you ask in faith' and adding, so to speak, 'Because I will not give you the faith—not that kind—unless you ask what I want to give you.' Once more, there is just a faint suggestion of mockery, of goods that look a little larger in the advertisement than they turn out to be. Not that we complain of any defect in the goods: it is the faintest suspicion of excess in the advertisement that is disquieting. But at present I have got no further. I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?

## MODERN THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM

This paper arose out of a conversation I had with the Principal<sup>1</sup> one night last term. A book of Alec Vidler's happened to be lying on the table and I expressed my reaction to the sort of theology it contained. My reaction was a hasty and ignorant one, produced with the freedom that comes after dinner.<sup>2</sup> One thing led to another and before we were done I was saying a good deal more than I had meant about the type of thought which, so far as I could gather, is now dominant in many theological colleges. He then said, 'I wish you would come and say all this to my young men.' He knew of course that I was extremely ignorant of the whole thing. But I think his idea was that you ought to know how a certain sort of theology strikes the outsider. Though I may have nothing but misunderstandings to lay before you, you ought to know that such misunderstandings exist. That sort of thing is easy to overlook inside one's own circle. The minds you daily meet have been conditioned by the same studies and prevalent opinions as your own. That may mislead you. For of course as priests it is the outsiders you will have to cope with. You exist in the long run for no other purpose. The proper study of shepherds is sheep, not (save accidentally) other shepherds. And woe to you if you do not evangelize. I am not trying to teach my grandmother. I am a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them. And now I start my bleating.

There are two sorts of outsiders: the uneducated, and those

[<sup>1</sup> The Principal of Westcott House, Cambridge, now the Bishop of Edinburgh (The Rt Rev Kenneth Carey).]

[<sup>2</sup> While the Bishop was out of the room, Lewis read 'The Sign at Cana' in Alec Vidler's *Windsor Sermons* (S.C.M. Press, 1958). The Bishop recalls that when he asked him what he thought about it, Lewis 'expressed himself very freely about the sermon and said that he thought that it was quite incredible that we should have had to wait nearly 2,000 years to be told by a theologian called Vidler that what the Church has always regarded as a miracle was, in fact, a parable!']

who are educated in some way but not in your way. How you are to deal with the first class, if you hold views like Loisy's or Schweitzer's or Bultmann's or Tillich's or even Alec Vidler's, I simply don't know. I see—and I'm told that you see—that it would hardly do to tell them what you really believe. A theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia—which either denies the miraculous altogether or, more strangely, after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection strains at such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes—if offered to the uneducated man can produce only one or other of two effects. It will make him a Roman Catholic or an atheist. What you offer him he will not recognize as Christianity. If he holds to what he calls Christianity he will leave a Church in which it is no longer taught and look for one where it is. If he agrees with your version he will no longer call himself a Christian and no longer come to church. In his crude, coarse way, he would respect you much more if you did the same. An experienced clergyman told me that most liberal priests, faced with this problem, have recalled from its grave the late medieval conception of two truths: a picture-truth which can be preached to the people, and an esoteric truth for use among the clergy. I shouldn't think you will enjoy this conception much when you have to put it into practice. I'm sure if I had to produce picture-truths to a parishioner in great anguish or under fierce temptation, and produce them with that seriousness and fervour which his condition demanded, while knowing all the time that I didn't exactly—only in some Pickwickian sense—believe them myself, I'd find my forehead getting red and damp and my collar getting tight. But that is your headache, not mine. You have, after all, a different sort of collar. I claim to belong to the second group of outsiders: educated, but not theologically educated. How one member of that group feels I must now try to tell you.

The undermining of the old orthodoxy has been mainly the work of divines engaged in New Testament criticism. The authority of experts in that discipline is the authority in deference to whom we are asked to give up a huge mass of beliefs shared in common by the early Church, the Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformers, and even the nineteenth century. I want to explain

what it is that makes me sceptical about this authority. Ignorantly sceptical, as you will all too easily see. But the scepticism is the father of the ignorance. It is hard to persevere in a close study when you can work up no *prima facie* confidence in your teachers.

First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. It sounds a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in those books all their lives. But that might be just the trouble. A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experiences of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious things about them. If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel. But I had better turn to examples.

In what is already a very old commentary I read that the Fourth Gospel is regarded by one school as a 'spiritual romance', 'a poem not a history', to be judged by the same canons as Nathan's parable, the Book of Jonah, *Paradise Lost* 'or, more exactly, *Pilgrim's Progress*'.<sup>1</sup> After a man has said that, why need one attend to anything else he says about any book in the world? Note that he regards *Pilgrim's Progress*, a story which professes to be a dream and flaunts its allegorical nature by every single proper name it uses, as the closest parallel. Note that the whole epic panoply of Milton goes for nothing. But even if we leave out the grosser absurdities and keep to *Jonah*, the insensitiveness is crass—*Jonah*, a tale with as few even pretended historical attachments as *Job*, grotesque in incident and surely not without a distinct, though of

[<sup>1</sup> Lewis is quoting from an article, 'The Gospel According to St. John', by Walter Lock in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, including the Apocrypha*, ed. by Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, Alfred Guillaume (S.P.C.K., 1928), p. 241. Lock, in turn, is quoting from James Drummond's *An Inquiry into the Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel* (Williams and Norgate, 1903).]

course edifying, vein of typically Jewish humour. Then turn to John. Read the dialogues: that with the Samaritan woman at the well, or that which follows the healing of the man born blind. Look at its pictures: Jesus (if I may use the word) doodling with his finger in the dust; the unforgettable  $\eta\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \nu\acute{\upsilon}\xi$  (xiii, 30). I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage—though it may no doubt contain errors—pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read. I would recommend him to read Auerbach.<sup>1</sup>

Here, from Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* (p. 30) is another: 'Observe in what unassimilated fashion the prediction of the parousia (Mk. viii, 38) follows upon the prediction of the passion (viii, 31).'<sup>2</sup> What can he mean? Unassimilated? Bultmann believes that predictions of the parousia are older than those of the passion. He therefore wants to believe—and no doubt does believe—that when they occur in the same passage some discrepancy or 'unassimilation' must be perceptible between them. But surely he foists this on the text with shocking lack of perception. Peter has confessed Jesus to be the Anointed One. That flash of glory is hardly over before the dark prophecy begins—that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Then this contrast is repeated. Peter, raised for a moment by his confession, makes his false step; the crushing rebuff 'Get thee behind me' follows. Then, across that momentary ruin which Peter (as so often) becomes, the voice of the Master, turning to the crowd, generalizes the moral. All His followers must take up the cross. This avoidance of suffering, this self-preservation, is not what life is really about. Then, more definitely still, the summons to martyrdom. You must stand to your tackling. If you disown Christ here and now, He will disown

[<sup>1</sup> Lewis means, I think, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Williard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953).]

[<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, translated by Kendrick Grobel, vol. I (S.C.M. Press, 1952), p. 30.]

you later. Logically, emotionally, imaginatively, the sequence is perfect. Only a Bultmann could think otherwise.

Finally, from the same Bultmann: 'The personality of Jesus has no importance for the kerygma either of Paul or of John . . . Indeed the tradition of the earliest Church did not even unconsciously preserve a picture of his personality. Every attempt to reconstruct one remains a play of subjective imagination.'<sup>1</sup>

So there is no personality of Our Lord presented in the New Testament. Through what strange process has this learned German gone in order to make himself blind to what all men except him see? What evidence have we that he would recognize a personality if it were there? For it is Bultmann *contra mundum*. If anything whatever is common to all believers, and even to many unbelievers, it is the sense that in the Gospels they have met a personality. There are characters whom we know to be historical but of whom we do not feel that we have any personal knowledge—knowledge by acquaintance; such are Alexander, Attila, or William of Orange. There are others who make no claim to historical reality but whom, none the less, we know as we know real people: Falstaff, Uncle Toby, Mr Pickwick. But there are only three characters who, claiming the first sort of reality, also actually have the second. And surely everyone knows who they are: Plato's Socrates, the Jesus of the Gospels, and Boswell's Johnson. Our acquaintance with them shows itself in a dozen ways. When we look into the Apocryphal gospels, we find ourselves constantly saying of this or that *logion*, 'No. It's a fine saying, but not His. That wasn't how He talked.'—just as we do with all pseudo-Johnsoniana. We are not in the least perturbed by the contrasts within each character: the union in Socrates of silly and scabrous titters about Greek pederasty with the highest mystical fervour and the homeliest good sense; in Johnson, of profound gravity and melancholy with that love of fun and nonsense which Boswell never understood though Fanny Burney did; in Jesus of peasant shrewdness, intolerable severity, and irresistible tenderness. So strong is the flavour of the personality that, even while He says things which, on any other assumption than that of Divine Incarnation in the fullest sense, would be appallingly arrogant, yet we—and many unbelievers too—accept Him at His own

[<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 35.]

valuation when He says 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' Even those passages in the New Testament which superficially, and in intention, are most concerned with the Divine, and least with the Human Nature, bring us face to face with the personality. I am not sure that they don't do this more than any others. 'We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of graciousness and reality . . . which we have looked upon and our hands have handled.' What is gained by trying to evade or dissipate this shattering immediacy of personal contact by talk about 'that significance which the early church found that it was impelled to attribute to the Master'? This hits us in the face. Not what they were impelled to do but what impelled them. I begin to fear that by *personality* Dr Bultmann means what I should call impersonality: what you'd get in a D.N.B. article or an obituary or a Victorian *Life and Letters of Yeshua Bar-Yosef* in three volumes with photographs.

That then is my first bleat. These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.

Now for my second bleat. All theology of the liberal type involves at some point—and often involves throughout—the claim that the real behaviour and purpose and teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood and misrepresented by His followers, and has been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars. Now long before I became interested in theology I had met this kind of theory elsewhere. The tradition of Jowett still dominated the study of ancient philosophy when I was reading Greats. One was brought up to believe that the real meaning of Plato had been misunderstood by Aristotle and wildly travestied by the neo-Platonists, only to be recovered by the moderns. When recovered, it turned out (most fortunately) that Plato had really all along been an English Hegelian, rather like T. H. Green. I have met it a third time in my own professional studies; every week a clever undergraduate, every quarter a dull American don, discovers for the first time what some Shakesperian play really meant. But in this third instance I am a privileged person. The revolution in thought and sentiment which has occurred in my



own lifetime is so great that I belong, mentally, to Shakespeare's world far more than to that of these recent interpreters. I see—I feel it in my bones—I know beyond argument—that most of their interpretations are merely impossible; they involve a way of looking at things which was not known in 1914, much less in the Jacobean period. This daily confirms my suspicion of the same approach to Plato or the New Testament. The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous. There is an *a priori* improbability in it which almost no argument and no evidence could counterbalance.

Thirdly, I find in these theologians a constant use of the principle that the miraculous does not occur. Thus any statement put into Our Lord's mouth by the old texts, which, if He had really made it, would constitute a prediction of the future, is taken to have been put in after the occurrence which it seemed to predict. This is very sensible if we start by knowing that inspired prediction can never occur. Similarly in general, the rejection as un-historical of all passages which narrate miracles is sensible if we start by knowing that the miraculous in general never occurs. Now I do not here want to discuss whether the miraculous is possible. I only want to point out that this is a purely philosophical question. Scholars, as scholars, speak on it with no more authority than anyone else. The canon 'If miraculous, un-historical' is one they bring to their study of the texts, not one they have learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.

But my fourth bleat—which is also my loudest and longest—is still to come.

All this sort of criticism attempts to reconstruct the genesis of the texts it studies; what vanished documents each author used, when and where he wrote, with what purposes, under what influences—the whole *Sitz im Leben* of the text. This is done with immense erudition and great ingenuity. And at first sight it is very convincing. I think I should be convinced by it myself, but that I

carry about with me a charm—the herb *moly*—against it. You must excuse me if I now speak for a while of myself. The value of what I say depends on its being first-hand evidence.

What forearms me against all these Reconstructions is the fact that I have seen it all from the other end of the stick. I have watched reviewers reconstructing the genesis of my own books in just this way.

Until you come to be reviewed yourself you would never believe how little of an ordinary review is taken up by criticism in the strict sense: by evaluation, praise, or censure, of the book actually written. Most of it is taken up with imaginary histories of the process by which you wrote it. The very terms which the reviewers use in praising or dispraising often imply such a history. They praise a passage as ‘spontaneous’ and censure another as ‘laboured’; that is, they think they know that you wrote the one *currente calamo* and the other *invita Minerva*.

What the value of such reconstructions is I learned very early in my career. I had published a book of essays; and the one into which I had put most of my heart, the one I really cared about and in which I discharged a keen enthusiasm, was on William Morris.<sup>1</sup> And in almost the first review I was told that this was obviously the only one in the book in which I had felt no interest. Now don’t mistake. The critic was, I now believe, quite right in thinking it the worst essay in the book; at least everyone agreed with him. Where he was totally wrong was in his imaginary history of the causes which produced its dullness.

Well, this made me prick up my ears. Since then I have watched with some care similar imaginary histories both of my own books and of books by friends whose real history I knew. Reviewers, both friendly and hostile, will dash you off such histories with great confidence; will tell you what public events had directed the author’s mind to this or that, what other authors had influenced him, what his over-all intention was, what sort of audience he principally addressed, why—and when—he did everything.

Now I must first record my impression; then, distinct from it, what I can say with certainty. My impression is that in the whole

[<sup>1</sup> Lewis’s essay on ‘William Morris’ appears in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1939).]

of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100 per cent. failure. You would expect that by mere chance they would hit as often as they miss. But it is my impression that they do no such thing. I can't remember a single hit. But as I have not kept a careful record my mere impression may be mistaken. What I think I can say with certainty is that they are usually wrong.

And yet they would often sound—if you didn't know the truth—extremely convincing. Many reviewers said that the Ring in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was suggested by the atom bomb. What could be more plausible? Here is a book published when everyone was preoccupied by that sinister invention; here in the centre of the book is a weapon which it seems madness to throw away yet fatal to use. Yet in fact, the chronology of the book's composition makes the theory impossible. Only the other week a reviewer said that a fairy tale by my friend Roger Lancelyn Green was influenced by fairy tales of mine. Nothing could be more probable. I have an imaginary country with a beneficent lion in it: Green, one with a beneficent tiger. Green and I can be proved to read one another's works; to be indeed in various ways closely associated. The case for an affiliation is far stronger than many which we accept as conclusive when dead authors are concerned. But it's all untrue nevertheless. I know the genesis of that Tiger and that Lion and they are quite independent.<sup>1</sup>

Now this surely ought to give us pause. The reconstruction of the history of a text, when the text is ancient, sounds very convincing. But one is after all sailing by dead reckoning; the results cannot be checked by fact. In order to decide how reliable the method is, what more could you ask for than to be shown an

[<sup>1</sup> Lewis corrected this error in the following letter, 'Books for Children', in *The Times Literary Supplement* (28 November 1958), p. 689: 'Sir,—A review of Mr R. L. Green's *Land of the Lord High Tiger* in your issue of 21 November spoke of myself (in passing) with so much kindness that I am reluctant to cavil at anything it contained: but in justice to Mr Green I must. The critic suggested that Mr Green's Tiger owed something to my fairy-tales. In reality this is not so and is chronologically impossible. The Tiger was an old inhabitant, and his land a familiar haunt, of Mr Green's imagination long before I began writing. There is a moral here for all of us as critics. I wonder how much *Quellenforschung* in our studies of older literature seems solid only because those who knew the facts are dead and cannot contradict it?']

instance where the same method is at work and we have facts to check it by? Well, that is what I have done. And we find, that when this check is available, the results are either always, or else nearly always, wrong. The 'assured results of modern scholarship', as to the way in which an old book was written, are 'assured', we may conclude, only because the men who knew the facts are dead and can't blow the gaff. The huge essays in my own field which reconstruct the history of *Piers Plowman* or *The Faerie Queene* are most unlikely to be anything but sheer illusions.<sup>1</sup>

Am I then venturing to compare every whipster who writes a review in a modern weekly with these great scholars who have devoted their whole lives to the detailed study of the New Testament? If the former are always wrong, does it follow that the latter must fare no better?

There are two answers to this, First, while I respect the learning of the great Biblical critics, I am not yet persuaded that their judgement is equally to be respected. But, secondly, consider with what overwhelming advantages the mere reviewers start. They reconstruct the history of a book written by someone whose mother-tongue is the same as theirs; a contemporary, educated like themselves, living in something like the same mental and spiritual climate. They have everything to help them. The superiority in judgement and diligence which you are going to attribute to the Biblical critics will have to be almost superhuman if it is to offset the fact that they are everywhere faced with customs, language, race-characteristics, class-characteristics, a religious background, habits of composition, and basic assumptions, which no scholarship will ever enable any man now alive to know as surely and intimately and instinctively as the reviewer can know mine. And for the very same reason, remember, the Biblical critics, whatever reconstructions they devise, can never be crudely proved wrong. St Mark is dead. When they meet St Peter there will be more pressing matters to discuss.

You may say, of course, that such reviewers are foolish in so far as they guess how a sort of book they never wrote themselves was written by another. They assume that you wrote a story as

[<sup>1</sup> For a fuller treatment on book-reviewing, see Lewis's essay 'On Criticism' in his *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Bles, 1966), pp. 43-58.]

they would try to write a story; the fact that they would so try, explains why they have not produced any stories. But are the Biblical critics in this way much better off? Dr Bultmann never wrote a gospel. Has the experience of his learned, specialized, and no doubt meritorious, life really given him any power of seeing into the minds of those long dead men who were caught up into what, on any view, must be regarded as the central religious experience of the whole human race? It is no incivility to say—he himself would admit—that he must in every way be divided from the evangelists by far more formidable barriers—spiritual as well as intellectual—than any that could exist between my reviewers and me.

My picture of one layman's reaction—and I think it is not a rare one—would be incomplete without some account of the hopes he secretly cherishes and the naïve reflections with which he sometimes keeps his spirits up.

You must face the fact he does not expect the present school of theological thought to be everlasting. He thinks, perhaps wishfully thinks, that the whole thing may blow over. I have learned in other fields of study how transitory the 'assured results of modern scholarship' may be, how soon scholarship ceases to be modern. The confident treatment to which the New Testament is subjected is no longer applied to profane texts. There used to be English scholars who were prepared to cut up *Henry VI* between half a dozen authors and assign his share to each. We don't do that now. When I was a boy one would have been laughed at for supposing there had been a real Homer: the disintegrators seemed to have triumphed forever. But Homer seems to be creeping back. Even the belief of the ancient Greeks that the Mycenaeans were their ancestors and spoke Greek has been surprisingly supported. We may without disgrace believe in a historical Arthur. Everywhere, except in theology, there has been a vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself. We can't keep ourselves from murmuring *multa renascentur quae jam cecidere*.

Nor can a man of my age ever forget how suddenly and completely the idealist philosophy of his youth fell. McTaggart, Green, Bosanquet, Bradley seemed enthroned forever; they went down as suddenly as the Bastille. And the interesting thing is that while I lived under that dynasty I felt various difficulties and

objections which I never dared to express. They were so frightfully obvious that I felt sure they must be mere misunderstandings: the great men could not have made such very elementary mistakes as those which my objections implied. But very similar objections—though put, no doubt, far more cogently than I could have put them—were among the criticisms which finally prevailed. They would now be the stock answers to English Hegelianism. If anyone present tonight has felt the same shy and tentative doubts about the great Biblical critics, perhaps he need not feel quite certain that they are only his stupidity. They may have a future he little dreams of.

We derive a little comfort, too, from our mathematical colleagues. When a critic reconstructs the genesis of a text he usually has to use what may be called linked hypotheses. Thus Bultmann says that Peter's confession is 'an Easter-story projected backward into Jesus' life-time' (p. 26, *op. cit.*). The first hypothesis is that Peter made no such confession. Then, granting that, there is a second hypothesis as to how the false story of his having done so might have grown up. Now let us suppose—what I am far from granting—that the first hypothesis has a probability of 90 per cent. Let us assume that the second hypothesis also has a probability of 90 per cent. But the two together don't still have 90 per cent., for the second comes in only on the assumption of the first. You have not A plus B; you have a complex AB. And the mathematicians tell me that AB has only an 81 per cent. probability. I'm not good enough at arithmetic to work it out, but you see that if, in a complex reconstruction, you go on thus superinducing hypothesis on hypothesis, you will in the end get a complex in which, though each hypothesis by itself has in a sense a high probability, the whole has almost none.

You must not, however, paint the picture too black. We are not fundamentalists. We think that different elements in this sort of theology have different degrees of strength. The nearer it sticks to mere textual criticism, of the old sort, Lachmann's sort, the more we are disposed to believe in it. And of course we agree that passages almost verbally identical cannot be independent. It is as we glide away from this into reconstructions of a subtler and more ambitious kind that our faith in the method wavers; and our faith in Christianity is proportionately corroborated. The sort

of statement that arouses our deepest scepticism is the statement that something in a Gospel cannot be historical because it shows a theology or an ecclesiology too developed for so early a date. For this implies that we know, first of all, that there was any development in the matter, and secondly, how quickly it proceeded. It even implies an extraordinary homogeneity and continuity of development: implicitly denies that anyone could greatly have anticipated anyone else. This seems to involve knowing about a number of long dead people—for the early Christians were, after all, people—things of which I believe few of us could have given an accurate account if we had lived among them; all the forward and backward surge of discussion, preaching, and individual religious experience. I could not speak with similar confidence about the circle I have chiefly lived in myself. I could not describe the history even of my own thought as confidently as these men describe the history of the early Church's mind. And I am perfectly certain no one else could. Suppose a future scholar knew that I abandoned Christianity in my teens, and that, also in my teens, I went to an atheist tutor. Would not this seem far better evidence than most of what we have about the development of Christian theology in the first two centuries? Would he not conclude that my apostasy was due to the tutor? And then reject as 'backward projection' any story which represented me as an atheist before I went to that tutor? Yet he would be wrong. I am sorry to have become once more autobiographical. But reflection on the extreme improbability of his own life—by historical standards—seems to me a profitable exercise for everyone. It encourages a due agnosticism.

For agnosticism is, in a sense, what I am preaching. I do not wish to reduce the sceptical element in your minds. I am only suggesting that it need not be reserved exclusively for the New Testament and the Creeds. Try doubting something else.

Such scepticism might, I think, begin at the very beginning with the thought which underlies the whole demythology of our time. It was put long ago by Tyrrell. As man progresses he revolts against 'earlier and inadequate expressions of the religious idea . . . Taken literally, and not symbolically, they do not meet his need. And as long as he demands to picture to himself distinctly the term and satisfaction of that need he is doomed to

doubt, for his picturings will necessarily be drawn from the world of his present experience.’<sup>1</sup>

In one way of course Tyrrell was saying nothing new. The Negative Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius had said as much, but it drew no such conclusions as Tyrrell. Perhaps this is because the older tradition found our conceptions inadequate to God whereas Tyrrell finds it inadequate to ‘the religious idea’. He doesn’t say whose idea. But I am afraid he means Man’s idea. We, being men, know what we think: and we find the doctrines of the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Second Coming inadequate to our thoughts. But supposing these things were the expressions of God’s thought?

It might still be true that ‘taken literally and not symbolically’ they are inadequate. From which the conclusion commonly drawn is that they must be taken symbolically, not literally; that is, wholly symbolically. All the details are equally symbolical and analogical.

But surely there is a flaw here. The argument runs like this. All the details are derived from our present experience; but the reality transcends our experience: therefore all the details are wholly and equally symbolical. But suppose a dog were trying to form a conception of human life. All the details in its picture would be derived from canine experience. Therefore all that the dog imagined could, at best, be only analogically true of human life. The conclusion is false. If the dog visualized our scientific researches in terms of ratting, this would be analogical; but if it thought that eating could be predicated of humans only in an analogical sense, the dog would be wrong. In fact if a dog could, *per impossible*, be plunged for a day into human life, it would be hardly more surprised by hitherto unimagined differences than by hitherto unsuspected similarities. A reverent dog would be shocked. A modernist dog, distrusting the whole experience, would ask to be taken to the vet.

But the dog can’t get into human life. Consequently, though it can be sure that its best ideas of human life are full of analogy and symbol, it could never point to any one detail and say, ‘This is entirely symbolic.’ You cannot know that everything in the

[<sup>1</sup> George Tyrrell, ‘The Apocalyptic Vision of Christ’ in *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), p. 125.]



representation of a thing is symbolical unless you have independent access to the thing and can compare it with the representation. Dr Tyrrell can tell that the story of the Ascension is inadequate to his religious idea, because he knows his own idea and can compare it with the story. But how if we are asking about a transcendent, objective reality to which the story is our sole access? 'We know not—oh we know not.' But then we must take our ignorance seriously.

Of course if 'taken literally and not symbolically' means 'taken in terms of mere physics', then this story is not even a religious story. Motion away from the earth—which is what Ascension physically means—would not in itself be an event of spiritual significance. Therefore, you argue, the spiritual reality can have nothing but an analogical connection with the story of an ascent. For the union of God with God and of Man with God—man can have nothing to do with space. Who told you this? What you really mean is that we can't see how it could possibly have anything to do with it. That is a quite different proposition. When I know as I am known I shall be able to tell which parts of the story were purely symbolical and which, if any, were not; shall see how the transcendent reality either excludes and repels locality, or how unimaginably it assimilates and loads it with significance. Had we not better wait?

Such are the reactions of one bleating layman to Modern Theology. It is right you should hear them. You will not perhaps hear them very often again. Your parishioners will not often speak to you quite frankly. Once the layman was anxious to hide the fact that he believed so much less than the Vicar: he now tends to hide the fact that he believes so much more. Missionary to the priests of one's own church is an embarrassing rôle; though I have a horrid feeling that if such mission work is not soon undertaken the future history of the Church of England is likely to be short.

## THE SEEING EYE

The Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space. On the other hand, a good many people in many different times and countries claim to have found God, or been found by God, here on earth.

The conclusion some want us to draw from these data is that God does not exist. As a corollary, those who think they have met Him on earth were suffering from a delusion.

But other conclusions might be drawn:

1. We have not yet gone far enough in space. There had been ships on the Atlantic for a good time before America was discovered.

2. God does exist but is locally confined to this planet.

3. The Russians did find God in space without knowing it, because they lacked the requisite apparatus for detecting Him.

4. God does exist but is not an object either located in a particular part of space nor diffused, as we once thought 'ether' was, throughout space.

The first two conclusions do not interest me. The sort of religion for which they could be a defence would be a religion for savages: the belief in a local deity who can be contained in a particular temple, island or grove. That, in fact, seems to be the sort of religion about which the Russians—or some Russians, and a good many people in the West—are being irreligious. It is not in the least disquieting that no astronauts have discovered a god of that sort. The really disquieting thing would be if they had.

The third and fourth conclusions are the ones for my money.

Looking for God—or Heaven—by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters or Stratford as one of the places. Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in

every play. But he is never present in the same way as Falstaff or Lady Macbeth. Nor is he diffused through the play like a gas.

If there were an idiot who thought plays existed on their own, without an author (not to mention actors, producer, manager, stagehands and what not), our belief in Shakespeare would not be much affected by his saying, quite truly, that he had studied all the plays and never found Shakespeare in them.

The rest of us, in varying degrees according to our perceptiveness, 'found Shakespeare' in the plays. But it is a quite different sort of 'finding' from anything our poor friend has in mind.

Even he has in reality been in some way affected by Shakespeare, but without knowing it. He lacked the necessary apparatus for detecting Shakespeare.

Now of course this is only an analogy. I am not suggesting at all that the existence of God is as easily established as the existence of Shakespeare. My point is that, if God does exist, He is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another.

If God created the universe, He created space-time, which is to the universe as the metre is to a poem or the key is to music. To look for Him as one item within the framework which He Himself invented is nonsensical.

If God—such a God as any adult religion believes in—exists, mere movement in space will never bring you any nearer to Him or any farther from Him than you are at this very moment. You can neither reach Him nor avoid Him by travelling to Alpha Centauri or even to other galaxies. A fish is no more, and no less, in the sea after it has swum a thousand miles than it was when it set out.

How, then, it may be asked, can we either reach or avoid Him?

The avoiding, in many times and places, has proved so difficult that a very large part of the human race failed to achieve it. But in our own time and place it is extremely easy. Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select them very

carefully. But you'd be safer to stick to the papers. You'll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or a snobbish appeal.

About the reaching, I am a far less reliable guide. That is because I never had the experience of looking for God. It was the other way round; He was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer. He stalked me like a redskin, took unerring aim, and fired. And I am very thankful that that is how the first (conscious) meeting occurred. It forearms one against subsequent fears that the whole thing was only wish fulfilment. Something one didn't wish for can hardly be that.

But it is significant that this long-evaded encounter happened at a time when I was making a serious effort to obey my conscience. No doubt it was far less serious than I supposed, but it was the most serious I had made for a long time.

One of the first results of such an effort is to bring your picture of yourself down to something nearer life-size. And presently you begin to wonder whether you are yet, in any full sense, a person at all; whether you are entitled to call yourself 'I' (it is a sacred name). In that way, the process is like being psycho-analysed, only cheaper—I mean, in dollars; in some other ways it may be more costly. You find that what you called yourself is only a thin film on the surface of an unsounded and dangerous sea. But not merely dangerous. Radiant things, delights and inspirations, come to the surface as well as snarling resentments and nagging lusts.

One's ordinary self is, then, a mere façade. There's a huge area out of sight behind it.

And then, if one listens to the physicists, one discovers that the same is true of all the things around us. These tables and chairs, this magazine, the trees, clouds and mountains are façades. Poke (scientifically) into them and you find the unimaginable structure of the atom. That is, in the long run, you find mathematical formulas.

There are you (whatever YOU means) sitting reading. Out there (whatever THERE means) is a white page with black marks on it. And both are façades. Behind both lies—well, Whatever-it-is. The psychologists, and the theologians, though they use different symbols, equally use symbols when they try to probe the depth

behind the façade called YOU. That is, they can't really say 'It is this', but they can say 'It is in some way like this.' And the physicists, trying to probe behind the other façade, can give you only mathematics. And the mathematics may be true about the reality, but it can hardly be the reality itself, any more than contour lines are real mountains.

I am not in the least blaming either set of experts for this state of affairs. They make progress. They are always discovering things. If governments make a bad use of the physicists' discoveries, or if novelists and biographers make a bad use of the psychologists' discoveries, the experts are not to blame. The point, however, is that every fresh discovery, far from dissipating, deepens the mystery.

Presently, if you are a person of a certain sort, if you are one who has to believe that all things which exist must have unity it will seem to you irresistibly probable that what lies ultimately behind the one façade also lies ultimately behind the other. And then—again, if you are that sort of person—you may come to be convinced that your contact with that mystery in the area you call yourself is a good deal closer than your contact through what you call matter. For in the one case I, the ordinary, conscious I, am continuous with the unknown depth.

And after that, you may come (some do) to believe that that voice—like all the rest, I must speak symbolically—that voice which speaks in your conscience and in some of your intensest joys, which is sometimes so obstinately silent, sometimes so easily silenced, and then at other times so loud and emphatic, is in fact the closest contact you have with the mystery; and therefore finally to be trusted, obeyed, feared and desired more than all other things. But still, if you are a different sort of person, you will not come to this conclusion.

I hope everyone sees how this is related to the astronomical question from which we started. The process I have been sketching may equally well occur, or fail to occur, wherever you happen to be. I don't mean that all religious and all irreligious people have either taken this step or refused to take it. Once religion and its opposite are in the world—and they have both been in it for a very long time—the majority in both camps will be simply conformists. Their belief or disbelief will result from their upbringing

and from the prevailing tone of the circles they live in. They will have done no hunting for God and no flying for God on their own. But if no minorities who did these things on their own existed I presume that the conforming majorities would not exist either. (Don't imagine I'm despising these majorities. I am sure the one contains better Christians than I am; the other, nobler atheists than I was.)

Space-travel really has nothing to do with the matter. To some, God is discoverable everywhere; to others, nowhere. Those who do not find Him on earth are unlikely to find Him in space. (Hang it all, we're in space already; every year we go a huge circular tour in space.) But send a saint up in a spaceship and he'll find God in space as he found God on earth. Much depends on the seeing eye.

And this is especially confirmed by my own religion, which is Christianity. When I said a while ago that it was nonsensical to look for God as one item within His own work, the universe, some readers may have wanted to protest. They wanted to say, 'But surely, according to Christianity, that is just what did once happen? Surely the central doctrine is that God became man and walked about among other men in Palestine? If that is not appearing as an item in His own work, what is it?'

The objection is much to the point. To meet it, I must readjust my old analogy of the play. One might imagine a play in which the dramatist introduced himself as a character into his own play and was pelted off the stage as an impudent impostor by the other characters. It might be rather a good play; if I had any talent for the theatre I'd try my hand at writing it. But since (as far as I know) such a play doesn't exist, we had better change to a narrative work; a story into which the author puts himself as one of the characters.

We have a real instance of this in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante is (1) the muse outside the poem who is inventing the whole thing, and (2) a character inside the poem, whom the other characters meet and with whom they hold conversations. Where the analogy breaks down is that everything the poem contains is merely imaginary, in that the characters have no free will. They (the characters) can say to Dante only what Dante (the poet) has decided to put into their mouths. I do not think we humans are

related to God in that way. I think God can make things which not only—like a poet's or novelist's characters—*seem* to have a partially independent life, but really have it. But the analogy furnishes a crude model of the Incarnation in two respects: (1) Dante the poet and Dante the character are in a sense one, but in another sense two. This is a faint and far-off suggestion of what theologians mean by the 'union of the two natures' (divine and human) in Christ. (2) The other people in the poem meet and see and hear Dante; but they have not even the faintest suspicion that he is making the whole world in which they exist and has a life of his own, outside it, independent of it.

It is the second point which is most relevant. For the Christian story is that Christ was perceived to be God by very few people indeed; perhaps, for a time only by St Peter, who would also, and for the same reason, have found God in space. For Christ said to Peter, 'Flesh and blood have not taught you this.' The methods of science do not discover facts of that order.

Indeed the expectation of finding God by astronautics would be very like trying to verify or falsify the divinity of Christ by taking specimens of His blood or dissecting Him. And in their own way they did both. But they were no wiser than before. What is required is a certain faculty of recognition.

If you do not at all know God, of course you will not recognize Him, either in Jesus or in outer space.

The fact that we have not found God in space does not, then, bother me in the least. Nor am I much concerned about the 'space race' between America and Russia. The more money, time, skill and zeal they both spend on that rivalry, the less, we may hope they will have to spend on armaments. Great powers might be more usefully, but are seldom less dangerously, employed than in fabricating costly objects and flinging them, as you might say, overboard. Good luck to it! It is an excellent way of letting off steam.

But there are three ways in which space-travel will bother me if it reaches the stage for which most people are hoping.

The first is merely sentimental, or perhaps aesthetic. No moonlit night will ever be the same to me again if, as I look up at that pale disc, I must think 'Yes: up there to the left is the Russian area, and over there to the right is the American bit. And up at the top

is the place which is now threatening to produce a crisis.' The immemorial Moon—the Moon of the myths, the poets, the lovers—will have been taken from us forever. Part of our mind, a huge mass of our emotional wealth, will have gone. Artemis, Diana, the silver planet belonged in that fashion to all humanity: he who first reaches it steals something from us all.

Secondly, a more practical issue will arise when, if ever, we discover rational creatures on other planets. I think myself, this is a very remote contingency. The balance of probability is against life on any other planet of the solar system. We shall hardly find it nearer than the stars. And even if we reach the Moon we shall be no nearer to stellar travel than the first man who paddled across a river was to crossing the Pacific.

This thought is welcome to me because, to be frank, I have no pleasure in looking forward to a meeting between humanity and any alien rational species. I observe how the white man has hitherto treated the black, and how, even among civilized men, the stronger have treated the weaker. If we encounter in the depth of space a race, however innocent and amiable, which is technologically weaker than ourselves, I do not doubt that the same revolting story will be repeated. We shall enslave, deceive, exploit or exterminate; at the very least we shall corrupt it with our vices and infect it with our diseases.

We are not fit yet to visit other worlds. We have filled our own with massacre, torture, syphilis, famine, dust bowls and with all that is hideous to ear or eye. Must we go on to infect new realms?

Of course we might find a species stronger than ourselves. In that case we shall have met, if not God, at least God's judgement in space. But once more the detecting apparatus will be inadequate. We shall think it just our bad luck if righteous creatures rightly destroy those who come to reduce them to misery.

It was in part these reflections that first moved me to make my own small contributions to science fiction. In those days writers in that genre almost automatically represented the inhabitants of other worlds as monsters and the terrestrial invaders as good. Since then the opposite set-up has become fairly common. If I



could believe that I had in any degree contributed to this change, I should be a proud man.<sup>1</sup>

The same problem, by the way, is beginning to threaten us as regards the dolphins. I don't think it has yet been proved that they are rational. But if they are, we have no more right to enslave them than to enslave our fellow-men. And some of us will continue to say this, but we shall be mocked.

The third thing is this. Some people are troubled, and others are delighted, at the idea of finding not one, but perhaps innumerable rational species scattered about the universe. In both cases the emotion arises from a belief that such discoveries would be fatal to Christian theology. For it will be said that theology connects the Incarnation of God with the Fall and Redemption of man. And this would seem to attribute to our species and to our little planet a central position in cosmic history which is not credible if rationally inhabited planets are to be had by the million.

Older readers will, with me, notice the vast change in astronomical speculation which this view involves. When we were boys all astronomers, so far as I know, impressed upon us the antecedent improbabilities of life in any part of the universe whatever. It was not thought unlikely that this earth was the solitary exception to a universal reign of the inorganic. Now Professor Hoyle, and many with him, say that in so vast a universe life must have occurred in times and places without number. The interesting thing is that I have heard both these estimates used as arguments against Christianity.

Now it seems to me that we must find out more than we can at present know—which is nothing—about hypothetical rational species before we can say what theological corollaries or difficulties their discovery would raise.

We might, for example, find a race which was, like us, rational but, unlike us, innocent—no wars nor any other wickedness among them; all peace and good fellowship. I don't think any

[<sup>1</sup> The reference is to Lewis's interplanetary novels, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. He was probably the first writer to introduce the idea of having fallen terrestrial invaders discover on other planets—in his own books, Mars (*Out of the Silent Planet*) and Venus (*Perelandra*)—unfallen rational beings who were in no need of redemption and with nothing to learn from us. See also his essay, 'Will We Lose God in Outer Space?' *Christian Herald*, vol. LXXXI (April, 1958), pp. 19, 74-6.]

Christian would be puzzled to find that they knew no story of an Incarnation or Redemption, and might even find our story hard to understand or accept if we told it to them. There would have been no Redemption in such a world because it would not have needed redeeming. 'They that are whole need not the physician.' The sheep that has never strayed need not be sought for. We should have much to learn from such people and nothing to teach them. If we were wise, we should fall at their feet. But probably we should be unable to 'take it'. We'd find some reason for exterminating them.

Again, we might find a race which, like ours, contained both good and bad. And we might find that for them, as for us, something had been done: that at some point in their history some great interference for the better, believed by some of them to be supernatural, had been recorded, and that its effects, though often impeded and perverted, were still alive among them. It need not, as far as I can see, have conformed to the pattern of Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection. God may have other ways—how should I be able to imagine them?—of redeeming a lost world. And Redemption in that alien mode might not be easily recognizable by our missionaries, let alone by our atheists.

We might meet a species which, like us, needed Redemption but had not been given it. But would this fundamentally be more of a difficulty than any Christian's first meeting with a new tribe of savages? It would be our duty to preach the Gospel to them. For if they are rational, capable both of sin and repentance, they are our brethren, whatever they look like. Would this spreading of the Gospel from earth, through man, imply a pre-eminence for earth and man? Not in any real sense. If a thing is to begin at all, it must begin at some particular time and place; and any time and place raises the question: 'Why just then and just there?' One can conceive an extraterrestrial development of Christianity so brilliant that earth's place in the story might sink to that of a prologue.

Finally, we might find a race which was strictly diabolical—no tiniest spark felt in them from which any goodness could ever be coaxed into the feeblest glow; all of them incurably perverted through and through. What then? We Christians had always been told that there were creatures like that in existence. True, we

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thought they were all incorporeal spirits. A minor readjustment thus becomes necessary.

But all this is in the realm of fantastic speculation. We are trying to cross a bridge, not only before we come to it, but even before we know there is a river that needs bridging.

# Christian Reflections by C. S. Lewis

## ON *Christianity and Literature:*

“. . . the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world.”

## ON *Christianity and Culture:*

“On the whole, the New Testament seemed, if not hostile, yet unmistakably cold to culture. I think we can still believe culture to be innocent after we have read the New Testament; I cannot see that we are encouraged to think it important.”

## ON *Ethics:*

“Obviously it is moral codes that create questions of casuistry, just as the rules of chess create chess problems. The man without a moral code, like the animal, is free from moral problems. The man who has not learned to count is free from mathematical problems. A man asleep is free from all problems . . .”

## ON *Futility:*

“I can understand a man coming in the end, and after prolonged consideration, to the view that existence is not futile. But how any man could have taken it for granted beats me . . .”

## ON *Church Music:*

“The case for abolishing all Church Music whatever thus seems to me far stronger than the case for abolishing the difficult work of the trained choir and retaining the lusty roar of the congregation.”

## ON *Petitionary Prayer:*

“My problem arises from the fact that Christian teaching seems at first sight to contain two different patterns of petitionary prayer which are . . . pressingly inconsistent in the practical sense that no man, so far as I can see, could possibly follow them both at the same moment.”

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