FROM ATHEIST TO CHRISTIAN

After fifteen C. S. Lewis was the happiest he had ever been. His previous schooling had given him pain more often than pleasure. Too many of his schoolmates had displayed every motive but that of real learning. He had grown to hate school sports, especially when he had to take part. He had felt constricted by his father, whom he thought peculiar in his ways and narrow in some of his views. Now he was joyfully immersed in rigorous intellectual training under W. T. Kirkpatrick, "the Great Knock," who was preparing him for entrance to Oxford.

The young Lewis was in love with learning. He had come to love books, not just their contents, but their physical make-up — the quality of their paper, their binding, even their odor. Under his new tutor he had plenty of contact with books. Homer in the original Greek came first, most of the *Iliad* and all of the *Odyssey*. Also Demosthenes, Cicero, Lucretius, Catullus, Tacitus, Herodotus, Euripides, Sophocles, and Virgil. Mrs. Kirkpatrick, the wife of his tutor, had him reading French in the evenings, and he was soon purchasing French books for his own library. A little later came German and Italian, with abundant reading in English and American writers.

Among his new-found freedoms was freedom from God. The fifteen-year-old student was a young atheist being tutored by an older atheist. Lewis had been reared in a nominally Christian home. At one of the schools he had attended he received genuine Christian training, and there he had made serious efforts to practice Christianity. But later circumstances encouraged him to abandon his belief in God, and by fifteen he was calling himself an atheist and writing emphatically of his opposition to God.

During his studies with Kirkpatrick (from 1914 to 1916) Lewis completed a tragedy in Greek form about Norse gods. In it Odin knowingly created a world through wanton cruelty. He had been warned against it but went ahead making creatures simply to vent his anger and spite upon them. Why, the tragedy asked, should the gods, or God, make a world in the first place? A writer of sorts from a very early age, Lewis was now also writing poetry that attacked God and the evil he felt was incarnated in the Ruler of the Universe. If God existed at all, He was more like a demon.

At this period a vigorous correspondence existed between Lewis and his Irish boyhood friend Arthur Greeves. The two had enjoyed many walks and talks together but apparently had never spoken of religion. Now Arthur asked his friend what he thought about religion. Lewis's answer was little less than a tirade. Religion is nothing more than man's own invention and is utterly without real foundation. Primitives made up religion out of their ignorant fears of thunder and other natural phenomena. They came to the point of believing these to be evil spirits and began to try to placate them with sacrifices. Thus various cults arose, usually after the death of a leader. It was out of such a situation that a philosophical Jew called Yeshua, or Jesus, had a cult grow up about him. Lewis rebuked Arthur for being so backward as to fail to join "the educated and thinking" people who ignore such old and decaying superstitions.

Years later Lewis was to put similar arguments in the mouth of an evil witch in his Narnia story *The Silver Chair*. The witch endeavored to persuade the children, who had long been lost underground, that they were wholly mistaken to think that there really was light above them and that such a one as the lion Aslan (Christ) existed. "I see," said the witch, "that we should do no better with your *lion*, as you call it, than we did with your *sun*. You have seen lamps, and so you imagined a better lamp and called it the *sun*. You've seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat. . . . Well, it's a pretty make-believe." She almost brought the children under her power before they awakened to her devilish intention.

Arthur asked his friend why with such a negative attitude he did not simply commit suicide. Because, replied Lewis, in spite of fits of occasional depression he was pleased with life and having a good time. Nor did he feel that being an atheist relieved him of all moral responsibility to himself and his community. These are things we owe to our manhood and dignity, quite apart from belief in gods.

Not that Lewis had always strictly followed the morality he postulated. He sometimes lied to his father and even defended the notion that not to lie may itself be criminal. He was quick to curse things he did not like – a guest downstairs, unfavorable weather, fellow pupils. He had also practiced fornication and generally played the fool.

Lewis wrote Arthur that he was willing to look at any new theistic evidences. He conceded that there was indeed "a Hebrew called Yeshua," but "when I say 'Christ' of course I mean the mythological being into whom he was afterwards converted by popular imagination. . . . That the man Yeshua or Jesus did actually exist, is as certain as that the Buddha did actually exist: Tacitus mentions his execution in the Annals. But all the other tomfoolery about virgin birth, magic healings, apparitions and so forth is on exactly the same footing as any other mythology; . . . most legends have a kernel of fact in them somewhere." Arthur suggested in one letter that Lewis was sad simply because he had "no hope of a 'happy life hereafter.' " "No," Lewis wrote back, "strange as it may appear I am quite content to live without believing in a bogey who is prepared to torture me forever . . . a spirit more cruel and barbarous than any man."

How did Lewis turn from such convictions to become one of the most completely orthodox and influential Christians of his generation? From the time of these letters rebuking Greeves to the time of his own conversion was thirteen years. It was a period of indecision in spiritual things. At times he looked back toward atheism; at times forward to a slowly brightening view of Christianity. "It took me as long," he was later to write, "to acquire inhibitions as others (they say) have taken to get rid of them. That is why I often find myself at such cross-purposes with the modern world: I have been a converted Pagan living among apostate Puritans."

Kirkpatrick had helped Lewis prepare for college, and to college he went. Like any other beginner, the scope of his horizon enlarged. He found one fellow who had been an atheist but was turning away from it, and they had a long talk about religion, particularly Buddhism. Another talk ranged over "the rival merits of Swinburne and Keats, the improbability of God, and Home Rule." He found a girl, "another agnostic" he called her, and they discussed "Christian mythologies." It is often the case that college leads young people away from God. For Lewis, possibly because he had already probed the depth of his unbelief so thoroughly, the movement was in the other direction.

Lewis continued to read books about religion. Some confirmed his atheism, others disturbed it. He read Berkeley's *Dialogues* and felt that the bishop's efforts to prove the existence of God turned out only to disprove the existence of matter. He read Clutton-Broch's *The Ultimate Belief* and saw that morals might be rooted in God rather than, as he had supposed, in one's accidental convictions of right and wrong.

The next encounter with such ideas was shortly after his entrance to Oxford, when he was sent into the trenches in France, arriving there on his nineteenth birthday. Two periods of leisurely reading were afforded him by a spell of trench fever and a war wound. Several years before, the seed of holiness had been implanted in him when he had sat down on a train and begun to read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Now the seed started to bear, if not fruit, at least some foliage. The correspondence with Greeves shows Lewis slowly becoming the occasional defender of spiritual things against his hitherto more orthodox friend.

Arthur had suggested that the beauty of the world is to some degree an evidence of God. From the London hospital where he was recuperating, Lewis took vigorous hold of this idea and pressed it further than Arthur had imagined. Precisely where, he asked, does the beauty of a tree, for example, reside? Like every other physical object, a tree is made up of atoms, and atoms are identical and without color. So when you call a tree beautiful you are actually speaking of something other than the atoms of which it is made. A light from the vibrations in the distant sun produces a wave toward your eye. When it reaches the tissues of your eye another vibration is set up and moves along a nerve like a telegraph wire, carrying the sensation to your brain. One such sensation we call greenness, anot

a third shapeliness. But there is no actual color either in the atoms of which the tree is composed or in all those vibrations.

How then does the beauty of the tree arise? Shape, size, color, touch, and the like are simply the names we call our sensations, and no amount of study of them can ever bring us to the notion of beauty in the tree. Beauty must therefore arise from some nonmaterial relation between the tree and myself. "I fancy," he told Arthur, "that there is Something right outside time and place, which did not create matter, as the Christians say, but is matter's great enemy: and that Beauty is the call of the spirit in that Something to the spirit in us." It was a long step upward for the atheist.

At this stage Lewis was more or less in the position of his character Mark in *That Hideous Strength*. The novel describes how Mark, who had grown up an unbeliever and materialist, was subjected to torture in an effort to get him to "believe" in a materialism more perverse than he had ever dreamed of. Under these circumstances "the idea of the Straight or Normal . . . grew stronger and more solid in his mind." Finally, it was like "a kind of mountain." Mark "had never before known what an Idea meant: he had always thought till now that they were things inside one's own head." But under persecution he came to understand that an idea is "something which obviously existed quite independently of himself and had hard rock surfaces which would not give, surfaces he could cling to."

Lewis himself was now discovering that things like beauty and the Straight have unexpected roots. Later on, debating with his friend Owen Barfield, he would be forced to the conviction that logic involves "participation in a cosmic *Logos*." At the time of this exchange with Greeves he still meant by "spiritual" something more nearly from nature upwards than from heaven downwards. But it is clear enough that substantial straws were blowing in the wind of Lewis's atheism.

Another deep-seated belief of this period, which Lewis was later to repudiate, was that of general or universal evolution. For some time he had worked on the lengthy narrative poem *Dymer*. The main idea, he wrote Arthur, was that of "development by self-destruction: . . . nature produces man only to conquer her, and man produces a future or higher generation to conquer the ideals of the last." This is a Keatsian idea, and Lewis was later to speak against it often. Yet it is significant that he adds of *Dymer:* "The background proceeds on the old assumption of good *outside* and *opposed to* the cosmic order." That is, somewhere outside the cosmos there appears to be a Good.

After the war Lewis returned to Oxford to complete his education, earning many honors along the way. As he commenced his college work anew he ran into a whole nest of men who were both Christians and intellectuals. He came to notice a wide gap between mere morality and "holiness" — his own word — in men like Nevill Coghill, J. R. R. Tolkien, A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, and, particularly, Owen Barfield. More and more he turned to the reading of distinctively religious writers. He read Jakob Boehme and, though not fully able to understand him, felt that he was talking of "something tremendously real." It was for Lewis another experience like *Phantastes*, "not like a book at all, but like a thunderclap. Heaven defend us — what things there are knocking about the world!" So compelling was the reading of Boehme that he attributed the effect to some local circumstance — perhaps the weather — and determined to try reading him again later.

The stream of God's calling in Lewis's life had already made many turns and tumbled over many rapids. Now it began to run deeper. He reexamined the quality of much of his lifelong reading and concluded that writers like Gibbon, Voltaire, Mill, Shaw, and Wells, who were well suited to his anti-Christian views, were thin and shallow, while writers whom he had most admired had a quality that suggested Christianity. George Herbert in particular he found superlative in conveying "the very quality of life as we actually live it from moment to moment; but the wretched fellow, instead of doing it all directly, insisted on mediating it through what I would still have called 'the Christian mythology.' "

All the while Lewis was maturing as a literary critic, and the insight into what makes a writer great became at the same time an insight into holiness. He was also continuing to review his philosophical outlook. Earlier he had experienced Lucretius, occultism, spiritualism, magic, theosophy, and pantheism in various forms. When logical positivism came onto the scene, Lewis equated it with the "ruthless dialectic" of his old tutor Kirkpatrick. Looking back, Lewis first felt that it was God himself who had kept him from getting too deeply involved in any of these movements. Perhaps it was the tremendous joy produced in him by reading such authors as George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton which enabled him to survive the New Psychology that swept through Oxford and overwhelmed him for a time with the idea that his whole imaginative world, so large an element in his life, was no more than wishful thinking.

Reading Henri Bergson taught Lewis to "relish energy, fertility, and urgency; the resource, the triumphs, and even the insolence, of things that grow" and of "resonant, dogmatic, flaming, unanswerable people" like Beethoven, Titian, and Goethe. Also Bergson persuaded him to accept the universe and life as existent fact, "the nearest thing to a religious experience which I had had since my prep. school days."

Next he went through a period in which he tried to combine the conception on the one hand of a "real" universe with the belief on the other that subjective thought and moral judgment are legitimate avenues to truth. Barfield convinced him that such a mixture would not do and forced him to turn from realism to idealism, the conception "that the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic *Logos*."

Even though he then turned to Absolute Idealism, he still did not see how this pointed in the direction of Christianity. "I thought that 'the Christian myth' conveyed to unphilosophic minds as much of the truth, that is of Absolute Idealism, as they were capable of grasping. . . . Those who could not rise to the notion of the Absolute would come nearer the truth by belief in 'a God' than by disbelief. Those who could not understand how, as Reasoners, we participated in a timeless and therefore deathless world, would get a symbolic shadow of the truth by believing in a life after death." Lewis had always loved the idea of calling his soul his own, of not being interfered with. But logic itself – or rather Logic Himself – had begun to hem him in.

Now the last move or two began to take place. Lewis came upon Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* and in reading it made a discovery that, as he says, "flashed a new light back on my whole life." In a word, he discovered that one cannot at the same instant hope and think about hoping. Hope and reflective thought about it can alternate rapidly, but they are two different things. All his life Lewis had been beset with a hope for something for which he could find no better word than Joy. Reading Alexander, he saw that his lifelong search for Joy had really been misdirected. His quest had been like that of the boy John, whom he was later to write about in *Pilgrim's Regress*. Turning away from the hateful Landlord to whom his parents had recommended him, John one day got a glimpse of a delicious Island and heard music so sweet as to set him searching for more of it. He went through a long series of unsatisfying and sometimes bruising experiences until he at last found the Joy he had sought in the Landlord whom he had so thoroughly misunderstood. On Alexander's terms John had been trying to re-create the experience of Joy inside himself when what he really wanted was not a sensation but a real Object.

Alexander made it clear to Lewis that the feeling of Joy he had been trying to capture was no more than a by-product, not the real thing. It was "merely the mental track left by the passage of Joy – not the wave but the wave's imprint on the sand." No image or sensation could ever be equal to the thing of which it was only the vestige. Images and sensations said, "I am only a reminder. Look! What do I remind you of?" The idea took shape that every desire is turned not to itself but to its object and owes its very character to its object. "It is the ol

Suddenly Lewis saw that his lifelong search for Joy was different from what he had ever supposed. He found that "in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective." He realized now that man has "a root in the Absolute, which is the utter reality." It was a discovery that most people never make; in Lewis it was like the blow of a sledge-hammer. The relentless and supposedly atheistic logic taught him by the Great Knock was strangely producing a sturdy plant ready almost for blossoms.

Alexander made Lewis see that the world is made up of real and abstractive experiences. A toothache is real, but thoughts about that toothache are abstract thoughts. An apple is real, but to multiply six apples times six apples is abstractive. Kissing one's sweetheart is a real experience, but analyzing that kiss is abstractive; and analysis is certain to dissipate the reality of a kiss. God is real, but to inquire into doctrines of God is abstractive. It is impossible to have the two experiences at the same moment. Both experiences have their value, but they should never be taken as equivalents. It is a predicament we carry from one end of life to the other. If we fail to understand the clear difference between the two, not only are we thinking badly but we may be missing the glowing delight and wonder of things natural and supernatural.

One day perched atop the bus going east from Magdalen College to his home, Lewis had the deeply quiet experience of decision. "I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut. . . . Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or take off the corslet meant the incalculable." Heaven's hound now had Lewis in sight. To use his own words: "Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God.' To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat." In Christian terms, the Spirit of God now had him securely but lovingly in hand.

As his antagonism to Christianity diminished Lewis naturally faced the complexities of Christian doctrine. He puzzled over how Christ's death on the cross "saved" a man. He saw clearly enough that there were two directions – one motivating a person towards Christ, the other propelling him to hell so that nothing short of a miracle could save him. "What I couldn't see was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now – except in so far as his *example* helped us." But, significant as example was, Lewis came to understand that following it was not fundamentally Christianity. He read the New Testament and found there "something quite different and very mysterious, expressed in those phrases I had so often ridiculed ('propitiation' – 'sacrifice' – 'the blood of the Lamb'), expressions which I could only interpret in senses that seemed to me either silly or shocking."

In this dilemma, friends at Oxford, including J. R. R. Tolkien, helped him see the difference between the mere doctrine or expository statement of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ and the living actuality, an actuality that goes deeper than language. That is, Christ Himself is larger than any possible doctrinal statement about Him can ever be. It was more of what Alexander had taught him.

Lewis became on occasion Greeves's teacher in spiritual things. To the argument of one of Arthur's friends that the Gospels do not teach the atonement, that the evangelists would have so taught had they the slightest excuse, and hence that Christ did not teach this doctrine, Lewis replied that the Epistles were written before the Gospels and that the apostles did therefore teach the atonement just following the crucifixion. Furthermore, he said, to remove the idea of sacrifice from Christianity would be to eliminate significance from both Judaism and paganism, since both point toward Christ. "Can one believe there was just *nothing* in that persistent *motif* of blood, death, and resurrection, which runs like a black and scarlet cord through all the greater myths – through Balder and Dionysus and

Adonis and the Grail too? Surely the history of the human mind hangs together better if you suppose that all this was the first shadowy approach of something whose reality came with Christ – even if we can't at present fully understand that something." It was a subject on which Lewis was to write at length as the years passed.

Arthur inquired of his friend about the notion of a good God and an evil world. That Arthur thought this question would be "elementary" for Lewis evidences the progress Arthur had noticed in his friend. Lewis disagreed. It was not elementary for him, and it might not be so even for the angels. Supposing that Arthur had in mind not the logical problem of how God might produce a world containing evil but the practical issue of God's particular concern with man's evil, Lewis proceeded. Arthur had spoken of God as having in Himself, at least potentially, the opposites of good and evil. This Lewis denied, citing the idea from the medieval definition of God as "that which has no opposite." God, he declared, must be regarded as the ultimate beyond the great opposites, "just as space is neither bigness or smallness but that in which the distinctions of big and small arise." Evil may thus be "included" under God, even though the Scriptures make clear that in Him is no darkness at all.

Arthur had remarked that there is no good without evil; Lewis insisted that it might be just the opposite – no evil without good. He clarified this by the illustration of a person walking a dog. If the animal gets his lead wrapped around a post and tries to continue running forward, he will only tighten the lead the more. Both dog and owner are after the same end, forward motion, but the owner must resist the dog by pulling him opposite. The master, sharing the same intention but understanding better than the dog where he wants really to go, takes an action precisely opposite to that of the dog's will. We might say it is in this sense that God "includes" evil.

Similarly God understands and shares the right wish that is at the root of our evil – the desire for forward movement toward ultimate happiness – and the sinful post around which we have tangled our leads. But by the fact of His sovereign knowledge of what is actually good for us, He must *not* sympathize or agree with us, but the opposite. In later years Lewis taught over and over that "Aslan is not a tame lion," that is, Christ is loving but He is not at all weak. He will not indulge us. On the contrary, His very nature makes him unyielding to anything other than our absolute need of Himself.

Lewis concluded that a God of everlasting love and grace can only wish for the eternal happiness of every man. He wants precisely what any man, apart from his evil will, really wants. "Only because he has laid up *real* goods for us to desire are we able to go wrong by snatching at them in greedy, misdirected ways. The truth is that evil is not a real *thing* at all, like good. It is simply good *spoiled."* Evil is a parasite on good. Lewis ends his argument by citing George MacDonald's remark, "Only God understands evil and hates it." If only we could see with God's eyes, rather than our fallen ones, we should always go His way.

But in spite of such clear thinking the young university don preferred his freedom, or what he thought to be his freedom, to any acceptance of Christianity. But he was beginning to feel God bearing down on him. Unable to go on with his ordinary duties, he put them aside. During the Trinity Term in 1929 he knelt down, prayed, and confessed that God really is God. In due course he and his brother left on a sunny morning by motorcycle for Whipsnade zoo. "When we set out," said Lewis, "I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did." The long journey into Light had finished and also had begun.

Even before he had fully accepted Christ as his Savior, he had set out to seek the total implications of his faith. In so doing he felt he must take a tenacious look at the real roots of sin in his life. He wrote Arthur, "I seem to have been supported in respect to chastity and anger more continually, and with less struggle, for the last ten days." He discovered "ludicrous and terrible things" about himself, the worst being a great depth of pride. When he had looked at his sins one by one, [illegible]

confessed them, pride arose and congratulated him on how well he had done. It was a state of mind he was to wrestle with personally and write about for the rest of his life.

But along with humiliation came at times great joy. He went through the experience of finding skies bluer and grass greener. "Today," he wrote Arthur, "I got such a sudden intense feeling of delight that it sort of stopped me in my walk and spun me round. Indeed the sweetness was so great, and seemed so to affect the whole body as well as the mind, that it gave me pause." And later, "Everything seems . . . to be beginning again and one has the sense of immortality." And again, "I really seem to have had youth given back to me lately."

Yet for the most part these were times of self-analysis before God. A close look at the devious ego differed little from a look at the devil himself. Once he had joked at the idea of Satan and hell; now he came to a deep conviction of their reality. At the same time his conception of heaven was growing more real. He concluded that man's lifelong yearning is actually for Joy and that all earthly joys are faint shadows of the great Joy arising from the total confession of Jesus Christ as the lodestone of one's heart.

He remained aware that progress in the practice of Christianity is both necessary and difficult. "I am appalled," he wrote Arthur, "to see how much of the change I thought I had undergone lately was only imaginary. The real work seems still to be done." He went back through his life to remember and reevaluate his relationships with people. He discovered that even the act of writing required the valley of humiliation. In response to Arthur's discouragement over his efforts to publish, Lewis warned that the yen to publish is spiritually dangerous. "One must reach the point of 'not caring two straws about his own status' before he can wish wholly for God's kingdom, not his own, to be established." Death to ambition as such will be the beginning of new life. Above all, the part of a man which puts success first must be humiliated if a man is ever to be really free.

Lewis understood that in his writing, as in everything else, mere ambition was to be renounced in favor of the will of God. Perhaps here we have an explanation of the power of his books in the lives of millions of people. "It is not your business to succeed," he wrote Arthur, "but to do right: when you have done so, the rest lies with God." That was henceforth to be his attitude as a writer, as a teacher, as the member of a household, and in his private life.

As early as the age of six Lewis had felt *Sehnsucht,* a longing for he knew not what. The most poignant experience of it had been one summer day when he was standing beside a currant bush. The little boy had felt suddenly arise in him "as if from a depth not of years but of centuries" a longing so deep that, as he described it later, "in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant by comparison." He sought hard to satisfy that longing, and he found every experience but one to be counterfeit. That one was God. Like John in *The Pilgrim's Regress,* Lewis fairly well had to be dragged into the Kingdom, but when he arrived there he knew with a great knowing what precisely the source of his longing had been.

For at least twenty-three years God patiently let His light fall on the child, the boy, the young atheist, the sinner, until finally in his rooms at Magdalen he acknowledged that God was God. Thereafter, like St. Paul, Lewis grew to hate many of the things he had once loved and to love some he had hated. The conception of Jesus, Yeshua, as a man-created myth was dropped. Gone, too, was the sophistication that had once assured Arthur that "educated and thinking people" reject the idea of Christ as Savior. These ideas were not only abandoned, they were reversed; and Lewis became their brilliant opponent.

All along he had clung to the strong belief that he was his own free agent. Now he discovered that such freedom was not actually freedom, and that true freedom arose from bondslavery to Jesus Christ. It was all very Pauline!