Past the Ravening Lion of Presentism: C.S. Lewis in the Next Century

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by Richard Hill

One of C.S. Lewis's pet peeves was the phenomenon he called "chronological snobbery, " a concept other writers have termed "presentism." By whatever name, the notion involves the smug certainty that today's ideas on anything are automatically improvements on what people in the past thought on the same subjects. Lewis acknowledged that in the sciences the aggregate of knowledge does continue to increase, but he argued that in religious, moral, and philosophical areas, thinking may in fact have deteriorated in the modern age. Though hard to grasp from our current, seemingly improved perspective, it seems logical that we are today as subject to intellectual fads and "the spirit of the age" as any previous era.

In any discussion of "the significance of C.S. Lewis to the contemporary world," we need to consider that Lewis's own work is also subject to the presentism he warned us against. Lewis is a more popular writer than ever, especially among Christians, but will he eventually fall out of favor for his personal and doctrinal beliefs? Will he been seen by 21st century readers as a crank-to-avoid rather than a sage to emulate?

Presentism in Action

We can certainly observe the "presentist" downsizing of past heroes in contemporary media and academia. George Washington, who was for generations the "Father of Our Country," now is just another vicious white slave owner. In support of this new understanding of U.S. history, several public schools named after Washington have in recent years even gone so far as to change their names. Chronological snobbery also thrives in literature and the social sciences. Distinguished critics who read *Huckleberry Finn* as a monument to anti-racism are now seen as complicit in Mark Twain's deeply imbedded prejudices. In Philosophy, Nietzsche and Marx, great sages of the early modern era, are now discredited, banished to the dustbin of history to which they relegated Christianity and other "outmoded" ideas. Thirty years ago

most psychiatrists were adherents of Sigmund Freud; today you would be hard pressed to find one analyst who would accept the Freudian label.

Christian Presentism?

So chronological snobbery would seem to affect all secular academic disciplines. But have Christian scholars been infected by it? Certainly some once-solid religious reputations are in decline. In Christian as well as secular schools Cotton Mather has been tarred with the brush of the Salem witch trials. William Jennings Bryan, with the help of that ubiquitous high school play *Inherit the Wind*, has been demoted from hero of the common man and statesman of high principle to buffoonish windbag. And with the possible exception of Billy Graham, twentieth-century evangelists are automatically considered Elmer Gantrys. Will Christian apologists—C.S. Lewis among them—be next to go? Let's look at some areas where Lewis might already seem dangerously out of fashion.

Lewis's Non-PC Lifestyle

One place where more and more Christian readers are likely to take issue with Lewis is in his personal habits. He has been accused of sexism by several critics, and not only that, he drank rather heavily by current standards and smoked constantly. When Bob Jones, founder of Bob Jones University, met Lewis, he is said to have remarked, "That man smokes and drinks, but I do believe he is a Christian." But many nineties moralists are not quite so tolerant as Jones about those who fraternize with the evil "Big Tobacco." If trends continue, who in the new century would want to expose their children to the talking animal stories of an author who smoked cigarettes? I can hear the objections: Why, that Aslan is no better than Joe Camel!

The Modern View of Paganism

On a more serious note, Lewis also differed with most modern Christians in his attitude toward paganism. Late-century believers tend to classify both occult and pagan figures as anti-Christian, but Lewis viewed classical paganism as not the evil child of Satan, but rather a wild but essentially good uncle of Christianity. He argued that the pagan at least had some sense of the supernatural, and thus was closer to true belief than the modern materialist. Lewis's books—including his books for children—are full of pagan images. Venus and Mars are part of the Christian cosmology in the Space Trilogy, and when Aslan in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* suffers the Narnian version of Christ's death and resurrection, he is surrounded by an army of Greek, Celtic, and ancient European pagan myths come to life. Lewis's point, of course, is that paganism is a herald for Christianity, and all the pagan myth figures recognize the sovereignty of the Christlike Aslan.

All well and good, but what if the modern popularity of Earth Worshipers, Wiccians, neo-Druids, and the like continues to expand into the new century, and what if militant members of those groups continue to see Christianity as Enemy Number One? Under that pressure, will Christians begin to see Lewis's images of paganism as more harmful than beneficial, and see Lewis as a purveyor of dangerous ideas for children? It sounds far-fetched now, but in a society with enough chronological snobbery to turn *Huckleberry Finn* into a racist book, anything is possible.

Christianity And _____

Another more serious issue which could conceivably dim Lewis's popularity is the growing tendency toward what Lewis called "Christianity and"—that is, linking Christianity with contemporary moral fashions while gradually substituting the "and" part of "Christianity and" for actual belief in Christ and following of his teachings. For the nineteen-forties, Lewis's senior devil Screwtape listed such "Christianity Ands" as "Christianity and the New Psychology," and "Christianity and Faith Healing." For the nineties we could add "Christianity and Environmentalism," "Christianity and Inclusive Language," and "Christianity and Politics." If in reading Lewis twenty years from now, we discover he does not take a stand on our particular "Christianity ands," whatever they may be then, we may then begin to think of Lewis as some Christians now think of, say, John Bunyan: interesting reading, but perhaps too elementary for the twenty-first century.

Lewis's focus on elementary, or as he called it "mere" Christianity, brings up another area of concern: his straightforward belief in basic Christian doctrine, the kind of belief that today's popular media shuns with great fastidiousness and that some modern intellectual Christians seem almost ashamed of admitting. We have already seen that fastidiousness in the "talking book" version of *Screwtape* read by Jon Cleese, wherein all the chapters discussing Christ's divinity are expurgated. And of course in the popular *Shadowlands* movie, there is no mention of Christ the savior at all; the Lewis character prays to a very vague god "because he has to—it's like breathing." The general consensus among educated Christians was that this dilution of Lewis was no great matter.

A major character in *The Great Divorce* is the minister who denies the resurrection of Christ. Rather than suffering for it in the modern age, he gains fame, his books are bestsellers, and he is made a bishop. For all that, he is told by an angel that he is an apostate, and for being an apostate he has been sent to Hell, or at least purgatory. If the present trend in mainstream churches to downplay the virgin birth and resurrection becomes the norm, if prominent Christians continue to preach a gospel of forgiveness without repentance and salvation through social reform—or, on the other side, a gospel of imminent End Times and holy guerrilla wars—then Lewis's rational supernaturalism may be shunned by both camps, and Lewis will speak to fewer and fewer of those who call themselves Christians.

Assumed Relations between Religion and Current Culture

Most of us already know Christians, including Christian college professors, who say they found Lewis significant in their youth, but feel they have grown beyond him now. After all, Lewis is terribly behind the enlightened attitudes of our age: he believed in punishment for criminals, distrusted populist politics, scoffed at fear of nuclear warfare, and detested the modern use of he word "democracy." And he fails the current "conservative" litmus test in several areas as well: he had nothing much to say about abortion, for instance, and he saw homosexuality as no great standout among sins. As for one of the major concerns of modern Christian intellectuals, Lewis had no interest in being "in the world, but not of the world" insofar as it pertained to keeping up

with popular culture. He never watched television—even educational television—and the last movie he saw may have been *King Kong* in 1938. He had no idea who Elizabeth Taylor, a fellow Briton and one of the foremost stars of his age, was. He would not be able to add much to the general conversation in the smart set of Christian professors who sneer at "fundamentalism" and review current films for *Books and Culture*.

No Real Christians or Humanists in the 20th Century?

As we can see on this and many fronts, Lewis fails to make the contemporary grade. As he said in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, he was, even in his lifetime, an "Old Western Man," a "dinosaur" in pre-modern outlook and attitude that the audience would not see many more of. Admirably well-read in history, philosophy, religion, and literature from the ancients to the present age, Lewis has taught many of us to seek and heed wisdom of past ages without judging its wise men by contemporary popular notions. So too must we focus on Lewis's wisdom and not worry about his divergence from the fashionable ideas we soak up from our current cultural environment.

As I contemplated this essay, my grandfather came to mind. Grandpa was the kindest man I have ever known, and I remember my nine-year-old disapproval of what seemed to me his outrageous racism. He used the N-word freely, and furthermore, his father (my great-grandfather) fought on the wrong side in the civil war. How could men like that be real Christians, I wondered? But students at this conference may live to hear their great-grandchildren tell them that there were no real Christians in the twentieth century. When we ask what in the world they mean by that, they may reply in a suitably condescending tone, "Because in the twentieth century, Grampy, people still enslaved animals and even slaughtered them for food! Everyone knows now that you can't possibly be a speciesist and a Christian at the same time!"

Time will tell if this is a ridiculous prediction, but for now, if we are not to lose Lewis in the new century, we had best keep in mind—and pass on—his admonition against chronological snobbery. And we should also keep in mind in, all our dealings with the modern world, one of my favorite Lewis quotes. Referring to the secular "truths" of his era (some of which , like Freudian psychology, modern thinkers now laugh at, even as they are sure their own "truths" will never be supplanted), Lewis wrote, "All that is not eternal is eternally out of date."