



The Relevance of C.S. Lewis

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It is difficult to exaggerate the importance and impact of C.S. Lewis. Although he died in 1963, most of his books are still in print and have sold around 200 million copies in more than thirty languages. During the 1998 C.S. Lewis centenary celebrations, the American magazine, *Christianity Today*, described Lewis as the Aquinas, the Augustine and the Aesop of contemporary evangelism, whilst the British Post Office – the Royal Mail – issued a special commemorative stamp featuring *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (the first of Lewis's Narnia books), as part of its new 'Magical worlds' series. According to Professor Adrian Hastings's classic *History of Christianity in England*, C.S. Lewis composed almost single-handedly "the popular religious apologetic of modern Britain."

The reasons for C.S. Lewis's enduring popularity

(2.1) What is the secret of Lewis's enduring popularity and why is he relevant today?

The answer to the first question lies in his character, his intellect, and his creativity. Lewis was not only an Oxford academic and a popular theologian, but also a poet, a children's writer, and a writer of science fiction. This means he was able to communicate at different levels and connect with different audiences. He also possessed a rigorously logical mind, a powerful imagination, and an extremely clear and lucid style of expression both in the written and spoken word. As a result, he was particularly effective in communicating theological truths and concepts through the use of ingenious pictures and analogies.

(2.2) In addition to his intellectual gifts, Lewis's personal experience of suffering and doubt enabled him to empathise with those who found it difficult to believe in God or accept the claims of Christianity. He lost his mother at the age of 10, was unhappy at school, and was wounded in the trenches during the First World War, losing one of his best friends in that terrible conflict. Not surprisingly, he became an atheist as a teenager and only came to God, with extreme reluctance, in 1929, as a young 31 year-old Oxford don.

Why is C.S. Lewis relevant today?

(3.1) Lewis's relevance today can be summarised in his own words from the preface to his best known theological work, *Mere Christianity*: "Ever since I became a Christian, I have thought that perhaps the best, perhaps the only service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief." His success in doing so during the 1940s earned him the label, 'the Apostle to the sceptics', and with justification. He not only tackled such perennial issues as the problem of evil and the apparent conflict between modern science and the supernatural in *The Problem of Pain* and *Miracles*; he also managed to communicate and defend the entire Gospel to a popular audience of millions in his famous wartime radio broadcasts between 1941 and 1944. According to the BBC, around 50% of his listeners were unbelievers – an extraordinary tribute to Lewis's powers of persuasion and communication. Furthermore, *Mere Christianity*, the published version of Lewis's radio talks, which first came out in 1952, has sold over 11 million copies worldwide and is continually in print.

(3.2) Has cultural change, especially the emergence of post-modernism, reduced the relevance and usefulness of C.S. Lewis's work and example? Not in my opinion! His communication techniques remain an invaluable model for 21st century apologists and evangelists, and his critique of atheism, scientific materialism, and moral relativism remains highly relevant because the process of secularisation and de-Christianisation has only accelerated since his death and increased the proportion of atheists and agnostics within most Western societies, especially within the opinion-forming elite. In the case of Britain, for example, the proportion of the

population disbelieving in God, according to one survey in 2000, has risen from 2% to 27% since the 1950s, and one third of those who *do* profess to believe in God, do not believe in 'a personal God'. Another recent survey reveals that "only 7% now say they are Christian churchgoers and 48% claim they have no religion." (Mori poll quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 15/4/01).

C.S. Lewis's apologetics – argument headings

(4.1) The self-contradiction of atheism in relation to the problem of evil. If our moral standard is subjective, the case against God collapses. If it is objective, how can it be the product of a random and purposeless universe?

(4.2) Our moral awareness, our sense of right and wrong, points to the existence of God because all the standard secular explanations of morality – instinct, survival value, and social utility – are inadequate.

(4.3) Atheists cannot give an adequate explanation of the religious impulse in human beings or make sense of religious experience.

(4.4) Atheism cannot explain the existence of reason and free will – i.e. it cannot account for or explain our ability to think and choose. (4.5) Atheism cannot explain the existence and order of the Universe, both of which indicate God's existence as the Creator and Designer of all things. (4.6) Science does not and cannot rule out either the possibility or the reasonableness of miracles and supernatural events. The *a priori* 'scientific' case against miracles begs the question of God's existence and involves an equally question-begging circular argument. If the Universe has a Creator, its 'natural' laws can be suspended or overruled.

(4.7) The credibility and significance of Christ's miracles recorded in the Gospels. They represent the speeding-up and localisation of God's 'normal' activity in the natural world.

(4.8) The philosophical credibility of the Resurrection – Eternal, Self-existent Being cannot be conquered by death.

(4.9) The superficiality of 'scientific' objections to Christianity based on the size of the Universe in

relation to the Earth, and the possible existence of other inhabited planets and intelligent species.

(5.1) The Christian explanation of evil and suffering is the only credible one compared with its logical alternatives – atheism and dualism.

(5.2) The essence of evil and the cause of the Fall – angelic and human – is the creature's rejection of its Creator – self-centredness versus God-centredness.

(5.3) The psychological reasons for rejecting belief in God: (a) the desire for personal autonomy; (b) fear of the incalculable consequences of surrendering self and life to God.

Christian truth in Lewis's fiction – general remarks

(6.1) Lewis's view of the importance and function of fairy tales - they can be evangelistically effective by baptising the imagination and presenting theological truths in fresh and novel settings. This is particularly important in a post-modern culture in which 'story-telling' is given so much prominence as a vehicle of communication.

(6.2) Lewis's fiction reveal and express his conception of God as Self-Giving, Creative Love, wholly Good, perfect in Beauty, infinitely joyful, loving and wise. Like Plato, C.S. Lewis sees God as Supreme and Eternal Goodness, Beauty and Truth. (See the portrayal of Christ in the Lion, Aslan – the central figure of *The Chronicles of Narnia* – and in the character attributed to 'Maleldil' in Lewis's science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Voyage to Venus*, and *That Hideous Strength*.)

(6.3) Lewis's fiction celebrates God in His role of Creator, and therefore as the source and origin of all life, beauty, goodness, creativity and happiness. This is vividly expressed in *The Magician's Nephew* (describing the creation of Narnia), and in *Voyage to Venus* (about a beautiful, newly created and unfallen world).

(6.4) Lewis's fiction also reveals his perception that all evil is rooted in self-centredness and pride, and inevitably breeds cruelty, oppression and death. This is vividly apparent in the portrayal of the 'White Witch' (also the 'Empress Jadis') in

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and *The Magician's Nephew*.

(6.5) Lewis's fiction, notably *The Chronicles of Narnia*, reveal his Christian vision of a perfect world and a good society – one rooted in the joyful and grateful worship of God, and full of beauty, kindness, reverence, laughter and love. In particular, such a world is characterised by respect for, and delight in, living beings and creatures in all their rich variety. Hence the significance of Lewis's Narnian world of talking animals: love, personality, and intelligence are seen transcending species.

(6.6) Although Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* are not in the strict sense Christian allegories, they do include the following Christian themes: Creation (*The Magician's Nephew*), Atonement (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), Resurrection (*Ibid*, and also *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle*) The final book of the Narnian tales, *The Last Battle*, also includes the themes of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement, and conveys Lewis's now famous contrast between life in the 'Shadowlands' (our fallen world) and the true life and 'real waking' awaiting us in our 'true country' of Heaven.

Recommended reading

The three most important apologetic works of C.S. Lewis you ought to read or re-read are:

Mere Christianity,

Miracles,

The Problem of Pain.

All these books are available as Fount-Collins paperbacks.

The most reliable biography of Lewis in its description of his intellectual and spiritual development, is:

C.S. Lewis: A Biography, by Roger Lancelyn Green & Walter Hooper, Collins (hardback), 1974.
by Roger Lancelyn Green & Walter Hooper, Collins (hardback), 1974.

For a detailed account of C.S. Lewis's wartime

broadcasts for the BBC – including the details of his centenary celebrations and the sales and impact of his books mentioned in this paper, see:

C.S. Lewis at the BBC, by Justin Phillips, Harper Collins (paperback), 2003. by Justin Phillips, Harper Collins (paperback), 2003.

My own book on Lewis, *C.S. Lewis: thinker of our time*, Claridge Press, 1996, is currently out of print but may be obtainable secondhand. Please pray that Continuum (who have taken over Claridge Press) bring out a second edition!