

A Prophet Neither in Ireland Nor in England

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Jesus said that 'No prophet is accepted in his own country'. My presence with you this evening might seem to prove the contrary of Clive Staples Lewis. Yet in different senses both his native Ireland and his adopted England have rejected him: having both rejected what, following the greatest of English Presbyterians, Richard Baxter, he called 'mere Christianity', by which he meant that vast body of essential doctrine and belief which all Christians hold in common. Indeed the phrase might serve to recall to us Richard Baxter's own labours for Christian reunion, and the fact that while he fell short of full charity to Roman Catholics, he shocked his fellow-Protestants by denying that the Pope was Antichrist. In Lewis we have the worthy modern heir to Baxter, and I can think of no twentieth-century writer who commands a larger devoted readership than Lewis among Christians of all kinds, from Evangelicals to Roman Catholics. Yet it is in Ulster that Christians seem most unable to accept that they do have a common ground, the ground which Lewis defended against the liberals and sceptics in England who most despise them.

Indeed I am not sure how many of his readers outside Ulster would know he was an Ulsterman, and I cannot see that the Province had much direct influence on his work or did anything to make him a Christian. He denied that he had satirized the Ireland of his childhood as Puritania in *The Pilgrim's Regress* when the claim was made by his Roman Catholic publisher,¹ yet in 1931, he summarized his objections to Irish Christianity to the closest of the Irish friends of his adolescence, Arthur Greeves. What was wrong with it, he declared, was:

(1) That the system denied pleasures to others as well as to the votaries themselves: whatever the merits of self-denial, this is unpardonable interference. (2) It inconsistently kept some worldly pleasures and always selected the worst ones — gluttony, avarice, etc. (3) It was ignorant. It could give no "reason for the faith that was in it". Your relations have been found very ill grounded in the Bible itself and as ignorant as savages of the historical and theological reading needed to make the Bible more than a superstition. (4) "By their fruits ye shall know them". Have they the marks of peace, love, wisdom and humility

*on their faces or in their conversation? Really, you need not bother about that kind of Puritanism. It is simply the form which the memory of Christianity takes just before it finally dies away altogether in a commercial community: just as extreme emotional ritualism is the form it takes on just before it dies in a fashionable community.*²

Again, Lewis's brother and life-long friend and companion Warnie describes Lewis's conversion to Christianity as no sudden thing but "a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long standing — an illness that had its origins in our childhood, in the dry husks of religion offered by the semi-political church-going of Ulster".³ Thus Lewis's return to Christianity sprang not from his ancestral Protestantism but from those stabs of joy as from another world experienced in reading Norse mythology: for his response to the gods of Valhalla, he wrote, "contained elements which my religion ought to have contained and did not . . . Sometimes I can almost think that I was sent back to the false gods there to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself."⁴ All that Ireland gave towards this was the beauty of landscape, especially in the Wicklow mountains, where Lewis came to see the wonder of his new mythological Wagnerian world, "here a steep hillside covered with firs where Mime might meet Sieglinde, there a sunny glade where Siegfried might listen to the bird . . ." ⁵ Even the Ulsterman with the profoundest influence on Lewis, his tutor Kirkpatrick, the 'Great Knock of Great Bookham' in Surrey, was an atheist, albeit a very Presbyterian one. "He always, on Sundays, gardened in a different, and slightly more respectable, suit. An Ulster Scot may come to disbelieve in God, but not to wear his week-day clothes on the Sabbath."⁶ What Lewis got from Kirkpatrick, apart from his classical training, was what he called his Dialectic, an ability to argue from fundamentals and to spot drivels a mile off and cry "Stop!" It was through this education in how to argue that the Ulster Atheist made the future apologist for Christianity; but Kirkpatrick taught him how to argue not what to argue for.

Thus if Ulster did little for Lewis's conversion, it must also be said that he became a Christian at Oxford among friends who were, or became, either Roman or Anglo-Catholics. *Surprised by Joy* is dedicated to an Oxford pupil who was to win a modest fame as Dom Bede Griffiths, a monk of Downside Abbey, and Lewis's most epoch-making friendship in the University was with the Roman Catholic Professor of Anglo-Saxon, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose fame as the author of works of fictional fantasy now even exceeds that of Lewis. It was Tolkien who, in Lewis's own words, taught him to overcome his two primary prejudices, never to trust a papist or a philologist. Again it was with the help of Tolkien and Tolkien's friend Hugo Dyson that Lewis found the truth of Christianity in his earlier fascination with mythology, in recognizing in Christianity a mythology which happened to be true. Again, it was a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, who first made sense to Lewis of the Christian outline of history. To the atheist Lewis, Chesterton was "the most sensible man alive 'apart from his Christianity'"⁷

and it was Lewis who succeeded Chesterton as the plain man's apologist for orthodoxy, and kept the clear sharp outlines of basic Christian doctrine alive for another generation of ordinary believers.

Yet Lewis never followed Chesterton to Rome, to the distress of Tolkien, who considered the title of Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress* ironical: "Lewis would regress," he wrote. "He would not re-enter Christianity by a new door, but by the old one: at least in the sense that in taking it up again he would also take up again, or reawaken, the prejudices so sedulously planted in childhood and boyhood. He would become again a Northern Ireland protestant."⁸ Indeed Lewis always remained in appearance the Ulster farmer; and a passage that he marked in Newman's *Apologia* was Newman's dismissive reference to the Irish William Palmer, that he "had never really grown into an Oxford man."⁹ His writings unite an Ulsterman's strength of conviction with a literary grace and music which may have come from his Welsh descent, or be of Southern Irish provenance; but I would not call it Oxonian. Certainly his Oxonian Catholic friend Tolkien had first hand experience of the nativist Ulster prejudice which Lewis had to outgrow. He and his brother were capable of referring to Irish Catholics as 'bog-trotters' or 'bog-rats' as other Anglo Saxons refer to 'niggers'; and Tolkien was deeply hurt by the tone and temper of Lewis's instinctive bristling rebuff when the professor spoke of his own devotion to St. John the Evangelist. "We stumped along the cloisters," Tolkien recalled, "and I followed feeling like a shabby little Catholic caught by the eye of an 'Evangelical clergyman of good family' taking holy water at the door of a church."¹⁰ This last phrase, an 'Evangelical clergyman of good family', is Lewis's own slightly satirical description of his Church of Ireland clerical grandfather, a former chaplain of Holy Trinity Church, Rome: surely the Vatican was in his parish? And while Lewis never came to share Tolkien's devotion to the saints, he complained in his final work, the *Letters to Malcolm*, that "the 'low' church milieu that I grew up in did tend to be too cosily at ease in Zion," and that grandpapa, in looking forward to "some very interesting conversations" with St. Paul in heaven, never foresaw "that an encounter with St. Paul might be rather an overwhelming experience even for an Evangelical clergyman of good family. But when Dante saw the great apostles in heaven they affected him like mountains."¹¹

"There's lots to be said against (Catholic) devotions to saints," Lewis concluded, in declaring that this was not for him, "but at least they keep on reminding us that we are very small people compared with them." He thought that such prayers to the holy dead *could* be lawful, and he had no compunction about praying *with* them, "With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven."¹² In this, as in the other issues dividing the Churches, as in his own habit from 1950 of making his private confession to an Anglo-Catholic priest, or in his long correspondence with an Anglican nun, Lewis moved from his original Protestantism in a Catholic direction towards the centre of the Christian tradition. In this, he tried to make sense of the whole of the orthodox inheritance, and to find the mean between what

the Church of England Prayer book calls too much refusing and too much admitting.

The creative use by Lewis of the no-man's land between the Churches is possibly best illustrated by *The Great Divorce*, which expounds the neglected notion of the *refrigerium*, a respite in which souls from hell are given a chance of heaven. They enter a paradise as a kind of purgatory, for as evil has unmade or disembodied them, so they find intolerably hard the very grass of the lovely celestial landscapes which surround them. But is their situation still unsure, and a real choice of heaven or hell still before them? "My Roman Catholic friends would be surprised," remarks Lewis, "for to them souls in Purgatory are already saved. And my Protestant friends would like it no better, for they'd say that the tree lies as it falls." Lewis gets an answer of sorts from his guide, the Victorian Congregationalist clergyman George MacDonald, whose fantasy novels had been to Lewis another opening to Joy: "They're both right, maybe. Do not fash yourself with such questions . . . What concerns you is the nature of the choice itself . . ." ¹³ Ought not that phrase, 'Do not fash yourself', be written on tablets of stone or plates of gold in Ulster, with the gloss that such differences of opinion are not only uncertain and endlessly debatable in themselves, but that there is something much more important, the common ground on which Catholics and Protestants agree?

What Lewis perceived with uncanny accuracy and foresight was that the modern world contains a phenomenon infinitely more sinister than Ian Paisley or the Pope, and that is the common enemy of all good Christians, the evil which I can only call in the vaguest terms liberalism, which leads to what Lewis called 'the abolition of man' in the name of an ultimate ethical and religious relativity. You can tell a Christian terrorist that he is violating his own Christian convictions; but it is difficult to show a man without morals that he can be violating anything at all. Yet Lewis's starting point was rather the modern abolition of God, in his own discovery that the inconsolable longing which had come to him in myth and fantasy, the Joy for which he watched and waited, was ultimately futile without an object:

I perceived (and this was a wonder of wonders) that just as I had been wrong in supposing that I really desired the Garden of the Hesperides, so also I had been equally wrong in supposing that I desired Joy itself. Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the values lay in that of which Joy was the desiring. And that object, quite clearly, was no state of my own mind or body at all. ¹⁴

Lewis saw that his essential mistake had been to desire the subjective sensation of Joy instead of Him who gave it. For "a desire is turned not to itself but to its object. Not only that, but it owes all its character to its object . . . The form of the desired is in the desire . . . It is the object that makes the desire itself desirable or hateful." ¹⁵ And so religious experience is like all other experience, not an end but a key or clue or an opening to something

other, indeed as Lewis came to see, as an avenue of divine self-disclosure, in which God reveals and offers Himself.

Thus Lewis identified his original error in the modern elevation of subjective experience over objective truth; and in his lectures on 'The Abolition of Man', delivered in the University of Durham in 1943, he unveiled the modernist snare of Satan in the apparently innocuous statement, by two schoolmaster authors of an elementary textbook on English, that when we call a waterfall sublime, we are speaking simply of our own emotions and not of a quality belonging to the waterfall itself. On this basis we merely *feel* that a waterfall is sublime, but being sublime is not an objective property of the waterfall. Thus beauty is only a matter of cultural conditioning and individual taste, as are all ultimate moral and spiritual values. Lewis opposes to such subjectivity the notion of *Tao* or the way, a universal body of moral and spiritual truths, antecedent to Christianity, which constitutes a kind of logic or grammar in terms of which the human reason has always interpreted the world. In all cultures there is a witness against lying and murder; as Lewis wrote in a later essay, 'The Poison of Subjectivism':

*If a man will go into a library and spend a few days with the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics he will soon discover the massive unanimity of the practical reason in man. From the Babylonian Hymn to Samos, from the Laws of Manu, the Book of the Dead, the Analects, the Stoics, the Platonists, from Australian aborigines and Redskins, he will collect the same triumphantly monotonous denunciations of oppression, murder, treachery and falsehood, the same injunctions of kindness to the aged, the young, and the weak, of almsgiving and impartiality and honesty. He may be a little surprised (I certainly was) to find that precepts of mercy are more frequent than precepts of justice; but he will no longer doubt that there is such a thing as the Law of Nature.*¹⁶

Of course, Lewis declared that while the Law of Nature was universally acknowledged, it was also universally disobeyed. In this, everyone falls short of what everyone must partly know. Yet the enormous underlying realm of sheer agreement outweighs any differences, and though a particular culture may be lamentably defective in one or other of the truths of the *Tao*, there is a sufficient common factor among all human cultures to tell us what all mankind believes. "Those who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognise a quality which *demand*s a certain response from us whether we make it or not."¹⁷ Lewis, when he wrote this, did not relish the society of young children, but he recognised this as a kind of colour-blindness in himself to a truth of the *Tao*. In short, the proper emotional reaction to the *Tao* may be present in an individual by grace, nature, or education: but the value is not simply a result of instinct nor is it reducible to our subjective response

to it, for it existed before us and exists beyond us, and like God it abides forever.

Thus, a philosophy, Lewis wrote, in 'The Poison of Subjectivism', *which does not accept value as eternal and objective can lead us only to ruin . . . Many a popular 'planner' on a democratic platform, many a mild-eyed scientist in a democratic laboratory means, in the last resort, just what the Fascist means. He believes that 'good' means whatever men are conditioned to approve . . . he does not yet fully realize that those who create conscience cannot be subject to conscience themselves. But he must awake to the logic of his position sooner or later; and when he does, what barrier remains between us and the final division of the race into a few conditioners who stand themselves outside morality and the many conditioned in whom such morality as the experts choose is produced at the experts' pleasure? . . . The very idea of freedom presupposes some objective moral law which overarches rulers and ruled alike. Subjectivism about values is eternally incompatible with democracy. We and our rulers are of one kind only so long as we are subject to one law. But if there is no Law of Nature, the ethos of any society is the creation of its rulers, educators and conditioners; and every creator stands alone and outside his own creation.*

*Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values, we perish.*¹⁸

Lewis's expertise in moral discourse had been sharpened by his great scholarly work on the personified abstractions of medieval allegory; and he insisted that we lose something when we abandon the use of such language. Yet the truth of the elementals of ethics was something self-evident to him, as set forth in the very first of Chesterton's Father Brown stories, 'The Blue Cross'. Father Brown declares:

*Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star. Look at those stars. Don't they look as if they were single diamonds and sapphires? Well, you can imagine any mad botany or geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think the moon is a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don't fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the slightest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board: "Thou shalt not steal".*¹⁹

Father Brown is lecturing the great criminal Flambeau, who is masquerading as a priest: but Brown knows that he is not a priest, for he attacks reason, which is 'bad theology'. For like Chesterton, Lewis insists that justice, like theology, is rational: not in the sense that the moral law can be proven by

reason, but that in itself it provides the first principles of that Practical Reason which we must assume if we are to prove anything moral at all.

Lewis, like Chesterton, embodied his teachings on the ultimate evil of subjectivity in fiction, in his science fiction novels, *Out of the Silent Plant* and *Voyage to Venus*, and above all in *That Hideous Strength*, a study of the corruption of Bracton College, Edgestow, which as he says in the Preface to the work, "has no resemblance, save for its smallness", to the University of Durham.²⁰ The principal villain, Frost, wishes to reduce everyone else to his own blind subjectivity, though he is in the hands of diabolical powers beyond his own complete imagining. He hopes to harness to N.I.C.E., the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments, a semi-scientific instrument for enslaving the nation to the Devil, the mysterious force of the Celtic magician Merlin who lies buried but still sleeping under Bragdon Wood. Yet Merlin, when awakened, becomes the focus for the awakening of the virtue of that other ideal buried Britain, Logres, a theme suggested by Lewis's Anglo-Catholic friend, the poet and novelist Charles Williams. Logres is the sleeping embodiment of all that is best and highest in the national spirit, and Merlin's resurrection heralds the defeat of evil by bringing down fire from heaven. For human resources by themselves are unavailing. When Merlin asks what good is left in the world, he is told that the Saxon king at Windsor is powerless, that the "Faith itself is torn in pieces . . . and speaks with a divided voice", that only one in ten of the population is Christian, and that there are no other Christian Princes and no Emperor.

*If all this west part of the world is apostate (protests the magician) might it be lawful, in our great need, to look farther . . . beyond Christendom? Should we not find some even among the heathen who are not wholly corrupt? There were tales in my day of some such: men who knew not the articles of our most holy faith but who worshipped God as they could and acknowledged the Law of Nature.*²¹

His hearer has to disillusion him: "The poison was brewed in these West lands, but it has spat itself everywhere by now". Above all, it is ascendant in the University, though the teachers there never thought anyone would act on their theories: all the philosopher's lectures were "devoted to proving the impossibility of ethics, though in private life he'd have walked ten miles rather than leave a penny debt unpaid."²² Lewis insisted that he had written about the corruption of a College not because dons were likely to be more corrupt than anyone else, but because he knew his own profession best. On the other hand, he did feel intensely the *trahison des clercs*, even in his own University, and he points to the modern tendency of the priests of the shrine, the guardians of the tradition, to betray it from within. The worst of these traitors were the Liberal theologians, so active among his fellow Anglicans. "Liberal Christianity can only supply", he concluded, "an ineffectual echo to the massive chorus of agreed and admitted unbelief . . . did you ever meet, or hear of, anyone who was converted from scepticism to a 'liberal' or 'de-mythologised' Christianity?"²³ Such a Christianity was like Arianism, the

special prerogative of a highly cultivated clergyman and *clerics manqués*: while the orthodox Athanasius stood where his disciples still stand today.

Indeed since Lewis wrote, the *trahison des clerics* has gone as far as he had foreseen in his Church and mine, the Church of England, in which the generation of clerics who have ruled since Lewis's death have sapped the very foundations of his 'mere Christianity'. There are, of course, some honourable exceptions to the rule, but in general the powers that be within the Church have happily administered the closure of thousands of parishes, and have acquiesced and even assisted in the relativisation and paganization of popular culture and the wholesale destruction of the disciples of home and family life. The people of England have been robbed of their religion and morals at least in part by their religious and moral leaders, in a wholesale National Apostasy from Christian faith and Christian ethics. The last bishop of my diocese, now archbishop of York, defended abortion. The present bishop is too notorious to require an introduction. And with this has gone a ruthless subversion of the doctrinal content of the Faith, in the name of that very subjectivity in which Lewis saw the flames of hell.

He was, of course, familiar with Modernist Bishops; as with the notorious Barnes of Birmingham, himself the persecutor of men more orthodox than he, whose biography has recently appeared under a title — *Ahead of his Age* — encapsulating the very worst of the liberal chronological snobbery which Lewis loathed. In *The Great Divorce*, he drew an immortal picture of a liberal Bishop, who refuses the glories of heaven for denying him the liberty to speculate. This prelate is told that there is no "atmosphere of inquiry", for heaven is "the land not of questions but of answers", "of the face of God". But the Bishop objects that "The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not? 'Prove all things' . . . to travel hopefully is better than to arrive". "If that were true, and known to be true", is the reply, "how could anyone travel hopefully? There would be nothing to hope for".²⁴ In short, the Bishop's outlook is rooted not in 'honest opinion', but in a wholly intellectual pride which Lewis thought the very worst of all sins, and which the Bishop will not even sacrifice for the Beatific Vision, preferring to read papers to his Theological Society in hell. "When", he says, "the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to command itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk!" "What risk?" comes the response. "What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came — popularity, sales for your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric?"²⁵ Now I cannot quite say this of our bishop, who was quite unknown, a minor provincial professor, until the offer of a bishopric thrust infamy upon him. But he, of course, has denied the doctrine of the Resurrection by turning it from an objective event into a subjective faith experience of rising in spirit with the Lord: and it is he who has come to symbolise the very worst of our modern theological subjectivity, in conjunction with academic arrogance and pride. I think Lewis was right to locate the heart of this treason in the heresies of New Testament scholarship,

of which he said that it was bound to make an uneducated man either an atheist or a Roman Catholic. At the moment in the church of England, it is making large numbers of *educated* men Roman Catholics; and I have recently discovered for myself that in Lewis's words, being "Missionary to the priests of one's own church" is an embarrassing role; though, he concluded, "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."²⁶

I have said that Lewis regarded much liberalism as demonic. It is well to remind ourselves that he came to Christianity through the intensity of his vision of heaven, that 'The Weight of Glory' is surely one of the greatest sermons in our language, and that outside the Revelation of St. John the Divine and Dante, there can be few anticipations of paradise more moving than the last chapter of *The Last Battle*, or the last lines of *A Grief Observed*. Yet the clarity of this picture is the other side to the intensity of his vision of hell, the description of self-devouring selfhood in the *Screwtape Letters* and the endless waste of bleak mean rainy streets which opens *The Great Divorce*. There is a saying of Kierkegaard, that communication may either give us information or change us from what we are; and Lewis's works are pervaded by the sense of the agony of the naturally egotistic and selfish soul in its struggles to escape from its own selfhood, its petty self-preoccupations, lusts, pride and self-obsessions, and the desperate reality of its choices for or against Almighty God. Lewis constantly reminds us that every other human being is created for either bliss or torment. In this, reading Lewis can, God willing, help to change us from what we are. To read Spenser, he said of his best loved poet, is to grow in mental health, and like Spenser, he is a gracious writer in the older sense of that lovely word, as one whose writings convey the grace of God. And he has, I believe, the answer alike to English infidelity and Irish bigotry in 'mere Christianity'. What both nations need, in different manner and measure, is the orthodox eirenic which he preached; and my prayer for both England and Ireland is that in both his visions may he find a home.

NOTES

1. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (London 1974), p. 130.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
3. W.H. Lewis (ed.), *Letters of C.S. Lewis with a Memoir* (London, 1966), p. 19.
4. *Surprised by Joy* (London, 1955), p. 78.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
8. Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography* (London, 1977), p. 151.
9. J.A.W. Bennett, *The Humane Medievalist. An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 5.
10. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their friends* (London, 1978), pp. 51-2.
11. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London, 1964), p. 23.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
13. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (London, 1972), p. 63.

14. *Surprised by Joy*, p. 208.
15. *Ibid.*
16. C.S. Lewis, 'The Poison of Subjectivism', in *Christian Reflections* (London, 1967), p. 77.
17. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Riddell Memorial Lectures, Fifteenth Series* (Oxford and London, 1943), p. 11.
18. 'The Poison of Subjectivism', pp. 80-1.
19. G.K. Chesterton, 'The Blue Cross', in *Stories, Essays and Poems* (London, 1965), p. 19.
20. *That Hideous Strength* (London, 1972), p. 5.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
23. *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 152. See also 'The Modern View' in Clyde S. Kilby (ed.) *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis* (London, 1968), pp. 219-34.
24. *The Great Divorce*, p. 40.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
26. C.S. Lewis, *Fern Seed and Elephants and other essays on Christianity* (London, 1975), p. 125.