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A Review of C.S. Lewis and the Truth of Myth

In the introduction to his dissertation, Mark Edwards Freshwater describes C.S. Lewis as a “man of many paradoxes: an atheist become Christian apologist; a literary critic writing theology; a bachelor (for much of his life) defending Christian marriage; and a logician defending the idea of myth” (ix). Lewis’s multi-faceted personality attracts a wide variety of readers because of his wide-ranging appeal. Lewis’s body of writing encompasses a unique melding of subject and style.

Margaret Patterson Hanney, author of C.S. Lewis captures the author’s particular essence when she claims, “Lewis emerges as a man haunted by longing, a man both passionately romantic and scrupulously logical, a man who, though love and suffering progressed from dogmatism to gentleness.... The logic of his prose masks a visionary core” (qtd. in Freshwater ix). Lewis’s unparalleled view of Christianity is fully delineated in Freshwater’s book. His thesis states:

It is our purpose to examine not only Lewis’s views of Christianity generally but to see in his views of myth a “signal of transcendence,” a gleam of the supernatural. This signal points to the reality of Lewis’s God-centered world view in a way which goes beyond the arguments about the original documents recording Christianity’s beginnings. (x)

Freshwater gives a detailed exploration of this supposition through a carefully constructed study of biographical information that includes major influences in Lewis’s life and a detailed account of Lewis’s conversion to Christianity. The author also explores Lewis’s apologetical writings with regards to the historicity of the New Testament. The final chapters directly relate to Lewis’s views

toward mythology and the creation of Christian truths within the mythopoeicly influenced world of Narnia.

Freshwater commences his exploration of C.S. Lewis' work with an interesting perception. Corbin Scott Carnell, author of Bright Shadow of Reality: C.S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect is summarized as asserting that Lewis's following consists of four kinds of readers.

Freshwater synthesizes, "First, there is the scholarly audience.... A second group includes the readers of his 'lay' theological and philosophical works on the nature of Christianity and morality.... Another following of Lewis's consists of lovers of 'fantastic fiction'.... Finally, Lewis has an increasing audience as a writer of children's stories" (1). This broad-spectrum of readers is accounted for because of Lewis's equally diverse writing style. His work, on one hand, is deeply rooted in applied axioms of logic and reason. The other aspect of Lewis's style is his ability to create pure fantasy.

Freshwater writes, "even in his most imaginative work, Lewis retained an imaginative style and in his most fantastic fiction, he maintained a logical, analytical approach" (2). Those who seek logically constructed believable arguments will find in Lewis's works exactly what they search for, but also will be touched on a deep level because contained within the structure of logical is a river of deep emotion. Conversely, those who search for emotional appeal in literature will find a sturdy construction of reason that makes the emotion believable and arguable to even the most logical of minds. Lewis's approach to writing is important to understand because, Freshwater indicates, "Lewis was concerned with combining the rational and imaginative in such a way as to create a heightened perception of reality. This is true not only in his Christian apologetic works, but in his literary analysis as well. And, of course, his own fictional works are an attempt to combine these two threads, fantasy and reason, in a new creative structure"(10). Lewis himself says in an essay, "I am a rationalist. For me reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.

Imagination, producing new metaphors or reviving old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition” (qtd. in Freshwater 13).

At this point, the doctoral candidate presents an overview of Lewis’s life and works. It is here that Freshwater speaks of Lewis’s literary influences and the origins of his deep belief in myth. This section with this insightful Lewisian quote: “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read and old one in-between” (qtd. in Freshwater 11). Freshwater reports that Lewis did not indulge in many contemporary offerings of literature because in the scholar’s mind “modern critics and theologians were often blinded by unconscious assumptions about reality of which they were completely unaware. [He felt that] reading literature of other ages is one way to overcome this blindness toward one’s own assumptions”(11). This is a very important thought for students of contemporary literature. Modern society tends, due largely to contemporary humankind’s ever diminishing attention span, to read only what is new and exciting. Another advocate of a belief in the power of mythology is Joseph Campbell. In an interview with Bill Moyer, Campbell declares, “One of our problems today is that we are not interested with literature of the spirit. We’re interested in news of the day and problems of the hour.... These bits of the information from ancient times, which have to do with themes that have supported human life, build civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner threshold of passage, and if you don't know what the guide signs are along way, you have to working out for yourself”(4). Both Lewis and Campbell agree; indeed, an understanding of myth is missing in contemporary culture.

A reading of Lewis’s sited literary influences would aid in correcting this problem of literary deficiency. Freshwater indicates the works of Dante, Spenser, Milton, Herbert, Plato, and Aristotle as major influences in Lewis’s pre-Christian thoughts. After becoming interested in Christianity, the future apologist studied the works of St. Augustine, Richard Hooker, Thomas Traherne, William

Law, and Thomas a Kempis. To these writers, Freshwater writes that Lewis “continues to acknowledge a conscious debt to these writers for the rest of his life” (10). Another influence Lewis submitted to is that of Rudolf Otto, a contemporary theologian. Ottos’ idea of “the Numinous” which is a description that seeks to account for mans’ basic awareness of the divine. This is a theme that runs through much of Lewis’s works (15). Freshwater also gives deserved attention to the influence of George MacDonald’s Phantastes. Freshwater states: “What Lewis found appealing in MacDonald’s work was his ability to create modern myth. MacDonald opened Lewis’s mind to the world beyond the logical. As Lewis was to remark, ‘The quality which has enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, and ecstatical to help him reality in which we all live” (17).

Perhaps the most interesting mention of influences in this section is the discussion of Lewis’s view on Carl Jung and his doctrine of Archetypal Patterns. Freshwater describes Lewis links between Jungian “Primordial Images” and archetypal images like that of a “Locked Door or the Lost and Found” (16). According to Lewis: “The Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images [archetypal images.] He found there, while Christianity is God expressing himself through what we call ‘real things” (qtd. in Freshwater 37). Jung and Lewis both share a deep concern for those who wish to demythologize Christianity. On this subject, Freshwater quotes Jung, “How, then, can one possibly ‘demythologize’ the figure of Christ?...What is the use of a religion without the mythos, since religion means, if anything at all, precisely that function which links us back to the eternal myth?”(qtd in Freshwater 16). This thought echoes Jack’s belief in the importance of recognition and acceptance of myth in religion. Lewis pointedly remarks of Jung’s approach to consciousness of being, “I perceive at once that even if it turns out to be bad science it is excellent poetry” (qtd. in Freshwater 16).

Following this discussion appears the first mention of personal influences of teachers and friends that affected Lewis. Freshwater lists W.T. Kirkpatrick as an important influence on Lewis's commitment to logic. He also includes a brief mention of the influences of the Inklings, especially Tolkien and Dyson. However, their impact is explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

Freshwater's account of Lewis's conversion to Christianity begins with this quote from Surprised by Joy. Lewis says simply of a pre-conversion conversation with an atheist:

[He] sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. 'All that stuff of Frazer's about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened'...If he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the toughs, were not, as I would still have put it—'safe,' where could I turn?' (qtd. in Freshwater 32)

Freshwater emphasizes the importance of the Lewis' belief in the factual appearance of the mythological pattern of the Dying God that was made real in the flesh of Jesus Christ that converted Lewis from theism to Christianity. Although Christians, Tolkien and Dyson, as evidenced in their writings, possessed an understanding of myth and its role in religion. Therefore, these two friends ably convinced Lewis of its place as well.

This chapter also recounts Lewis's belief that myth should not be confused with allegory. Freshwater summarizes, "In allegory, the images stand for concepts. In myth, the images symbolize and imagine something which cannot be reduced to a single concept. Allegory can always be translated back into meaningful concepts. Mythical meaning cannot be fully stated in conceptual terms" (38). Because of the complex nature of myth, it becomes an extra-literary concept. It should be separated by the reader from the words which it is translated into a larger realm of meaning. According to Lewis, myth should have an element of fantasy contained in it and possess a truth of universal reality. Because of universality of mythological themes, these concepts evoke powerful

emotional responses, such as awe, enchantment, and inspiration (39). The author claims that mythology served for Lewis “a purpose similar to the koans of Zen Buddhism, allowing the images to register beneath the surface of the mind, allowing us to actually grasp eternal truths which might baffle the intellect and confuse the mind”(39).

The next two chapters of the book speak to Lewis’s fear that contemporary cultures tend to remove the existing mythopoeic influence from Christianity. Freshwater posits:

Lewis was suspicious of modern New Testament scholarship’s tendencies to reject the elements of the Christian story that most clearly pointed to its nature as ‘myth becomes fact:’ the Divinity of Jesus, the concept of the Kingdom of God, and the miraculous. (55)

It is interesting to read contemporary theological views on these subjects and witness Lewis’s seamlessly logical approach in disproving the modern postulations. These discussions cast doubt on the absolute historical validity of the New Testament. This is consistent with Freshwater’s stated purpose in that even if the historical validity of the New Testament can be questioned, the shining beacon of mythology contained within Christianity remains powerful. Freshwater concludes by pointing out that “The image of Jesus as God-man was the central point of Christianity for Lewis. When various New Testament critics questioned that aspect of the Christian message, Lewis felt he had to reject their findings or reject what gave Christianity its mythic power” (62).

Next in Freshwater’s book is a chapter on Aslan. Lewis said of his creation of the noble lion, “Aslan is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, ‘What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world rather than ours?’”(qtd. in Freshwater 87). The author wisely observes, “Interesting enough, it is in his fictional writings that Lewis seemed most expressive about the nature of Christ and most expansive about what the Incarnation means” (87). He also asserts this point by drawing

comparisons between Lewis's Space Trilogy and The Chronicles of Narnia. Freshwater emphasizes that to fully understand Lewis's concept of Christ; it is necessary to not only read Lewis's non-fiction, but to also "examine that concept in Lewis's fictional settings" (95).

In a thoughtful examination of the creation of the Narnia series, Freshwater is careful to remind his reader that it was not Lewis's wish to create an allegory of the gospel. He attempted to get past the stereotypical responses and limitations of religious piety. Lewis writes of this motivation:

Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told to feel about God or the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told to one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings.... But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could" (qtd. in Freshwater 87).

By composing a world that dwells within the universally recognized realm of myth, Lewis creates strong and believable Christian themes. Lewis critic, Peter Schakel, states that "the Chronicles are high myth, communicating so directly to the imagination and emotions through powerful images and symbols that they cannot be translated fully into intellectual terms.... They communicate directly to the imagination and the emotions a sizeable share of the central elements of the Christian faith" (qtd. in Freshwater 99).

Throughout the remaining of this chapter, Freshwater deconstructs the Narnia series so the character of Jesus parallels the character of Aslan. Perhaps the wisest comment that is found in Freshwater makes occurs in this chapter. Gilbert Meilaender is quoted as stating, "In the secret in community of Narnia lies in the relation of each inhabitant of Narnia to Aslan. Aslan deals with each individual in a unique way, but a repeated theme of The Narnia Chronicles is that each learns only his

own story—the story of how he has been called by Aslan and what is required of him” (qtd. in Freshwater 101). It is exactly this example that illustrates Lewis’s ability to get beyond the “watchful dragons” of doctrine into a place where the true nature of God’s ability to reach to his creation and affect people in individualized ways.

In the last chapter of his book, Freshwater deals with Lewis’s “myth become fact” premise. He reiterates that Lewis, admittedly, never completely proved the historicity of the New Testament. The author cites as evidence Jack’s Letters to Malcolm when he writes that a belief in God “...is a venture. We don’t know it will be. There is our freedom.” On his role as apologist, Lewis claims that his beliefs are, “Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be. For ‘we know that we shall be made like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’” (qtd. in Freshwater 128). The author reiterates his thesis that the absolute validity of the Gospels is not essential. It is not the absolute historical reality of Jesus that attracted so many to him, but the “kerygma (proclamation of Christ) of the early church rather than an encounter with the historical Jesus” that influences the conversion process (127). Freshwater continues, ‘As Lewis recognized, finite beings have no absolute knowledge of the Infinite God, only analogies, mythical models, symbols, and abstractions. But it was in the realm of myth that man responded most fully, as a whole person, to the supernatural realm’ (126). This is witnessed in the Chronicles of Narnia where Lewis took the mythical aspects of the Christian religion and placed them in a realm of fantasy. Freshwater interestingly notes: “Lewis showed in The Narnia Chronicles that the realities of the Gospel can be transposed into a fictional world like Narnia without distorting or detracting from the Christian message. The Narnia Chronicles succeed as religious fantasy because the truth of the ‘myth’ they present is prior to and independent of an historical judgements or findings”(127).

In closing, Freshwater reiterates his thesis when in stating:

Whether the historical documents of the New Testament Church reflect an accurate portrayal of Jesus' nature and mission can be debated. But the basic 'truths' of Christian faith, of a loving and caring God, of a supernatural realm which in some sense intervenes in the world of the everyday, these must be held to be in some sense valid, or Christianity cannot be seen as a useful way of interpreting humanity and the world.... Lewis, by affirming the truth of myth, also affirmed the truth of the Christian faith. (128)

Overall, Freshwater's dissertation is well done. His thesis is proven within his writing. However, Lewis may disagree with Freshwater in his assumption that the absolute validity of the New Testament is unimportant. As readers of Lewis, it is important to realize that Jack's prevailing attitude is one of belief in the absolute historicity of the New Testament. This fact was absolutely vital to his conversion. Freshwater places an inordinate emphasis on the excerpt from Letters to Malcolm. Freshwater recognizes this and even addresses the possible inaccuracy when he declares, "Lewis might have found the above argument an attempt at having it both ways, an exercise in what he called "liberal" theology" (127). However, Lewis's focus on the importance of myth cannot be denied. Within the pages of his dissertation, Freshwater uncovers and assembles a very interesting assembly of thoughts regarding C.S. Lewis and his belief in the truth of myth.

Works Cited

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