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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III**

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## **Male vs. Female as Good vs. Bad: Deconstructing Gender in C.S. Lewis's Theology**

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C. S. Lewis on several occasions addresses the spiritual significance of gender. In *Perelandra* he suggests that gender is a spiritual truth that precedes biological embodiment. As such, biology is not the reason men are superior to women; rather, God created men that way, first spiritually and then physically to reflect the spiritual truth. This viewpoint takes a practical turn in his essay "Priestesses in the Church" (twice cited as one of Lewis's most important writings by Peter Kreeft in his keynote presentations for the 1999 Ewbank Colloquium). Here Lewis argues that women simply cannot represent God to humanity as well as men can.

Yet Lewis did not acquire this presumed truth on his conversion to Christianity. Rather, the belief that men are in general, and in certain specific ways, superior to women precedes his conversion. If anything, later in his life he may have become less extreme in his position, owing to his experiences with women intellectuals, and his wife in particular. Yet Christianity provided a convenient theological underpinning for Lewis's pre-existing assumptions regarding gender.

In "Priestesses in the Church" Lewis consciously espouses a gender hierarchy. At other times, however, Lewis reveals this hierarchy in ways of which he may have been much less conscious. He occasionally uses gendered terms for evaluative purposes. Such instances show the importance of this attitude to Lewis's thinking. Today I wish to deconstruct one such occurrence that I believe foregrounds and problematizes Lewis's gender hierarchy. In true deconstructive style, I will draw our attention to a

few small phrases in a brief, perhaps even minor essay and passages that, when given more than their due attention, reveal the contradictory nature of Lewis's gender hierarchy.

The essay opens *God in the Dock*, and is titled "Evil and God," first published in 1941 in *The Spectator*. In this essay Lewis responds to an earlier essay of the same title by C.E.M. Joad, in which that author argues against the worldviews he labels "mechanism" and "emergent evolution" as philosophically inadequate. Joad concludes that thinkers are left with only two general recourses: monotheism or dualism. Lewis concurs, but good Christian apologist that he is, he sets about to show why dualism is also philosophically inadequate when compared with monotheism.

Lewis expresses two arguments against dualism, one metaphysical and the other moral. The metaphysical argument is less relevant to my analysis, so I will only summarize it briefly. Lewis argues that two completely opposite forces, good and evil, can exist only contingently. Because they are opposites, neither can be ultimate. Some more ultimate ground must have produced the situation of equally powerful opposites; or at the very least, that situation is *itself* more ultimate than the two opposing forces. Lewis notes we can only imagine the two opposite forces inhabiting some shared *space*, and thus that space must be closer to the universal ultimate than are good and evil.

The moral argument is based on the practical inability to maintain the terms used for the two opposite forces. If good and evil are equal, and if neither is in some

way derived out of the other, then how can one determine which is evil, that is, which is morally undesirable? Under dualism, Lewis argues, one can no longer pass judgments, since the label "good" would most likely mean "that which we prefer." To assert a value, "good" must be more ultimate, more original, than "evil," and "evil" must be essentially a perversion of "good." The true relationship between good and evil is parasitic rather than equal. With this argument, Lewis has prepared his reader for the assertion that monotheistic belief systems, such as Christianity, offer a fuller, more accurate view of reality than dualistic systems, though he also praises dualism as a far better belief system than many of the new philosophies of his contemporaries.

Gender only enters the argument in a small way in the last paragraph when Lewis writes, "Dualism can be a manly creed" (24). *This* is the phrase I wish to focus on. From the context, Lewis clearly intends this as high praise. Lewis shows more respect to a follower of dualism than, say, a follower of the subjectivism he criticizes in *The Abolition of Man*. Yet the word "manly" itself can only have meaning as a compliment if its opposite term, "womanly," lacks the same complimentary power. If "womanly" can be a complimentary term, why doesn't Lewis use it instead of "manly"? Just as "good" cannot mean good if it is co-equal with "evil," neither can "manly" carry its meaning if it is merely coequal with "womanly."

In the supposedly non-gendered world of ideas, Lewis uses only the gendered term "manly" as a compliment, never the term "womanly." In fact, Lewis uses terms such as "feminine" or "womanly" as compliments only when referring to women. His use of "manly" as a philosophical compliment, however, betrays a hidden assumption that to apply a term such as

"womanly" to an idea would be an insult.

From this perspective one can look forward two decades to Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, surely one of Lewis's most beautiful books, and one that I presume (in contrast with assertions by some Lewis scholars) is biographical. On page 56 Lewis describes the depth of love and friendship he experienced with his wife. In an effort to communicate this depth to her, Lewis recounts, he "once praised her for her 'masculine virtues.' But she soon put a stop to that by asking how I'd like to be praised for my feminine ones." Only when Joy confronted his assumption that "masculine" somehow equates with "good" did he recognize his own unacknowledged assumption that to be called "feminine" is an insult. In fact, if her masculine attributes make his wife superior in his eyes to other women, then to be called "feminine" must be an insult even to women.

Thus these two terms, as Lewis uses them, cannot be equally complimentary within their own settings; one can no more say that "womanly" is a compliment to woman than "evil" is a compliment to an evil person. Lewis's moral argument against dualism deconstructs claims that both "manly" and "womanly" are equally complimentary within their own contexts. When gender functions as a figure in Lewis's theological writings, it betrays a moral understanding of gender (which, of course, is consistent with Lewis's actual relationships with women). If "manly" connotes positive value, whether applied to a man, an idea, a belief system, or even a woman, then there is no space left for "womanly" to connote positively. Just as evil, parasitically derived from good, has less moral value than good, so too woman, or at least the feminine, parasitically derived from man, is not only authoritatively inferior to man, but also morally inferior.

To sum up my argument thus far: for Lewis to use the term "manly" as a compliment to the philosophy of dualism in "Evil and God" is to use the term as a synonym for "good." When Lewis says "dualism is a manly creed," he argues that, relatively speaking, it is good, though not the best. Given that dualism pits good vs. evil, the very arguments Lewis employs to show that good cannot be equal with evil apply in the same way to "manly" vs. "womanly." For "good" to be "good," it must be morally superior to evil; for "manly" to equate with "good," it must be morally superior to "womanly." Lewis asserts, "badness is not even bad *in the same way* in which goodness is good." (23) Similarly, "womanly" must not be "womanly" in the same way that "manly" is "manly." That is, gender is not simply a difference; it's something comparable to the major and minor leagues. "Manly" is to "womanly" in the same way that "mature" is to "childish."

This, in fact, is the very issue that underlies Lewis's essay "Priestesses in the Church," first published in *Time and Tide* in 1948, again in response to an earlier article published therein, this time from Lady Marjorie Nunburnholme urging the Church of England to accept female priests. While opposing Nunburnholme, Lewis acknowledges that woman is not "necessarily, or even probably, less holy or less charitable or stupider than a man." Lewis's response, ultimately, is that God decreed a male priesthood, having created masculinity as more representative of God than femininity. While men are not necessarily closer to God than women are, masculinity as a concept is closer to God than femininity. Remember again that for Lewis (and Tolkien) gender is a conceptual element of the universe which precedes God's creation of biological life forms. Masculinity, in other words, precedes actual men.

Yet Lewis, of course, associates masculinity and men. Being a man means one is to a large extent, and can be to a greater extent, masculine. Being a woman means one is not to a large extent, cannot be to a great extent, and should not be very much at all, masculine (which makes one wonder why Lewis praised his wife for her masculine virtues). That is, while men may be and act no holier than women, they are still more like God than women are. To be born male, therefore, is a special honor (Lewis wonders if it might not actually be a burden) to represent God to humanity in a way that women simply cannot do.

Why specifically is it that women cannot represent God to humanity as priests? Well, Lewis replies, it's a mystery. God has decreed it in his infinite wisdom. From man's perspective, Lewis acknowledges, it is irrational. Yet having posited gender as preceding biology, Lewis is free to use gendered adjectives once again in a revealing way. God must be represented to man by a man, Lewis says, because in relationship to us, God is masculine. To state this the other way around, in relationship to God, we are *all* feminine. That is, as individuals and as a church we are situated hierarchically subordinate to, inferior to, and dependent upon Christ, who in turn, Lewis implies, is feminine to God the Father. The fundamental principle of femininity, it seems, is subordination to masculinity. By the way, this is precisely the principle Lewis did not experience from the two women who dominated his adult life.

Lewis does not pursue other equally logical conclusions of his formulation. If men are most like God due to their masculine superiority to women, and if Christ can be seen as feminine in relation to God the Father, women must have a special bond or resemblance to Christ in his role as submitter to the Father. What does this special cor-

relation mean to humanity? In addition, if even men are feminine in relationship to Christ, then shouldn't we men study women humbly and carefully, since they more closely model Christ-like submission? This is something Lewis claims to have never done. In the chapter on friendship in *The Four Loves*, Lewis makes clear he has had or taken little opportunity to observe women. "What were the women doing meanwhile?" Lewis asks when discussing why men throughout history have enjoyed male camaraderie. "How should I know? I am a man and never spied on the mysteries of the Bona Dea" (95) Yet shouldn't that mystery give us insight into our beloved Christ, and into our own role in relationship with him? Lewis's emphasis on perceiving God as masculine suggests that God's masculinity is more worthy of study than His femininity.

So, what is the upshot of this discussion? Is Lewis wrong in his views on women as priests? Or in his hierarchical and non-biological view of gender? Let me make clear, I'm not seeking to make such arguments. Rather than passing judgment on Lewis, I, in good deconstructive fashion, prefer instead to make a small point, rather than a major argument. The point is simply that gender carries with it moral value in Lewis's writings. We should understand this when we read his work, whether we agree with him on this matter or disagree with him.

We should also understand that his viewpoint is more than just a reflection of Lewis's time. Lewis sought to engage Dorothy L. Sayers in his campaign against women priests, and her response is instructive. Sayers' main argument on gender, as expressed in two essays in her collection *Unpopular Opinions*, is that men and women are both equally human. When Lewis asked her to back his viewpoint, she

declined. Nothing about women's physiology should prevent her from functioning appropriately as priest. Sayers does not accept Lewis's argument that men were chosen by God to be placed hierarchically above them, nor that they as a result more accurately reflect God's nature.

In a sense, this entire disagreement centers on diverging interpretations of Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*." To emphasize the first half is to see man created more in God's image than woman, as Lewis seems to do; to emphasize the second half is to see man and woman equally reflecting God's image, as Sayers seems to do.

If nothing else, this disagreement between Lewis and Sayers should validate continued debate and disagreement on the nature of gender and theology among the Inklings, and among the fans of the Inklings. It is from this perspective that I humbly, respectfully, and cheerfully disagree with Peter Kreeft, the distinguished keynote speaker for the Second Biennial Ewbank Colloquium, in his assertion that "Priestesses in the Church" is among Lewis's most important essays relevant to our times.

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