C.S. Lewis, Apologist

One who defends a religious position using reason

Tony Dekker
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C. S. Lewis, *Apologist*

Lewis’ background

The “Trilemma” – was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?

*The Pilgrim’s Regress* and the *Zeitgeist*

*The Problem of Pain*

Assessment

C.S. Lewis (1898 - 1963)
C.S. Lewis: A Brief Biography

• Born: 1898 (Belfast)

• WW I: 1917–1918 (wounded)

• Undergraduate: 1919–1923 (Greek & Latin, Philosophy, English)

• Teaching at Oxford: 1925–1954

• Conversion to Theism and Christianity: 1929–1931

• The Pilgrim’s Regress: 1933

• Mere Christianity: 1942-1944 (based on radio talks)

• Teaching at Cambridge: 1955–1963

• Died: 1963
The “Trilemma” – aut Deus aut homo malus

Jesus’ claim to be God:

“Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins [Matt 9:2, etc.]. He says He has always existed [John 8:58]. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time [John 5:22–30].

Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God … But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world Who had made it”

(Mere Christianity, Book II, Ch 3)
The “Trilemma” is clear (though not original to Lewis)

Jesus’ claim to be God:

• **Unconscious falsehood (insanity):** “a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg”

• **Deliberate falsehood (Satanic):** “or else he would be the Devil of Hell”

• **Truth:** or “this man was, and is, the Son of God … fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God”

• “let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

(Mere Christianity, Book II, Ch 3)
“Logic!” said the Professor half to himself. “Why don’t they teach logic at these schools?

There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth.

You know she doesn’t tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.”

(The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Ch 5)
Reactions to the “Trilemma”

Josh McDowell: adapted as “Lord, liar, or lunatic?”

Peter Kreeft: “The strength of this argument is that it is not merely a logical argument about concepts; it is about Jesus. It invites people to read the Gospels and get to know this man.”

Anonymous convert: “one of the foundational steps towards me becoming a Christian.”

Richard Dawkins: “ludicrously inadequate. A fourth possibility … is that Jesus was honestly mistaken. … [but] there is no good historical evidence that he ever thought he was divine.”

www.peterkreeft.com/topics/christ-divinity.htm
“My own line was to say that I was a professional literary critic and I thought I did know the difference between legend and historical writing: that the Gospels were certainly not legends (in one sense they’re not good enough)

... if they are not history then they are realistic prose fiction of a kind which actually never existed before the eighteenth century.

Little episodes such as Jesus writing in the dust when they brought Him the woman taken in adultery (which have no doctrinal significance at all) are the mark.”

(“Christian Apologetics,” 1945, included in Compelling Reason)
The Pilgrim’s Regress, 1933 – The Zeitgeist

- An exploration of conversion, based on Lewis’ own
- An allegorical discussion of philosophical issues
- A response to 1930s arguments against Christianity – which differ from today’s
- Not his most popular book
“Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires” — *A Philosophy of Life* (lecture), 1932

“… fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind” — *The Future of an Illusion*, 1927
Answering Freud’s “Wish-Fulfillment”

2 + 2 = 4? “You say that because you are a mathematician”

The love of God may be like other loves: but which is the original? – See The Pilgrim’s Regress, Book III, Ch 8 to Book IV, Ch 4

“Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food… If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” — Mere Christianity, III, 10
The problem:

“If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty he would be able to do what he wished.

But the creatures are not happy.

Therefore God lacks either the goodness, or power, or both.”

(The Problem of Pain, Ch 2)
God is Love – but what does that mean?

“You asked for a loving God: you have one…

not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate…

but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work”

(The Problem of Pain, Ch 3)
“If you choose to say, ‘God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,’ you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God:

meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words ‘God can.’”

“… if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of courtesy.”

*(The Problem of Pain, Ch 2)*
“God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right.

… free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of … creatures that worked like machines would hardly be worth creating.

The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight”

*(Mere Christianity, II, 3)*
“souls … cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of courtesy…

they can then exploit the fixed nature of matter to hurt one another.

The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbour on the head.”

(The Problem of Pain, Ch 2)
“I am progressing along the path of life… absorbed in a merry meeting with my friends… or a bit of work that tickles my vanity today…

when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain that threatens serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers that threatens us all with destruction, sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down…

Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should have been in at all times.”

(The Problem of Pain, Ch 6)
Influenced by his own multi-stage spiritual journey

Wide appeal: several of his books considered “classics”

“Lewis taught me to anticipate heaven” – Philip Yancey

Desire and Reason both seen as friends to Christianity

As an academic, interested in combating “Zeitgeist” ideas

“Trilemma” – aimed at Christian-friendly Bible-readers
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Book cover, *Mere Christianity*

Book cover, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*

Book cover, *The Problem of Pain*

Book cover, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*

Album cover, *Albertine* by Brooke Fraser
(This album contains the “C.S. Lewis Song”)