

REVIEWS

A Reasoning Christian

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CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS

By C. S. Lewis

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The fourteen essays of *Christian Reflections* come from the last twenty-odd years of the life of C. S. Lewis. The earliest, "Christianity and Literature," was read to a religious society in Oxford and then included in a collection of essays that appeared in 1939. The last, retitled "The Seeing Eye," had been printed in *Show* as "Onward, Christian Spacemen" in 1963. Those who think of Lewis primarily as the explicator and defender of "mere Christianity" may find these essays only peripheral to that central concern. In them the educated Christian reflects not so much on questions that concern all Christians as on such questions as would be faced by one who, like Lewis himself, is by profession a literary scholar and an intellectual, or by anyone whose interests focus on intellectual and aesthetic activity.

From the time of his conversion Lewis devoted himself to what he called "the enormous common ground" shared by Christians. Discussions about differences of doctrine or ritual he found "seldom edifying." He chose to be neither controversialist nor innovator. When an American editor invited him to write a critique of *Honest to God*, Lewis wrote back: "What would you yourself think of me if I did? . . . A great deal of my utility has depended on my having kept out of dog-fights between professing schools of 'Christian' thought. I'd sooner preserve that abstinence to the end." Though in one of these essays, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," he takes issue with contemporary theology, he engages in no dogfight. He makes instead a very gentle and conciliatory protest and speaks of it as the bleating of a sheep whose shepherds he hopes will hear.

Awareness of Lewis's longtime commitment to the common ground of Christianity prepares the reader of *Christian Reflections* for its conservative position. In one of the essays Lewis speaks of himself as "a Christian, and even a dogmatic Christian untinged with Modernist reservations and committed to supernaturalism in its full rigour" (p. 44).

That conservatism shows itself most clearly in a cluster of essays that seem to belong together, not only by reason of some overlapping ideas, but even more obviously in the employment of the same strategy of logic. To illustrate that strategy and to show how Lewis's mind works in the essays of this group, let us look at "The

Poison of Subjectivism" in some detail. Until recent times, Lewis notes, man in studying his environment has assumed the validity of his own reason. Now, in the light of the belief that his brain developed as a result of blind evolutionary process, man concludes that his thought is merely subjective, that "there is no reason for supposing that it yields truth."

The focus of the essay is on "practical reason," by which Lewis means our judgment of good and evil. Contemporary man's surprise at the idea that judgment of good and evil is a function of reason is itself evidence of the pervasive influence of subjectivism. Up to our time, he says, men took for granted that in moments of temptation passion was opposed by reason, not simply by a feeling about values that had been generated by the interaction of environment and tradition. In the modern view, "to say that a thing is good is merely to express our feeling about it; and our feeling about it is the feeling that we have been socially conditioned to have" (p. 73).

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Now, one who assumes that value judgments are the result of such social conditioning, and who also happens to be a reformer, is likely to conclude that the conditioning might have been different and better, and that it is therefore possible to improve our conceptions of morality. In opposition to that conclusion Lewis offers these propositions:

- (1) The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of planting a new sun in the sky or a new primary colour in the spectrum.
- (2) Every attempt to do so consists in arbitrarily selecting some one maxim of traditional morality, isolating it from the rest, and erecting it into an *unum necessarium* (p. 75).

Lewis's method of supporting these assertions is to show that whenever one proposes to abandon an old morality and substitute a new one, inescapably he bases his appeal on principles of the traditional morality he professes to have rejected, and is thus guilty of self-contradiction. To illustrate this inevitable confusion of thought, Lewis notes that such a statement as "We must abandon irrational taboos and base our values on the good of the community" is in effect only a variant of "Do as you would be done by."

Likewise, a shift of ground offering a biological rather than a moral foundation for conduct and urging a certain line of action "for the preservation of our species" appears to be founded on the notion that we have other instincts also that are vigorously in conflict with that instinct to preserve the species. Then how does one decide which instincts are to be obeyed more than others? Only by an appeal to a standard, and that standard turns out to be traditional morality. Having rejected traditional morality, the subjectivist is placed in the position that he cannot propose any moral reform, because he finds no grounds on which to justify that reform except, ultimately, the traditional morality he has already rejected.

To the argument that his position makes progress impossible, Lewis replies that goodness is a fixed and immutable standard. That being so, moral progress consists not in seeking a new standard but in moving closer to that fixed, though never wholly attainable, standard. He admits that our ideas of good may improve, but says that such improvement must be from within the moral tradition and that it results from illuminating blind spots that have obscured our understanding of what goodness truly is.

As confirmation of his belief in "the massive unanimity of the practical reason in man," Lewis points to the surprising agreement among men of diverse cultures and religions on matters of moral principle. Examining a great variety of moral codes, almost universally he finds denunciations of oppression, murder, treachery, and falsehood. He finds injunctions of honesty, of almsgiving, of kindness to the aged, the young, and the weak. He finds mercy more stressed than justice. He admits that "no outline of universally accepted value shows through," yet he finds "substantial agreement with considerable local differences of emphasis and, perhaps, no one code that includes everything."

If Lewis seems to pass over the evidence that practical reason can be easily subverted, that consciences can be badly educated, and that revelation is progressive, the reason may be in his vividly expressed fear of the dangers inherent in subjectivism. He says, "Out of this apparently innocent idea comes the disease that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not crushed; the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes." Looking ahead, he sees the subjectivist reformers as conditioners who will seek to create conscience by "eugenics, psychological manipulation of infants, state education, and mass propaganda," until eventually there would be on the one hand only the masses conditioned in a morality determined by the experts, and on the other a few conditioners who, having created conscience, cannot be subject to conscience themselves and thus stand outside morality.

In "*De Futilitate*," the most closely reasoned of the essays, Lewis argues again for validity of reason. Here he examines a subjectivist view that it is absurd to demand that the universe be good, or to complain that it is bad, because such judgments are merely human thoughts and consequently they tell us nothing whatever about the universe, only about man's thinking.

But, says Lewis, unless thought is valid we have no reason to believe at all in the real universe, and he concludes that logic is a real insight into the way in which real things have to exist. He rejects the term "human reason," insisting that if thought is indeed rational it is far more than human, it is in fact cosmic or supercosmic. That is, logical thought is not "reading rationality into an irrational universe but responding to a rationality with which the universe has always been saturated" (p. 65).

The essay "On Ethics" is closely related to the two mentioned above, employing a style of argument that relies a good deal upon pointing up contradictions inherent in an opposing position, revealing a great deal of faith in logic, and expressing conviction that man cannot create values or establish a new morality or a code of ethics or an ideology. He concludes the essay by saying: "I send you back to your nurse and your father, to all the poets and sages and law givers, because, in a sense, I hold that you are already there whether you recognize it or not: that there is really no ethical alternative: that those who urge us to adopt new moralities are only offering us the mutilated or expurgated text of a book which we already possess in the original manuscript. They all wish us to depend on them instead of on that original, and then to deprive us of our full humanity. Their activity is in the long run always directed against our freedom" (p. 56).

Three other essays explore questions likely to be present in the mind of a Christian

who, by profession and inclination, is concerned with literature and the arts — “Christianity and Literature,” “Christianity and Culture,” and “On Church Music.” The first of these was a lecture on an assigned topic, and it turned out to be a topic on which Lewis did not have much to say. He almost dismissed the subject in an analogy I quote as a good illustration of Lewis’s felicitous use of that device:

It would be possible, and it might be edifying, to write a Christian cookery book. Such a book would exclude dishes whose preparation involves unnecessary human labour or animal suffering, and dishes excessively luxurious. That is to say, its choice of dishes would be Christian. But there could be nothing specifically Christian about the actual cooking of the dishes included. Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a pagan. In the same way, literature written by Christians for Christians would have to avoid mendacity, cruelty, blasphemy, pornography, and the like, and it would aim at edification in so far as edification was proper to the kind of work in hand. But whatever it chose to do would have to be done by the means common to all literature; it could succeed or fail only by the same excellences and the same faults as all literature; and its literary success or failure would never be the same thing as its obedience or disobedience to Christian principles (pp. 1-2).

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The Christian, he believes, will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured pagan, for whom literature or culture may be a substitute for religion.

If, for the Christian, the end of human life is salvation in Christ and the glorifying of God, what is the value of culture, he asks, in “Christianity and Culture.” He attacks the idea that “coarse, unimaginative people” are less likely to be saved than “refined and poetic people.” Examining all New Testament references that might be relevant, he finds that if it is not hostile, it is “unmistakably cold to culture.” To New Testament writers, culture may be innocent, but it is not important. Lewis’s conclusion is that culture is a storehouse of the best sub-Christian values, that it is not in itself meritorious, that it may be innocent and pleasant, that it is a vocation for some, that it may be helpful in bringing certain souls to Christ, and that it may be pursued to the glory of God.

In the essay “On Church Music,” he is concerned with the way differences in education and in taste affect our judgment of what glorifies God. His reflections lead him to this interesting observation: There are two musical situations on which I think we can be confident that a blessing rests. One is where a priest or an organist, himself a man of trained and delicate taste, humbly and charitably sacrifices his own (aesthetically right) desires and gives the people humbler and coarser fare than he would wish, in a belief (even, as it may be, the erroneous belief) that he can thus bring them to God. The other is where the stupid and unmusical layman humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music which he cannot, or cannot fully, appreciate, in the belief that it somehow glorifies God, and that if it does not edify him this must be his own defect (pp. 96-97).

The least characteristic essay is doubtless “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” because it reveals Lewis in a position closer to controversy than he usually occupies. In it he presents to a group of young clergymen in training a reasoned, ingratiating statement of his response to recent theology. Its most telling arguments are those in which as literary scholar and critic Lewis exposes the way biblical criticism has frequently been bad or discredited criticism. Touches of humor are

more frequent in this essay than in any other. For example: "The Biblical critics, whatever reconstructions they devise, can never be crudely proved wrong. St Mark is dead. When they meet St Peter there will be more pressing matters to discuss" (p. 161).

"The Seeing Eye," an essay in response to the Russian astronaut's failure to find God in space, includes this glimpse of his personal ground for faith: "I never had the experience of looking for God. It was the other way round; He was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer. He stalked me like a redskin, took unerring aim, and fired. And I am very thankful that that is how the first (conscious) meeting occurred. It forearm[s] one against subsequent fears that the whole thing was only wish fulfilment. Something one didn't wish for can hardly be that" (p. 169).

To read *Christian Reflections* or any of the other Lewis works that I know is to be in communication with a cultivated and adroit and urbane mind, a mind disciplined to make precise distinctions, a mind skilled in logic and orderly analysis. Lest these qualities in any way suggest detachment and remoteness, let me quickly add that it is a mind that reveals itself in expression that is personal, genial, ingratiating. And one must feel, I think, even when not fully persuaded by its logic, that above all it is an honest mind dedicated to the glorifying of God and the salvation of men.

Yet I put down *Christian Reflections* with a touch of nostalgia, a vague feeling of disappointment, for its author addresses a world that is gone, a world that now seems curiously remote from us, a world not yet engaged by the most pressing problems of these days. I fear that many of the questions on which he focused his impressive intellectual resources may seem only academic to young readers. And to many older ones his obvious faith that sweet reasonableness can lead us to the solutions we require may stir up more than a little envy.

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In Defense of Secular History

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GOD AND MAN IN HISTORY

By George Edgar Shankel

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The historian seeks to understand human activity in the past. He is not satisfied merely with establishing a correct chronological sequence of events; he attempts to identify the causes and effects of these events, whether they be of a social, political, economic, or psychological nature. The only restriction placed on these explanations is that they be supported by evidence available to other scholars. For this reason historians do not generally write about the influence of divine and satanic forces. They may believe that such powers actually exist, but the absence of evidence usually prevents inclusion of such considerations in scholarly histories.