



C.S. Lewis the Truth-Seeker: *How God Formed a Great Christian Apologist*

by Joel S. Woodruff, Ed.D.

Vice President of Discipleship and Outreach, C.S. Lewis Institute

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2013 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

Unlike the dramatic, instantaneous conversion of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, C.S. Lewis came to faith in Christ through a search for truth that journeyed through the twists, turns, and dead ends of a long, thirty-year maze characterized by varying worldviews, ideas, and religions. This quest involved both his intellect, which sought logical, sound answers to the questions of life, and his heart, which longed for something to fill the lonely void within. As Lewis explored each worldview along the way, he would be enamored by the approach, only to eventually recognize the weaknesses of the view and be disappointed by the conclusions of that particular ideology. It was this thoughtful, careful, Socratic-like search for life's *raison d'être* that enabled Lewis to understand so deeply the world's religions and philosophies and also articulate how these views paled in comparison to the ultimate truth found in Jesus Christ. In other words, God took Lewis's pre-Christian wanderings in false religions and philosophy and redeemed those experiences, enabling Lewis to communicate the truths of biblical faith in ways that searching people could understand. After all, he had been there himself.

In the preface (sometimes presented as an afterword) to the third edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, an allegorical look at his own conversion, Lewis writes,

The sole merit I claim for this book is that it is written by one who has proved them [various worldviews] all to be wrong. There is no room for vanity in the claim: I know them to be wrong not by intelligence but by experiences, such experience as would not have come my way if my

youth had been wiser, more virtuous, and less self-centred than it was. For I have myself been deluded by every one of these false answers in turn and have contemplated each of them earnestly enough to discover the cheat. To have embraced so many false Florimels is no matter for boasting: it is fools, they say, who learn by experience. But since they do at last learn, let a fool bring his experience into the common stock that wiser men profit by it.¹



Joel S. Woodruff, Ed. D.

Lewis had in a sense “dated” and been infatuated by a number of “Florimels,” damsels of great beauty who turned out to be illusions. By “dating” various worldviews, over time, Lewis developed deep insight into the ways in which a religion can at first appear attractive, only to lead to bitter disappointment when the honeymoon is over and the witch suddenly appears. It was this experience in the first thirty years of his life, before his conversion, that prepared him to become one of the greatest Christian apologists of the twentieth century.

Raised in a Christian Home

Lewis's spiritual journey began within the confines of a home in which he experienced the love and security communicated to him by his mother, Flora, the daughter of an Anglican priest. Born in 1898, his early years afforded him great happiness. His mother read stories from the Bible, prayed with Lewis daily, and

introduced him to the teachings of Christ. The family attended a Protestant church in Belfast, although they didn't have any problem in hiring a Catholic maid, whom Lewis loved and who also told him Bible stories.

Lewis's idyllic childhood, however, would come crashing down when his mom was diagnosed with cancer. Lewis, aged nine at the time, prayed fervently that God would heal his mom. When he was greeted with the tragic news of her death, he became angry at a God who would take away his loving mother. Added to the pain of this loss was the inability of his father, Albert, to comfort and console Lewis and his brother, Warnie. When the boys most needed their dad, just weeks after their mother's death Albert sent them off to a small English boarding school to fend for themselves.

Lewis had begun his life surrounded by Christian practice and thought, but the loss of his mom and the coldness of his father sent him reeling spiritually. From this point he describes his spiritual journey in this way: "On the intellectual side my own progress had been from 'popular realism' to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity. I still think this a very natural road, but I now know that it is a road very rarely trodden."²

Pessimism, Atheism, and Popular Realism

In boarding school Lewis's antagonism toward Christian faith grew as he experienced the hypocrisy of the "Christian" boarding school. The cruel hazing of the younger boys by the older boys burnt an indelible impression on Lewis, as he later wrote of the pain inflicted by those in the "inner circle." Lewis's first headmaster frequently beat his students and was actually declared mentally unstable soon after Lewis's departure. Fortunately Lewis had the companionship of his brother, Warnie, for some of these difficult years during which Lewis became a pessimistic atheist.

When it was clear that Lewis was suffering miserably, his father relented and arranged for him to be tutored in the home of William Kirkpatrick, who had taught Albert himself and also Warnie. A former headmaster, Kirkpatrick was skilled in the Socratic method and logic. From the moment Lewis met Kirkpatrick, whom he called "The Great Knock," Lewis was pressed to give a logical reason for every state-

ment he made and defend his position. Some would have found Kirkpatrick intimidating, but Lewis for the first time ever enjoyed school. Later Lewis would state that the intellectual rigor and challenge of Kirkpatrick was like "red beef and strong beer,"³ an exhilarating diet that gave the bright Lewis confidence and enjoyment. From the age of fifteen to seventeen, under the Kirkpatrick's influence, Lewis sharpened the debate and reasoning skills that would serve him well for the rest of his life. Rationalism, or popular realism as Lewis would call it, became his *modus operandi* as he sought to believe only that which could be proven by clear logic and reason. He adopted a materialistic or naturalistic worldview in which the only thing that mattered was "matter." His atheist worldview was solidifying.

It is interesting to note that down the road these very Socratic reasoning tools would point Lewis in the direction of Christianity and enable him to explain the reasonableness of the Christian faith to the modern, scientifically oriented world.

Following his years with Kirkpatrick, Lewis gained entrance to Oxford University. His first studies at Oxford, however, would be short-lived, as he soon found himself in the British Army, serving as an officer in the trenches of World War I. As he witnessed firsthand the horrors of war in France and was eventually wounded in action, men dying all around him, Lewis's atheism became more entrenched.

Lewis would survive the war, return to his studies in Oxford, and immerse himself in the academic world.

Philosophical Idealism

Lewis was an outstanding student who attained a triple first at Oxford in classics, philosophy, and English. A triple first means that Lewis was at the top of his class in each of these subjects. His photographic memory, ability to write well, and gifting as a logician shot him to the head of the class.

During his student days, as many in his generation were recovering from the horrors of war and were questioning the meaning of life, Lewis himself began to sense that his atheism just didn't address his inner longings for something more. And so for a time he felt drawn to what he called philosophical idealism, as espoused by the British Hegelians and Henri Bergson. This worldview argued that the world we perceive through our senses is only appearance or curtain

behind which the Absolute is hiding. In other words, Lewis was beginning to realize that there is more to this world than just “matter” and the material world we live in.

Pantheism

The phase of philosophical idealism didn’t last long, as Lewis’s commitment to logic soon found the British Hegelian “Absolute” to be too vague and ambiguous. Now Lewis explored pantheistic religions such as Hinduism and the monistic world of Buddhism. He was intrigued by the idea that the “Absolute” rather than being vague was somehow immanent, within and around everything. Perhaps everything really was spiritual and matter was an illusion. This worldview seemed to touch his imagination and was more intellectually challenging. However, again, his logic forced him to realize that pantheism was unable to explain the physical and spiritual worlds in a way that seemed to bear any resemblance to reality. To totally abandon the obvious, the physical world, and claim that it is just an illusion went too far. What’s more, within pantheism there seemed to be no way to link goodness and truth. He would later write in his book *Miracles*, “The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you.”⁴

Lewis knew both through logic and from exploring his heart within, that there must be another way to explain the world as we see it.

Theism

Lewis eventually became a tutor and lecturer at Magdalen College, Oxford. He really enjoyed the lively discussions on philosophy, literature, and religion that took place among his colleagues, and Lewis developed some good friendships. Lewis soon realized that most of the people he gravitated to were Christians, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Hugo Dyson, and Owen Barfield. They encouraged Lewis to consider the claims of Christianity.

While Lewis on the one hand was approaching this quest from an intellectual perspective, he also began to sense that there was more to the human person than just the mind. In his later book *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis writes, “Think of your man as a series of concentric circles, his will being the innermost, his intel-

lect coming next, and finally his fantasy.”⁵ Another word for “fantasy” would be “imagination.” Lewis noted that throughout his life he was moved by particular writers as they painted a picture that enlivened his imagination and gave him a sense of joy or longing that was beyond his present experience of reality. In other words, there were things that his intellect or mind couldn’t fully grasp that he knew were still important.

He tells, for example, of the time early in his life when he picked up a book titled *Phantastes*, by the nineteenth-century Scottish writer George MacDonald, which somehow baptized Lewis’s imagination. A whole new world was opened up to him. And wouldn’t you know, MacDonald had been a Christian. Over time Lewis realized that he liked other Christian writers as well, such as Dante, Milton, George Herbert, and G.K. Chesterton.

Alister McGrath writes, “Lewis’s reading of the classics of English literature forced him to encounter and evaluate the ideas and attitudes that they embodied and expressed. And to his chagrin, Lewis began to realize that those who were grounded on a Christian outlook seemed to offer the most resilient and persuasive ‘treaty with reality.’”⁶

Lewis knew that truth would somehow reconcile the rational, intellectual external side of his life with the deep yearning that he felt from the internal imaginative side of his being. Finally, after years of thinking, reading, arguing, debating, reflecting, engaging in discussions with friends, and reading literature, Lewis gave in to the intellectual idea that God exists. He writes, “In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”⁷ At this point, Lewis had converted to theism, the idea that God created humankind and the world in which we live. A Creator God best explains the reality that we perceive with our senses and the inner longings that we have for something greater than ourselves. But Lewis still had not converted to Christ. He had fallen into the camp of the monotheistic worldview held by Jews, Christians, and Muslims and was simply a theist.

Christianity

Up to now, Lewis had systematically “dated” the worldviews of atheism, a number of different phi-

losophies, the pantheistic world of Hinduism and Buddhism, agnosticism, and had conceded that monotheism made the most sense of the world. He knew that God existed. Now he would need to explore Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He looked closely at one question separating these three monotheistic faiths: did Jesus exist, and if so, was He who He said He was, and did He really arise from the dead?

On September 19, 1931, Lewis went for a walk with his friends Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien behind Magdalen College on a favorite trail called Addison's Walk. That night they discussed the literary idea of myth. Myth as they defined it was a story that passed on some element of truth and touched the imagination. Tolkien argued that the difference between all other myths and the Christian myth was that the Christian story really happened in history through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus was who He said He was, and He really arose from the dead. He encouraged Lewis to approach the New Testament story with the same passion he exhibited when approaching other literary works.

A short time after that conversation, Lewis was riding in his brother's motorcycle sidecar on the way to the zoo. At the end of the ride, he suddenly realized he was a Christian. In a letter dated October 1, 1931, to his childhood friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis wrote: "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity . . . [My] long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a good deal to do with it."⁸

Lewis's imagination had been intrigued by the story of the Gospels; his intellect had conceded that the idea of God made the most sense out of reality, and now he had finally submitted the innermost concentric circle, his will, to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. His long quest to discover truth had finally found the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus of Nazareth.

With full abandon and commitment to Jesus, Lewis now sought to submit all aspects of his life to God and live to the full as a disciple of Christ. During the next thirty years or so, he would publish nearly a book a year, using the genres of fantasy, fiction, apologetics, letters, and other writings to share the good news of the gospel with the world around him. He would become the second best known voice on the BBC during World War II after Winston Churchill, giving people a reason to believe in and live out the truths of faith in Je-

sus. Today his books continue to sell millions of copies every year.

Why is this? I would argue that God redeemed the many years of searching by Lewis. God turned the dead ends, the twists and turns of Lewis's search for truth into a wealth of experience and wisdom by which Lewis could effectively point out the weaknesses of all other worldviews and shine the light on the truth of Jesus. For God is in the business of taking the wrong turns, sins, tragedies, hardships, and mistakes of our past and turning them into a blessing for ourselves and others.

Lewis went on to emulate the example of Paul in Athens. Luke writes about Paul,

The longer Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy, the angrier he got—all those idols! The city was a junkyard of idols.

He discussed it with the Jews and other likeminded people at their meeting place. And every day he went out on the streets and talked with anyone who happened along. He got to know some of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectuals pretty well through these conversations. Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: "What an airhead!" But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued: "That's a new slant on the gods. Tell us more."

(Acts 17:16–18 THE MESSAGE)

Lewis was called names akin to "airhead," as some in the Oxford intellectual community couldn't fathom how such a bright intellectual could fall for Christianity. He was denied promotions and suffered personal insult for his beliefs. However, Lewis's conviction, formed after years of intellectual, imaginative, and willful searching had found the truth. There was no turning back. He has helped countless people get a new slant on the gods and discover the one true God. God redeemed Lewis's past search for truth by using this bright Oxford professor to show modern generations that God is not only reasonable; He can also fulfill the deepest longings within the human heart.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, "Preface to the Third Edition," *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933, 1943; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (1955; repr., London: Fontana

Books, 1959), 111.

4. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 149.

5. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 37.

6. Alister McGrath, *Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet: C.S. Lewis: A Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), 133.

7. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 183.

8. C.S. Lewis, "Letter to Arthur Greeves, 1 October 1931," in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 1, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 974.

© 2013 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind



*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

