

Inklings Forever

Volume 5 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &
Friends*

Article 5

6-2006

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us: C.S. Lewis and the Problems of Rote, Reverence, and Metaphor

Dave Fillman

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

Fillman, Dave (2006) "The Almighty is Slipping Past Us: C.S. Lewis and the Problems of Rote, Reverence, and Metaphor," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/5

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.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

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

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us: C.S. Lewis and the Problems of Rote, Reverence, and Metaphor

Dave Fillman

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us: C.S. Lewis and the Problems of Rote, Reverence, and Metaphor

Dave Fillman

In the long and enduring history of Christian literature, one of the most subtle and important statements ever made is to be found in C.S. Lewis's monumental work Mere Christianity. To grasp this statement is to see not only one of the most frightening, and fundamental problems facing the modern Church, but also within the statement, the sight of a possible solution.

In his chapter titled "The Shocking Alternative," Lewis makes the case that in ancient Biblical history, God singled out and revealed himself to the Jewish people. He goes on to say "Then comes the real shock. Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He were God. He claims to forgive sin. He says he has always existed. He says he is coming to judge the world at the end of time" (54). In essence, Lewis goes on to say that this claim was ". . . the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips" (55). It is in reference to Christ's claim to forgive sins that Lewis makes his extremely important statement: ". . . the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to" (55). Though this is an isolated sentence, it speaks volumes concerning Lewis's view of the human condition in relation to God. In this statement, he is alluding to the fact that, the claims of the very Word of God concerning Christ can simply slip past one's notice. And so the question becomes: how does one keep the impact of the worth of the claims of Almighty God from slipping away unnoticed?

Though there are numerous barriers that can keep one from fully comprehending the impact and worth of

the Word of God, three examples of these barriers can be given from three of Lewis's works: Mere Christianity, Miracles and On Stories. And the three barriers are rote, reverence, and metaphor.

The first barrier has been alluded to in the statement just read, where Lewis, speaking of the claim of Christ, said "we have heard it so often . . ." He is implying a kind of mechanical hearing, which comes about through constant repetition. This barrier may be properly defined by The Webster's Dictionary as "rote": "Routine or repetition carried out mechanically or unthinkingly" (999). Constant repetition can cause not only mechanical hearing, but a mechanical response to the Word of God, as seen in Lewis's second chapter on faith in Mere Christianity. In this chapter he argues for the fact that mankind is in an undone condition in relation to the Almighty. He states that if a man thinks in a certain way, "He is misunderstanding what he is and what God is. And he cannot get into the right relationship until he has discovered the fact of our bankruptcy" (127). It is in the following paragraph that Lewis makes the case for the mechanical response:

When I say "discovered," I mean really discovered: not simply said it parrot-fashion. Of course, any child, if given a certain kind of religious education, will soon learn to *say* that we have nothing to offer to God that is not already His own and that we find ourselves failing to offer even that without keeping something back. But I am talking of really

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us • Dave Fillman

discovering this: really finding out by experience that it is true. (127)

Here Lewis defines “parrot-fashion” as a merely learned response: to say something unthinkingly or mechanically. The Webster’s Dictionary defines parroting: “To repeat by rote”(828).

What is also frightening for the Church is the inherent danger that accompanies rote hearing and response as seen in the warning of Scripture that particularly addresses this condition, found in the book of Isaiah:

Then the Lord said, “Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned *by rote*, therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, . . . And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed” (New American Standard Bible, Isa. 29:13,14).

So, not only from Lewis’s perspective but from Scripture itself, the rote mind is clearly a dangerous, unthinking, mechanically learned response. It causes us not only to give “lip service,” but it also causes wisdom and discernment to be concealed. As a result, as he has already stated, it causes the most shocking claims of God to simply “slip past us unnoticed.” But how can this be avoided?

The second barrier is found in a chapter called “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” in Lewis’s book On Stories. In this chapter, Lewis speaks of a certain paralyzing childhood inhibition, and ask the question: “Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. And reverence itself did harm”(47). Here, the second barrier is identified as a false reverence. This comes about through inhibitions, due to “religious” feelings, that are brought about by coercion.

The third barrier is identified in the chapter “Horrid Red Things” from his book Miracles, Lewis addresses the issue of metaphor, and suggests that any man with a modern education when looking into any authoritative statement of Christian doctrine, will find himself faced with a completely “savage” or “primitive” picture of the universe (68). He states that, “Everything seems to presuppose a conception of reality which the increase of our knowledge has been steadily refuting for the last two-thousand years and which no honest man in his senses could return to to-day” (69). According to Lewis, the reason for the modern rejection and disgust for Christianity is that “When once a man is convinced that Christianity in *general* implies a local “Heaven,” a

flat earth, and a God who can have children, he naturally listens with impatience to our solutions of particular difficulties and our defenses against particular objections” (69). And so the third barrier, concerns the anthropomorphic imagery that is found in Scripture, and may be defined as metaphor.

When dealing with these three aspects of hindrance, one must return to the original question: how does one keep the impact of the worth of the claims of Almighty God from slipping away unnoticed? How does one scale the incredibly imposing barriers of rote hearing and response, reverence that is forced, and the sometimes strange and “primitive” metaphorical language used in Scripture?

The beginning of the solution is to be found in Lewis’s earlier quote on parroting. Remember, that Lewis places the idea of learning something “parrot-fashion” in opposition to “really discovering . . . really finding out by experience that [something] is true.” And so, to Lewis, there is a way to actually experience the truth of the impact of the worth of God, and the solution is to be found by re-casting the image of God. Returning to the section of the previous quote from his book On Stories, Lewis continues his thoughts of what to do about the inhibitions brought about by forced reverence. In the part of the paragraph that follows, he gives his oft-quoted solution that we have been looking for, “But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could” (47).

Here, then, is Lewis’s magnificent answer. By casting the things of God and the sufferings of Christ into an imaginary world, one steals past the watchful dragons of inhibitions, piety, and Sunday school associations which, after time, could only degenerate into rote hearing and response. By employing this solution, one does not let the experience, potency, and wonder of the Almighty slip past.

Lewis does this obviously and famously in his greatest work of fantasy, The Chronicles of Narnia. But he also uses this methodology in his theological writings as well, by sometimes “re-casting” the things of God and the sufferings of Christ into in a more transcendent form so that they be seen, as if, for the first time. This is wonderfully illustrated in his books Miracles and Mere Christianity. It is here that we must ask some key questions: Should the metaphorical images of Christianity be destroyed? Are they necessary, absurd—even dangerous to our doctrines? Should we have more sophisticated imagery? Or do they point to a higher reality that cannot be grasped without them?

Lewis argues that “. . . the absurdity of images does not imply absurdity of doctrines” (75). Powerfully, he asserts that:

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us • Dave Fillman

If a man watches his own mind, I believe he will find that what profess to be specially advanced or philosophic conceptions of God are, in his thinking, always accompanied by vague images which, if inspected, would turn out to be even more absurd than the man-like images aroused by Christian theology (74).

Lewis states that “The truth is that if we are going to talk at all about things which are not perceived by the senses, we are forced to use language metaphorically” (72). He goes on to ask the question, that if a Galilean peasant were to really believe the images of Christ—literally and physically sitting down “at the right hand of the Father,” and then got an education and discovered that “the Father had no right hand, and did not sit on a throne” would the primitive images really have mattered to him? (75).

Here Lewis makes one of the most profound statements that can be said about the actual reality of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of re-casting doctrine into an imaginary world, as he might in his fantasy, or science fiction works, he re-cast the sheer reality of Christ as it is, in the transcendent realm—without the “primitive” anthropomorphic imagery of Scripture. In response to the question of whether the original images would have mattered to the Galilean peasant, Lewis thrusts us into a realm that is sudden, clear, and shocking:

What mattered must have been the belief that a person whom he had known as a man in Palestine had, as a person, survived death and was now operating as the supreme agent of the supernatural Being who governed and maintained the whole field of reality. And that belief would survive substantially unchanged after the falsity of the earlier images had been recognized (75).

By introducing this astounding reality into one’s thinking, the following corresponding verse of Scripture can never be seen in quite the same way: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (New American Standard Bible 1 Timothy 2:5).

Lewis repeatedly re-cast images into visions sometimes filled with nuances of myth, legend, and romance—such as when he calls the devil “. . . a Dark Power in the universe . . .” (Mere Christianity 50). He makes reference to the Incarnation as “God [landing] in enemy occupied territory in human form” (56). In terms of avoiding legalism in our on-going sanctification, to be Christ-like, “. . . is more like painting a portrait than like obeying a set of rules” (162). With this sort of mindset, all the familiar passages heard thousands of times, and all the prayers and usual responses, will now

hold the substance and the deep reality of the unseen Christ.

This is demonstrated in one of the most poignant passages Lewis ever wrote, concerned the portrait of Our Lord as our Sacrifice, and Saviour. In the chapter “The Grand Miracle” in his book Miracles Lewis majestically sets the stage of the greatest heroic epic in the history of mankind, and does so with an unearthly vision of Christ that will keep the impact of the Almighty from slipping past us. He states that God came to earth from absolute being, into time and space—down, and down further still—into the very depths of humanity he has created (111). Lewis then creates this portrait:

But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders (111).

Lewis’s vision of the Almighty destroys the barriers of rote, reverence, and metaphor. Hidden under the vast, accumulated layers of complacent hearing, and response, false piety, and metaphorical imagery, is a God that is truly seen for the first time and therefore truly worshipped for the first time. In a final excerpt about his vision of Heaven, and Christianity being more than duties and rules and guilt and virtue, he humbly says:

One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes. But this is near the stage where the road passes over the rim of the world. No one’s eyes can see very far beyond that: lots of people’s eyes can see further than mine (131).

C.S. Lewis has pulled back the curtain of a mundane, earthly reality and has ushered us into the eternal realm of a God and Christ beyond our limited sight. And he was able to do so, because the span of his own sight was so powerful, so far-reaching, and so clear.

Works Cited

The Almighty is Slipping Past Us • Dave Fillman

- Lewis, C.S. Mere Christianity. New York: Macmillan, 1960.
- . Miracles. New York: Macmillan, 1978.
- . On Other Stories. San Diego: Harcourt, 1982.
- “Rote” Def. 2.2 The New Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. 8th ed. 1981.
- “Parrot” Def. 2 The New Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. 8th ed. 1981.
- Updated New American Standard Bible. Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1999.