

11-1999

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist

Eric McGlaughlin
Belmont College

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGlaughlin, Eric (1999) "The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 2 , Article 18.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol2/iss1/18

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay Second Place Student Essay Winner

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist

Eric McGlaughlin

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist

by Eric McGlaughlin

Many colleagues and critics of C.S. Lewis have called him the Christian Apologist. His writings defend the faith that he searched so long to find. The countless stories, essays, and poems of C.S. Lewis have stirred Christians and agnostics alike to consider the truth and reason of God. His own wife, Joy Gresham, was converted as a result of reading Lewis's arguments (Drew 261). His writings have elements that attract both children and adults, science-fiction fans and scholars, and Christians and atheists (Murphy 12). However, Lewis's orthodoxy and commitment to God did not always dominate his writings. In fact, he spent much of his early life as an atheist, until he was converted to Christianity at age thirty-one (Bloom 1729). His conversion and his past atheistic ideals are present influences in all of his writings. These factors, combined with incredible reasoning skills, give Lewis the reputation of the great Christian Apologist.

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on November 29, 1898. His family of four, with a brother Warren three years older, was middle-class, traditionally Christian, and very average. His father Albert James Lewis was a solicitor, and his mother Flora Augusta Lewis a homemaker and the

daughter of a clergyman. Clive, or Jack as he preferred to be called, spent his early years as a happy child who loved nature and a brilliant pupil who loved reading and writing. However, on August 23, 1908, Lewis's life twisted tragically as his mother died of cancer. He had prayed to God, the great magician in the sky, to heal his mother. When the magician failed to perform his trick, Lewis's belief in Christianity shattered (Gilbert and Kilby 9).

His father then sent him to various boarding schools, all of which taught Orthodox Christianity, and all of which Lewis hated. Lewis's eagerness to abandon theism was fed by the random, lustful sight of a dancing mistress and the natural, pessimistic reality of such authors as H.G. Wells and Sir Robert Ball (Kilby 14,15). Statements of "I believe" became ideas of "one does feel." If more than one thousand religions cover the earth, why should the one thousandth, Christianity, be labeled true? (Lewis, *Surprised* 61-63). In 1914, the final brick was laid in Lewis's atheistic wall when W.T. Kirkpatrick, a mature atheist, became Lewis's tutor. Young Jack basked in his freedom from religion, as he also reveled in the teachings of Greek, Latin,

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist • Eric McLaughlin

French, German, and Italian (Gilbert and Kilby 9).

In 1917, this proud, newly-reformed atheist joined the Somerset Light Infantry and arrived on the front lines of World War I on his nineteenth birthday. However, in 1918, he suffered a fairly serious wound and was sent home to pursue his studies (Drew 260, 261). Because of natural ability and the tutelage of W.T. Kirkpatrick, Lewis received a scholarship to Oxford University in 1919. In his first year at Oxford, he published his first work, ironically titled *Spirits in Bondage*, which overtly proclaimed his theological viewpoint that “nature is wholly diabolical and malevolent and that God, if he exists, is outside and in opposition to the cosmic arrangement” (Gilbert and Kilby 11). As a student at Oxford, Jack excelled phenomenally in his studies of literature, winning the Chancellor’s Prize in 1923 for one of his many English essays. His view against Christianity deepened, and God came to represent nothing more than ugly architecture, bad poetry, and especially interference in his personal endeavors, the worst idea yet (Lewis, *Surprised* 172,173).

Despite this outlook, a few individuals began to penetrate his atheistic wall, including authors such as Milton and MacDonald, and including personal acquaintances such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Arthur Greeves. Lewis had conversed with Greeves for a while through the mail about the idea of God and theism. Through all of these conversations, Lewis insisted that Greeves was “backward for not joining the educated and thinking people who ignore such old and decaying superstitions” (Gilbert and Kilby 16,17). Nevertheless, in one of many of Greeves’s letters, he struck a blow to Lewis’s atheism when he declared that beauty is the

evidence of God. When Lewis considered that a tree, through constructed out of the same atoms, protons, and electrons as all other matter, can be beautiful to see, he was forced to admit that there must be something in the spirit of the tree, beyond the natural, calling to his own spirit. Once at Oxford, friends such as Tolkien, Barfield, Nevill Coghill, and A.C. Harwood showed Jack a personal trait that he had yet to encounter—holiness (Gilbert and Kilby 18). Owen Barfield especially, although described by Lewis as a man who “has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one” (Lewis, *Surprised* 199), was the first to truly discover the holes in Lewis’s realism (Lewis, *Surprised* 208). At the same time, books such as George MacDonald’s *Phantasies*, Alexander’s *Space, Time, and Deity*, and G.K. Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man* wove into Lewis’s thought pattern, presenting new ideas about theism that he had never considered. Lewis gradually adopted the position of Roland in *Chansen* that “Christians are wrong, but the rest are all bores” (Lewis, *Surprised* 213,214).

In 1926, Lewis published his narrative poem *Dymer*. In the story, a young man revolts against his totalitarian society, kills his teacher, and travels through the galaxy, living many strange and romantic adventures. In the end, he is killed by a “wing’d and sworded shape brimming with life” (Kilby 20). Lewis, although still denying Christianity, reveals how his adventures apart from orthodoxy seem to be losing their excitement. He was soon to find that “the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man” (Lewis, *Surprised* 228), as he wrote later. He spent night after night in his room at Oxford trying his hardest to avoid this Creator who was seeking him so eagerly. But the brick wall of atheism Lewis had constructed was as a paper-thin curtain to

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist • Eric McGlaughlin

God. During the Trinity Term in 1929, Lewis fell to the floor of his office and confessed that "God was God" (Lewis, *Surprised* 228,229).

Lewis's conversion changed every facet of his life. The events of his conversion influenced every facet of his writings. Lewis joined a literary group called the Inklings, with other such Christian authors as J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Nevill Coghill, and later his brother Warren. This circle of authors met regularly to drink tea, discuss writings, and enjoy each other's company (Gilbert and Kilby 8). Lewis's comradeship with the Inklings, his former atheistic ideals, and his conversion left their footprints on all of Lewis's works, but certainly on *Out of the Silent Planet*, a science-fiction story of another world, and *The Silver Chair*, the fourth of Lewis's famed Narnian children's tales. However, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, an allegory very much like the story of Lewis's conversion itself, left the strongest impression of Lewis's struggle to convert.

The setting for *Out of the Silent Planet* is simple. Two scientists/renegade astronauts kidnap an innocent passerby named Dr. Ransom and embark on a journey to explore the people of Mars, which is called Malacandra by the natives. Upon arrival, Ransom escaped his kidnappers and begins to encounter the culture upon which he has stumbled. The hross, the people of Malacandra, live simply; however, they do possess limited technology in astronomy, and they lived completely peaceful with surrounding societies. The hross tell Ransom of Maleldil, the creator, in whom they trust that all will be well. Ransom is extremely skeptical but finds that being in the presence of the hross makes it easier to trust in someone he cannot see (Bloom 1738). The hross speak mysteriously of the Silent Planet Earth, which

they call Thulcandra, and of the bent people who come from Thulcandra. When Ransom tells tales of war, poverty, and disease, the hross are puzzled as to why Maleldil is heard so clearly throughout the universe, yet so little on the Silent Planet, even though the hross legend says that Maleldil once came to Thulcandra as a person (Lewis, *Out* 131-133).

C.S. Lewis viewed Christianity in the same way that Ransom first viewed the hross. At first, Lewis saw Christians as a primitive people who trusted in their God, for whom they had no proof of existence. However, when Lewis told the tales of his atheistic world, he began to see how silent his world really was. He found that being in the presence of other Christians made it easier for himself to trust in one he could not see. The hross did not fear death, but only bentness, for death did not destroy, but reunited the hross with Maleldil (Lewis, *Out* 132). This belief, the mountain that Lewis felt he could not pass, eventually became the answer he was searching for.

The fourth book published in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Silver Chair*, exemplifies another theme present in many of Lewis's works—searching. *The Silver Chair* is the story of an inexperienced trio of travelers, Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum, the tall and lanky marshwiggle. They are traveling through the lands north of Narnia searching for the lost Prince Rillian, who, on a quest to revenge his mother's death, followed a beautiful lady away into a lost kingdom. Puddleglum, although in the end a hero, does not waver from his pessimistic views. Throughout the journey, Puddleglum complains of poor weather and harsh boarding conditions, even when the conditions were quite hospitable. He also insists that the search for Rillian is completely futile, and that the trio is destined never to find him. However, as the story progresses, and

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist • Eric McGlaughlin

Puddleglum's character is more deeply revealed, the reader finds that Puddleglum is secretly driven by an extreme longing to find Rillian and be reunited with the Prince of his home land (Kilby 16). C.S. Lewis held the same attitude while under the tutelage of W.T. Kirkpatrick. While Lewis proved always to be the theological pessimist, insisting the God is just a dying myth and the church a mob of blind followers, beneath the surface an intense longing for joy drove Lewis to search deeper and harder to find the missing piece of his life.

The atheistic views of Lewis are also found in the antagonist of *The Silver Chair*. The reader later discovers the beautiful lady whom Rillian followed to be the evil witch of the Underworld. She had killed the queen of Narnia to begin Rillian's quest, then she placed a spell on him to keep him in bondage to herself. When the travelers from Narnia find the witch's underground kingdom and finally the entranced Prince Rillian, they break the spell that had bound the prince only to encounter a standoff between a very angry and magical witch and all that they know to be true of the overworld. The witch proclaims that the entire overworld is simply a myth, and when the Narnians tell of the sun and Aslan, the noble lion who rules the overworld, she insists that the travelers have merely manufactured these ideas. She argues that "you can only tell me that [the sun] is like the lamp... You have seen lamps, so you imagine a bigger and better lamp and call it a sun. You have seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat, and so you call it a lion" (Lewis, *Silver* 157). The arguments of the witch correspond exactly with the arguments of Lewis as an atheist. He wrote to Arthur Greeves these same ideas as an explanation for the origin of religion. He wrote that the magnitude of nature caused early humans to fabricate a force behind

nature, creating a god out of fear and ignorance (Gilbert and Kilby 16).

Though one finds the influences of Lewis's early theological viewpoints in nearly all of his fictional works, *The Pilgrim's Regress* shows the events of his conversion most clearly. Satirically called "the further spiritual adventures of C.S. Lewis" (Kilby 25), Lewis published this story in 1933, the first story he wrote as a Christian (Gilbert and Kilby 12). John, an ambitious youth living in the great land of Puritania, doesn't understand the rules enforced by his landlord. He has never seen this landlord, and half-heartedly ignoring his rules, fascinates himself with a distant enchanted island. He leaves home in search of this island, meeting Vertue, who is to accompany John on his travels. He declines invitations from many people he meets on the road, including an inviting chance to join Mr. Enlightenment on his journey (Kilby 25,26). John and Vertue eventually meet Guide, who tells them that the island is the home of the landlord, and that his longing for the island merely masks his real longing for the landlord himself (Kilby 28). The Guide, who represents the Holy Spirit, leads John back home on the same roads by which he came, only they appear much different on the way back to Puritania (Kilby 35). Because of the obvious representation of the characters in this allegory, little explanation is needed to reveal the parallel story of Lewis's own search for the landlord. Lewis followed many false objects looking for joy; and when their falsity was revealed, he abandoned the objects until finding that the place where he started held the answer for which he was searching (Gilbert and Kilby 12).

At age fifty-eight C.S. Lewis married Joy Gresham, and she died of cancer four years later. Lewis himself died on November 22,

The Atheistic Influences of the Christian Apologist • Eric McGlaughlin

1963, of a heart attack, ending the life of arguably the greatest Christian author of the twentieth century (Drew 260,261). His innumerable works spoke of sacrifice as the key to joy, and self-choice as the key to hell, a lesson Lewis knew quite well. God had sought after him for years, not letting go until Lewis had given everything and returned to Puritania. Lewis described his own search for God as much a search as "the mouse's search for the cat" (Gilbert and Kilby 20). He knew his salvation to be incredible. Therefore, he let it soak through his entire life until every word that he spoke or wrote revealed fully how God had captured him and captured him completely.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold, ed. The Chelsea House Library of Literary Criticism: Twentieth Century British Literature, Vol. 3. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Drew, Bernard A. The 100 Most Popular Young Adult Authors: Biographical Sketches and Bibliographies. Englewood: Libraries Unlimited, 1996.
- Gilbert, Douglas, and Clyde S. Kilby. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Kilby, Clyde S. The Christian World of C.S. Lewis. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Lewis, C.S. Out of the Silent Planet. New York: Macmillan, 1963.
- Lewis, C.S. Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life. New York: Harcourt, 1955.
- Lewis, C.S. The Silver Chair. New York: Macmillan, 1977.
- Murphy, Brian. C.S. Lewis: Starmony Reader's Guide 14. Ed. Roger C. Schlobin. Mercer Island: Starmont, 1983.