

THE LIBERAL ARTS, ANTIDOTE FOR ATHEISM
A PARTIAL THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE LIBERAL ARTS

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Abstract

C. S. Lewis once stated that the decline of classical learning was a contributory cause of atheism. This article explores why he made this very unusual statement, describing how Lewis saw the Classics as a literature full of gods and goddesses, providing hints of truth, giving us things to write about, and preparing for the Christian faith. Using some remarkable quotations from Virgil and Plato, Lewis demonstrated how those writers anticipated both the birth and the death of Christ. Lewis's concept of myth, powerfully present in the Classics, shows how the Gospel story itself is a "true myth," one with a pattern that is similar to many of the pagan myths. The personal story of Lewis himself demonstrates how the Classics, and, more broadly, the liberal arts were a testimony to the truth of God and how the Greek plays of Euripides, the philosophy of Samuel Alexander, the imagination of writer William Morris, the poetry of George Herbert, and the historical sensibility of G. K. Chesterton combined (with many other similar influences) to convince Lewis that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were especially a "true myth," one that happened in history, demonstrating him to be the Son of God.

Keywords: *Atheism, classical learning, the Classics, conversion, patron saint, liberal arts, myth*

One of the most puzzling quotations from C. S. Lewis that I have ever come across is this statement, written by Lewis to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves on Dec. 17, 1932: "...one of the contentions of the book is that the decay of our old classical learning is a contributory cause of atheism." (*Collected Letters*, 2: 93) Lewis was describing one of his purposes in writing *The Pilgrim's Regress*. The book would be published in 1933. He was claiming that the high frequency of foreign language quotations which he included in that book would not be understood and that he should not have included so many. If classical learning were still the norm, he implied, people would understand his quotations and would be more likely to believe in God.

I had long been aware of this quotation from Lewis and had always thought of it as exaggerated words of the young Oxford professor, who had not

yet honed his writing skills. That assumption was, of course, naïve, since Lewis seldom if ever makes statements without good reason, even at an early age.

The subtitle of *The Pilgrim's Regress* is “An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism.” In that subtitle we find out the purpose of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, whereas in the title we learn, because of its similarity to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, about its content—the story of one man's journey to the celestial city. The subtitle tells us that Lewis wanted to defend the Christian faith, the human intellect, and the place of romance, romance in the sense of myth, story, and the fairy tale. Of course, by the word *apology* he meant defense—apology in the sense of the original Greek word *apologia*.

I. THE CLASSICS

Since Lewis was especially talking about Greek and Latin quotations, he was demonstrating his familiarity with and appreciation of the Classics. According to Lewis, the Classics do what good history also does; they prevent the mind from being isolated in its own age (Lewis, “Modern Man,” 62). The Classics also provide an infusion of the better elements of Paganism, enabling students of the Classics both to believe that valuable truth could still be found in old books and to reverence tradition (Lewis, “Modern Man,” 62).

Ironically, Lewis also wrote about how the Classics had led him into atheism, at least when he looked at religion superficially. He reasoned that the world was full of gods and wondered why Christ couldn't be placed on the same plain as Adonis and the Ancient of Days on the same level as Jupiter (*Early Prose Joy*, 28).

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the Guide told John and his traveling companion Vertue that unfortunately the Northern people¹ no longer had to learn the languages of the old Pagans (Greek and Latin). When they had to learn those languages, they “started no further from the light than the old Pagans themselves and had therefore the chance to come at last to Mother Kirk. But now they are cutting themselves off even from that roundabout route” (*Regress* 185). Reading the literature of the old Pagans meant being exposed to the myths of those cultures, which contained many foreshadowings of the Gospel story. That attitude was what freed Lewis to write in *Mere Christianity*,

If you are Christian you do *not* have to believe that all other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you *do* have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain *at least some hint of the truth*. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the

¹ The North symbolizes narrow intellectualism, and the South symbolizes excessive emotionalism and superstition.

question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view (*Mere Christianity* 35).

Notice what he said about other religions. These other religions “contain at least some hint of the truth.” Elsewhere he wrote, “Faith ... does not flow from philosophical arguments alone; nor from experience of the Numinous alone; nor from moral experience alone, nor from history alone; but from historical events which at once fulfill and transcend the moral category, which link themselves with the most numinous elements in paganism, and which (as it seems to me) demand as their presupposition the existence of a Being who is more, but not less, than the God whom many reputable philosophers think they can establish” (“Is Theism Important?” 175).

II. DYING AND RISING GODS

The very concept of a dying and rising God in other religions attracted Lewis in the years before he became a Christian, but he refused to believe that such dying and rising could have happened in Jesus Christ. He wrote, “The idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) ... moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels” (*Collected Letters*, 1: 977). Then, with the help of J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, he came to see God’s hand in such myths, preparing those peoples for the coming of the Gospel message, much like Don Richardson documents in his excellent book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. But the dry and narrow intellectualism of the North in *The Pilgrim’s Regress* was now preventing him from even considering the power of the Gospel.

And yet those other religions were preparing him for the truth of the Christian faith. Then, in 1926, when the atheist philosopher Harry Weldon told Lewis that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was surprisingly strong, he was shocked and forced to look at the Gospels for himself. The pagan religions helped lead him to Christ, and the honest opinion of an atheist provided an assist. Lewis later wrote, “The Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call ‘real things’” (*Collected Letters*, 1: 977).

In *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis wrote about a couple of those pagan stories. He stated,

Virgil, writing not very long before the birth of Christ, begins a poem thus: “The great procession of the ages begins anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns, and the new child is sent down from high heaven.” It goes on to describe the paradisaal age which this nativity will usher in. And of course

throughout the Middle Ages it was taken that some dim prophetic knowledge of the birth of Christ had reached Virgil....

Later in the same book, Lewis also wrote,

Plato in his *Republic* ... asks us ... to imagine a perfectly righteous man treated by all around him as a monster of wickedness. We must picture him, still perfect, while he is bound, scourged, and finally impaled At this passage a Christian reader starts and rubs his eyes. What is happening? Yet another of these lucky coincidences? But presently he sees that there is something here which cannot be called luck at all.

... Plato is talking, and knows he is talking, about the fate of goodness in a wicked and misunderstanding world. But that is not something simply other than the Passion of Christ. It is the very same thing of which that Passion is supreme illustration. If Plato was in some measure moved to write of it by the recent death ... of his master Socrates then that again is not something simply other than the Passion of Christ. The imperfect, yet very venerable, goodness of Socrates led to the easy death of the hemlock, and the perfect goodness of Christ led to the death of the cross, not by chance but for the same reason; because goodness is what it is, and because the fallen world is what it is....

And what are we to say of those gods in various Pagan mythologies who are killed and rise again and who thereby renew or transform the life of their worshippers or of nature? ... Christians who think, as I do, that in mythology divine and diabolical and human elements (the desire for a good story), all play a part, would say: "It is not accidental. In the sequence of night and day, in the annual death and rebirth of the crops, in the myths which these processes gave rise to, in the strong, if half-articulate, feeling (embodied in the many Pagan 'Mysteries') that man himself must undergo some sort of death if he would truly live, there is already a likeness permitted by God to that truth on which all depends" (*Reflections on the Psalms* 104-107).

I could go on to talk about other miracles of Christ, besides His death and resurrection, but I think you've gotten my point.

III. MATTER FROM THE CLASSICS

Lewis also said of the Classics that "they gave us Matter...new things to write and feel about" ("English School" 69). Things like courage, justice, wisdom, and moderation, in story after story, in Homer and Virgil and Dante, in Aeschylus and Euripides, in Plato and Aristotle. Lewis once wrote,

...to lose what I owe to Plato and Aristotle would be like the amputation of a limb. Hardly any lawful price would seem to me too high for what I have gained by being made to learn Latin and Greek. If any question of the value of classical studies were before us, you would find me on the extreme right ("English School" 64).

Lewis saw the pagan gods as precursors, much like the apostle Paul saw the altar in Athens erected to an unknown god as a precursor to his proclamation. He even made this rather startling statement in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University:

It is hard to have patience with those Jeremiahs, in Press or pulpit, who warn us that we are “relapsing into Paganism”. It might be rather fun if we were. It would be pleasant to see some Prime Minister trying to kill a large and lively milk-white bull in Westminster Hall (De Descriptione 10).

When we stop and think about it, we begin to understand. What would be more likely to succeed—to share the Gospel message with an Asian or African pagan or to share the Gospel message with an American citizen who thinks he understands the message of the Bible and has, subsequently, rejected it?

IV. MYTH

The essay “Myth Became Fact” explains how it is that pagan mythology has conveyed ideas that God used to prepare people for the Gospel. In fact, in that essay, Lewis offers us what we might call a theology of mythology:

Those who do not know that this great myth became Fact when the Virgin conceived are, indeed, to be pitied. But Christians also need to be reminded ... that what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth.... We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on our theology. We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘Pagan Christs’: they *ought* to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t. We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome.... For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child, and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher (“Myth Became Fact” 67).

The mythology of paganism is witness to a non-material world. As Lewis expressed in a letter to Arthur Greeves, “Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call ‘real things’” (*Collected Letters*, I, 977).

Writing in *The Discarded Image* about a medieval work, Lewis wrote that it was "... typical of much material which the Middle Ages inherited from antiquity. Superficially it seems to need only a few touches to bring it into line with Christianity; fundamentally it presupposes a wholly Pagan ethics and metaphysics.... Scipio is exhorted ... to look above and despise the world; but he is to despise primarily 'the talk of the rabble' and what he is to look for above is the reward 'of his achievements'.... It will be ... fame or 'glory' in a sense very different from the Christian.... he is exhorted to remember that not he, but only his body, is mortal. Every Christian would in some sense agree. But it is followed almost immediately by the words 'Realize therefore that you are a god'. For Cicero that is obvious; 'among the Greeks', says Von Hügel—and he might have said 'in all classical thought'—'he who says immortal says *god*. The conceptions are interchangeable.' If men can go to heaven it is because they came from there..." (*Discarded Image* 27).

V. AN INTEREST IN PRE-CHRISTIAN WORLDS

The location of much myth in pre-Christian worlds, both in the writings of Lewis and Tolkien, is a tacit assumption that God is at work in other worlds, even where there are no Christians and no Scriptures. Lewis's late in life myth, *Till We Have Faces*, is set in the land of Glome on the outskirts of Greece a century or two before Christ. Tolkien's Middle-earth is set many years before the time of Christ. Lewis loved Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and partly from them he learned about other worlds.

These works highlight the virtues of heroism, chivalry, courage, love, loyalty, faithfulness, and many other biblical qualities. And, as Lewis states in *Early Prose Joy*, "There is no temperament and no environment which he [God] has left without a witness of Himself" (*Early Prose Joy*, 27). For Lewis, there are multiple intersections between the Liberal Arts and belief in God.

VI. THE CONVERSION OF C. S. LEWIS

Who can better describe the Liberal Arts as an antidote to atheism than a man who was once an atheist and whose education was steeped in the liberal arts? C. S. Lewis had been trained in the Classics, in English literature, history, philosophy, and some bits of theology, just enough to understand basic Christian theology.

The conversion of C. S. Lewis is described in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, as consisting primarily of four chess moves that God made against him. I say "primarily," because this was a fifteen-year journey for Lewis, and there were many intermediate steps as the Hound of Heaven chased Lewis "down the nights and down the days; ... down the arches of the years... down

the labyrinthine ways.” The first chess move was the loss of a bishop. The second move was the loss of his second bishop. The third move was Check, and the final move was Checkmate.

While there is much more in Lewis’s journey from atheism to Christianity than I can describe in the time allotted to me, I can illustrate the impact of the liberal arts in the four chess moves that Lewis ascribes to God during that time. He himself becomes an illustration of one of the ways in which the liberal arts helped to bring him to belief in God. The journey started with his reading of George McDonald’s fairy romance, *Phantastes*, which he purchased on March 4, 1916. He finished reading the book three days later. That book awakened his imagination, which, for the next eight years, lived in an unhappy alliance with his intellect.

Then God’s first move took place when Lewis read Euripides’ *Hippolytus* in March 1924 (Heck, “Chronologically Lewis.”). He had first encountered Euripides at least by February 1915, while studying with his tutor W. T. Kirkpatrick at Great Bookham in Surrey (*Surprised by Joy* 144). He described the *Hippolytus* as “splendid stuff.” It brought about the return of Joy, which had been missing from his life. “There was a transitional moment of delicious uneasiness, and then—instantaneously—the long inhibition was over, the dry desert lay behind, I was off once more into the land of longing, my heart at once broken and exalted as it had never been since the old days at Bookham” (*Surprised by Joy* 217). This marks the return of his appreciation of Joy, his word for a desire or longing for another world, ultimately for God. In his diary for March 6, Lewis wrote, “I got a sort of eerie unrest and dropped into the real joy” (*Surprised by Joy* 297f.). It was this reading of the *Hippolytus* that caused the first chess move. The first bishop had been lost.

The *Hippolytus*, a Greek play from the fifth century BC, which Lewis read in the original Greek, offered a dramatic portrayal of gods, love, and family intrigue. The passage in the *Hippolytus* that captured Lewis’s bishop was probably this one:

Oh God, bring me to the end of the seas
To the Hesperides, sisters of evening,
.....
Let me escape to the rim of the world
Where the tremendous firmament meets
The earth, and Atlas holds the universe
In his palms (Brown, *A Life Observed*, 128).

This, of course, means that reading Euripides was the awakening of the imaginative Lewis from the enthrallment of materialism to recognize that reality included far more than what his five senses told him.

On March 8, 1924, Lewis took philosopher Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* out of the Oxford Union library. Lewis wrote this about God's next chess move: "The next Move was intellectual, and consolidated the first Move. I read in Alexander's *Space Time and Deity* his theory of "Enjoyment" and "Contemplation" (*Surprised by Joy*, 217). Lewis took Alexander's book out of the Union the day after he read the *Hippolytus*. So the second move was philosophical. It was, Lewis wrote, the equivalent of losing one's last remaining bishop (*Surprised by Joy*, 221). That second move involved the distinction between enjoyment and contemplation, that is, between experience and analysis. Lewis very much liked this distinction, realizing that his experience of Joy, or longing, was only the footprint of something other than Joy, in reality, of God, although he didn't know it at the time. His experience of this longing, this sense of eternity, wasn't the reality behind it, but only its track. He had evidence of the supernatural, and the natural was tied to the supernatural.

The third move linked his new understanding about Joy, gained from the second move, with philosophical Idealism (*Surprised* 221). It probably happened just a few weeks or months before the fourth and last move in 1930. The third move connected the philosophy of Idealism to Lewis's longing for another world, especially as portrayed in the writings of William Morris, but also those of the poet Yeats, the Christian writings of Chesterton, the poetry of George Herbert, and other writers. In other words, this third move was an intersection between philosophy and literature, a linking of two very different subject areas, but a linking that good liberal arts education accomplishes, either in interdisciplinary courses or team-taught courses, or by intentional overlapping between disciplines.

The fourth and last move was a shift from what he called "the Absolute" to a person, from a philosophical position to a theological one, when he realized that he was using philosophy to keep God at arm's length. This illustrates another linkage, this time between philosophy and theology.

William Morris is an interesting case study. Lewis once wrote of Morris, "I always thought Morris the most essentially *pagan* of all poets. The beauty of the actual world, the vague longings wh. it excites, the inevitable failure to satisfy these longings, and over all the haunting sense of time & change making the world heart breakingly beautiful just because it slips away ... all this, I thought, he gave to perfection: but of what this longing really pointed to, of the reason why beauty made us homesick, of the reality *behind*, I thought he had no inkling." Again, Lewis wrote, "...there is clear statement of eternal values ... and also, best of all, a full understanding that there is something beyond pleasure & pain. For the first ... time the light of *holiness* shines through Morris' romanticism, not destroying but perfecting it" (*Collected Letters*, 1: 911).

The fourth move happened in 1930. As I already stated, Lewis realized that using the term "the Absolute" was just a way of avoiding talking about a

Person, or God: “The fourth Move was more alarming. I was now teaching philosophy ... as well as English. And my watered Hegelianism wouldn’t serve for tutorial purposes. A tutor must make things clear. Now the Absolute cannot be made clear” (*Surprised* 222). The fourth move seems most likely to have happened in the first ten days of June 1930.

Bede Griffiths wrote about the discovery of Berkeley’s *Principles of Human Knowledge*, while pursuing the reading of philosophy, which Lewis had recommended. He was charmed by Berkeley’s style, but also his thought. One passage in particular charmed him, since it spoke of the world as being unable to exist without a mind and stated that such a mind must be the eternal Spirit, that is, God.

Shortly thereafter Lewis wrote a passage that appears to reflect the fourth move:

I could not last out one hour—without continual conscious recourse to what I called Spirit. But the fine, philosophical distinction between this and what ordinary people call ‘prayer to God’ breaks down as soon as you start doing it in earnest.... Even if my own philosophy were true, how could the initiative lie on my side? My own analogy, as I now first perceived, suggested the opposite: if Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare’s doing. Hamlet could initiate nothing.... I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer. It might, as I say, still be true that my ‘Spirit’ differed in some way from ‘the God of popular religion.’ My Adversary waived the point. It sank into utter unimportance. He would not argue about it. He only said, ‘I am the Lord’; ‘I am that I am’; ‘I am’ (*Surprised* 226f.).

Shortly after this, Lewis gave in and admitted that God was God, labeling himself “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England (*Surprised* 228f.). Lewis had become a theist.

As I described those four moves, did you see the connections to the Liberal Arts? The philosophy of Samuel Alexander, Greek drama of Euripides, the poetry of Yeats and George Herbert, the romance novels of William Morris, Chesterton’s Christian understanding of history, and Idealism?

Well, of course, the story doesn’t end there. On Sept. 28, 1931, C. S. Lewis and his brother Warren traveled to the Whipsnade Zoo in the side car of Warren’s motorcycle. Lewis wrote in his autobiography, “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did” (*Surprised by Joy* 237).

VII. C. S. LEWIS, PATRON SAINT OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Oxford University gave Lewis “a liberal arts education, including the study of the classics, philosophy, history, and English language and literature” (*Irrigating* 84). Not only did he study those topics, he also recommended the study of

subjects that are widely representative of the liberal arts. “He wanted philology, linguistic history, linguistic theory (W. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis* 161), grammar, logic, rhetoric (*Prince Caspian* 52f.),¹ the Classics, French (Lewis, *The Silver Chair* 8), history (*Prince Caspian* 194),² philosophy (“The Idea of an ‘English School’” 64), religion, literature, art, mathematics (Lewis, *The Silver Chair* 8), biology (Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” 27), music (*The Horse and His Boy* 178),³ and astronomy (Lewis, *The Discarded Image* 185f.) to be taught, in short, the liberal arts. Foreign language, a subject at which Lewis excelled, was also recommended” (Heck, *Irrigating Deserts* 51).

His undergraduate studies in Honour Moderations led him to Greek and Latin texts. Among the end results were his writing *The Four Loves*, drawing on four Greek words for love, three of which appear in the New Testament, and enabling him later in life to carry on a correspondence with two Italian Catholic priests in Latin and to pepper his writings with phrases in Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French, and many other languages.

His study of history led him to recommend the reading of old books, insisted that the study of history enabled one to see how each period of history is saturated with ideas that are not easily seen by those living at that time, and prevented him from being taken in by the claim that no one in ancient times believed that the size of the universe was great. He wrote in his essay “Dogma and the Universe,” “Ptolemy knew just as well as Eddington⁴ that the earth was infinitesimal in comparison with the whole content of space.”⁵

The study of philosophy enabled Lewis to write *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, both a challenge to David Hume’s denial of the miraculous and a defense of the New Testament view of miracles. His rather philosophical *The Abolition of Man* is considered by many to be the best defense in the English language of objective standards of right and wrong.

And, of course, his writings in literature resulted in the best-selling volume in *The Oxford History of English Literature*, that is, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. Or the book that put him on the map as a medievalist, *The Allegory of Love*. Or his defense of reading literature without preconceptions, *An Experiment in Criticism*.

¹ These three, of course, are the three subjects of the medieval Trivium, grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Rhetoric was among the subjects that young Prince Caspian was taught by Doctor Cornelius, as was history.

² Miss Prizzle, the teacher in a modern school, taught a reconstructed history that excluded the true history of Narnia.

³ Music was one of the subjects Cor said he would be learning.

⁴ Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882-1944) who wrote *The Expanding Universe* (1933).

⁵ Ptolemy lived at Alexandria in the 2nd century A.D. The reference is to his *Almagest*, bk. I.

What about his theological writings from a lay perspective? His most influential work, *Mere Christianity*, or his imaginative theology in the Ransom Trilogy or the Chronicles of Narnia, or his foray into *The Problem of Pain*, or his study of prayer in *Reflections on the Psalms* and *Letters to Malcolm*, not to mention his many essays, especially “The Weight of Glory.”

To read Lewis widely is to receive a liberal arts education. Anyone who studies what Lewis studied will be far the better for it because Lewis himself was versed in the liberal arts. The liberal arts do not have a patron saint, but if one ever *were* adopted, I can’t imagine anyone more appropriate for that honor than C. S. Lewis.

So what? Hold on to the liberal arts no matter what the cost and thereby contribute to the cause of good education and even theism. And read Lewis while you do.

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