

Week 7: Sharing the Faith: C. S. Lewis on Apologetics

C. S. LEWIS GOD IN THE DOCK

“What we believe always remains intellectually possible; it never becomes intellectually compulsive. I have an idea that when this ceases to be so, the world will be ending.”

--C. S. Lewis “Religion and Rocketry” in
The World’s Last Night and Other Essays
(1960)



NB: “In the dock” means “on trial” with “dock” originally denoting an enclosed place for the defendant in a court of law.

Elevenes with C. S. Lewis

Sharing the Faith:
C. S. Lewis on Apologetics

Week 7

November 5, 2017

Plan for the day

- Reports of personal interactions with C. S. Lewis
- Introduction to apologetics
- How Lewis became an apologist
- Know your audience: A discussion with two commentators
- The three apologetic gateways employed by Lewis
- Your experiences as an apologist?
- Lewis' moving beyond apologetics
- What made Lewis so effective

What brought about the change in Lewis from being an aspiring atheist poet to becoming one of the greatest Christian apologists of all time?



- Friends, e.g. Owen Barfield (1898-1997)
 - So well read Lewis wrote in his diary: “Barfield has probably forgotten more than I ever knew... The wisest and best of my unofficial teachers.”
 - Barfield’s interest in spiritual experiences caused Lewis to write, “Everything I had labored so hard to expel from my life seemed to have flared up for me in my best friends.”
 - 2 changes due to Barfield, Lewis abandoned:
 - his “chronological snobbery”
 - his belief that the universe as revealed by the senses was “rock-bottom reality”
- Writers, e.g. G. K. Chesterton
 - *The Everlasting Man* (1925)—made sense of what had actually happened in history.

Keeping the “chain” going

- Lewis was an apologist who was helped to faith by other apologists.
- We need to keep the “chain of apologists” going.
- Though few are called to be professional apologists, all believers are called to share the faith.
- We have to learn to do so, typically in part by trial and error.

A definition

- Apologetics—based on the Greek word *apologia*, meaning “defense”
 - Apologetics can be defined as “a reasoned case proving the innocence of a person in court or the validity of an argument or belief”
 - Christian apologetics primarily involves the refutation of a criticism, an effort to remove misunderstandings or to counter attacks.
 - Christian apologetics in addition attempts to explore and explain Christianity’s potential attraction to those who have yet to discover it.
- Key verse: 1 Peter 3:15

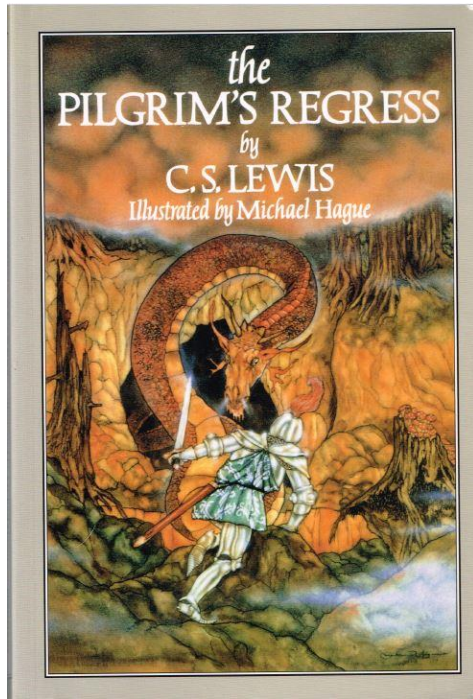
“In your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord.
Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*]
to anyone who demands from you an accounting [*logos*]
for the hope that is in you,
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

The three main tasks of apologetics

- 1. Defending. What keeps people from believing?
 - If there is misunderstanding or misrepresentation, attempt to correct wrong ideas.
 - If truth claims are questioned, indicate how you or others have resolved similar doubts.
- 2. Commending. How can the listener be helped to grasp the relevance of Christianity?
 - For example, by using stories, analogies, or reporting your or others' experiences.
- 3. Translating. How can the key concepts of the Christian faith be explained in the language of the listener?
 - How might concepts or terms be expressed in the vernacular, or illustrated by an image or story?

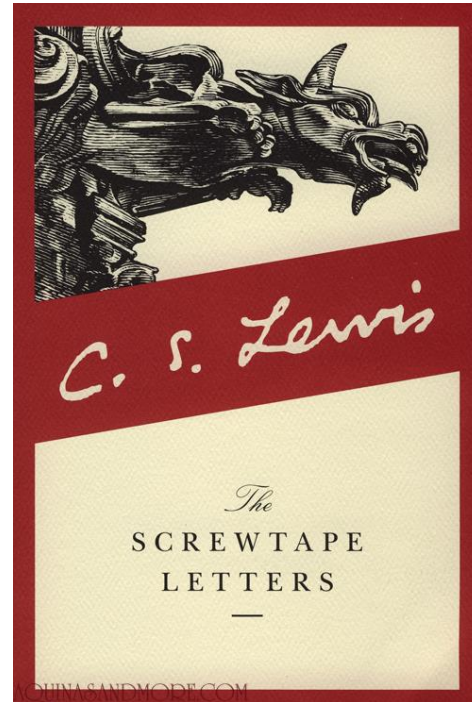
How did Lewis become such an effective apologist?

**How did he go from this in
1933...**



“clunky, ponderous”
“needless obscurity”
“an uncharitable temper”

... to this in 1942?



“winsome, witty”
Such a huge readership that
Lewis ended up on the cover of
Time

How did Lewis become such an effective apologist?

Three key developments before 1942 (and two more that started by 1942 and served to keep Lewis sharp and in touch):

- 1939: Lewis was asked to write *The Problem of Pain*.
- May, 1941: Lewis began going to Royal Air Force bases, giving talks and interacting with young servicemen.
- August 1941: Lewis began giving nationwide radio talks, first published as *Broadcast Talks* and later revised and published as *Mere Christianity*.
- January 1942: The Socratic Club, a forum for debates with the leading atheists of the day, began meeting at Oxford with Lewis as president
- Readers wrote to Lewis from all over the world “he answered them in unbelievable number and with unfailing generosity” (Farrer, “The Christian Apologist”, p. 33)

Lewis' advice about "Christian Apologetics" from his address to clergy and youth leaders in Wales, 1945

- You must get to know your audience.
 - Listen!
 - Learn their worldview and assumptions, their values.
 - Learn their language.
- Our commentators: Emily Carrico & Andy Anderson

Worldviews and values of current college students: Some representative quotes from students when I ask them to “Tell Me about Yourself”

- “I have never believed in a god, though I did not identify as an **atheist** until high school. My parents never spoke about religion, so I only really began to think about religion in the past few years. I think it is important to understand how things work and why things are the way they are. Natural selection and evolution make so much sense to me, and I find it odd that so many people reject a **scientific view** in favor of a religious one.”
- “I am a --- (science) major with a very **materialist** outlook on life. I realized that I was unable to share my parents’ Jewish faith very early and caused my father no end of grief as a result. While I disagree with Camus in that I find his outlook far too depressing to be meaningful, it did spur me to briefly research other philosophies and eventually settle on Locke and a little **nihilism** as my own personal outlook.”

Some representative quotes from students when I ask them to “Tell Me about Yourself” (cont.)

- “My favorite TV show is Cosmos. I’m not sure if I’m an atheist but I largely oppose religion. I’m sometimes **nihilistic**, but I’m also very positive. ‘Be soft. Don’t let pain make you hard.’”
- “I think the most important thing about me is that I deeply resonate with being **lost**. I endlessly question everything in my life, making it impossible to truly feel a sense of direction or purpose.. And usually this is discouraging, depressing, and bleak; however, in my life it leads to all those things surrounded by an amazing sense of wonder, awe, and joy. **Existential** bliss perhaps.... This ‘lostness’ is core to my identity.”

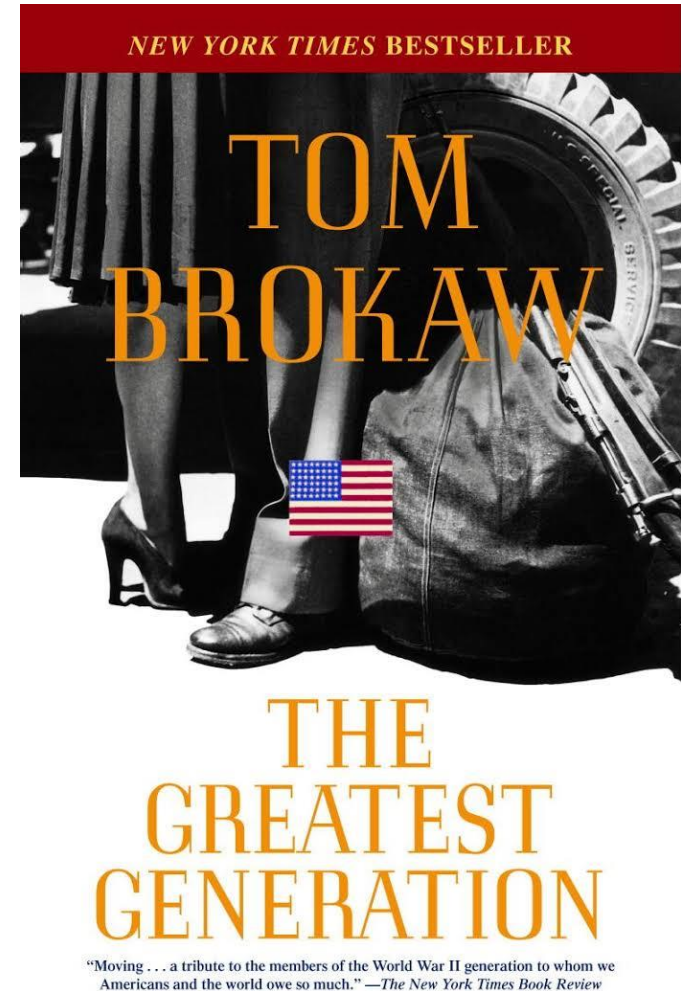
Quotes from one student when asked first to “Tell Me about Yourself” and later to respond to Lewis’ arguments about the existence of a moral law.

- “I was raised in an **atheist** household. I was encouraged to reject the idea of a deity since I was a child.”
- “I don’t think that there is some overarching ‘real’ morality, or Right, simply because what the Nazis were doing is considered ‘wrong.’ I believe you would be hard-pressed to find any number of cultures or groups which shared a moral concept that genocide was an ok thing to do. However, you *can* find groups who believe that. There are currently small factions of Alt-Right groups in America who believe in white supremacy and see nothing morally wrong with a genocide wiping out minority populations.”
- “**There isn’t a morality.** We make our choices.”

Assumptions and values of “the greatest generation”

- “America’s citizen heroes and heroines who came of age in the Great Depression and the Second World War and went on to build America—it is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced.”
- “This generation was united not only by a common purpose, but also by **common values**—duty, honor, economy, courage, service, love of family and country, and, above all, responsibility for oneself.”

--Tom Brokaw



The three different apologetic gateways employed by Lewis: reason, experience, and the imagination

- Lewis' approach presents a vision as much as an argument.
 - This vision appeals to the human longings for truth, goodness and beauty.
 - Lewis shows how what we observe and experience “fits in” with the idea of God.
- Consider again two primary arguments from *Mere Christianity*.
 - The argument from right and wrong (or morality)
 - The argument from longing (or desire)

The appeal to reason

- Recall *Mere Christianity* opens with “Right and wrong as a clue to the meaning of the universe”
 - Lewis is not asserting morality *proves* God’s existence, but is suggesting this is one of several clues or signposts which cumulatively make a case for believing in God.
 - Every argument you observe bespeaks an awareness of an objective standard: “a real law which we did not invent and which we know we ought to obey”
 - This knowledge of the moral law is “the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.”
 - This awareness ought to arouse our suspicions that there is “Something which is directing the universe and which appears in me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong.”
- Note Lewis’ concern is to explore what could be worked out about God “on our own steam,” instead of “taking anything from the Bible or the churches.”

A final comment on philosophical arguments for faith:
“It is commonly said that if rational argument is so seldom the cause of conviction, philosophical apologists must largely be wasting their shot.”

- “The premise is true, but the conclusion does not follow.”
- “For though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief.”
- “What seemed to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned.”
- “Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”

-Austin Farrer “The Christian Apologist”, p. 26.

The appeal to the experience of longing

- Recall “The Weight of Glory”: the inconsolable secret we cannot hide and cannot tell.
 - We desire something we have never actually experienced. We remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy.
 - Lewis reworked this for his Broadcast Talks making it easier to understand: We all long for things, only to find our hopes dashed when we achieve what we thought would satisfy:
 - “A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”
 - Lewis suggests these earthly pleasures are “only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage.” They “were never meant to satisfy,” but “to suggest the real thing.”
- Note Lewis views this as another clue, which might be called the theological and apologetic significance of aesthetic experiences.
 - For example, the resonance between the beauty of the created order and human aesthetic sensitivities transcends the limits of reason but “fits in” with the Christian faith.

The appeal to the imagination:

Comments on the relation of reason and imagination

- “Imagination for Lewis is not irrational, it is proto-rational” Jesse Delaney
- Lewis believes “the essential starting-point for ratiocination [thinking] is a hunch or an intuition” (Stephen Logan, “C. S. Lewis and the Limits of Reason”, p. 44).
- In Lewis’ poem “Reason” the intellect figures as a maid, the imagination as a mother:

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother
Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?
Who make imagination’s dim exploring touch
Ever report the same as intellectual sight?
- “Boethius, it will be remembered, distinguishes *intelligentia* from *ratio*; the former being enjoyed in its perfection by angels. *Intellectus* is that in man which approximates most nearly to angelic *intelligentia*; it is in fact *obumbrata intelligentia*, clouded intelligence, or a shadow of intelligence. We are enjoying *intellectus* when we 'just see' a self-evident truth; we are exercising *ratio* when we proceed step by step to prove a truth which is not self-evident.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, p. 157)

The appeal to the imagination

- The real apologetic issue involves resolving the great questions of life, such as identity, meaning, and value.
- Conveying what being a believer would mean, or what a religious experience is like to someone who has yet to experience these requires an appeal to the imagination.
- Lewis regarded reason (“the organ of truth”) and imagination (“the organ of meaning”) as complementary.” (C. S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare,” in *Selected Literary Essays*).
- Some apologists defend individual Christian doctrines, e.g. the incarnation or the Trinity, and then argue for the truth of the Christian faith as a whole; Lewis inverts this procedure.
 - The appeal of the Christian faith comes through better on seeing a panorama of reality through its lens, not a series of snapshots.
 - The imagination is the means by which the coherence and depth of this vision are grasped.
- The imaginative vision is best expressed through narratives, e.g.
 - Jesus’ use of stories like The Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan
 - Or Aslan being willing to die for Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Your experiences of giving
an answer to the hope that
is in you?

Other comments?

After 15 years (1940-55), the period of Lewis' phase as primarily a Christian apologist ended.

- “Nothing is more dangerous to one’s own faith than the work of an apologist.”
 - “No doctrine... seems.. so unreal as the one I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment... it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result when you go away from the debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar.” (Lewis, “Christian Apologetics”, p. 12)
- In 1955, Lewis declined an invitation from Carl F. H. Henry to write apologetic pieces for an American audience.
 - “A man can’t always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it.” (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 1958, p. 7)

What made Lewis so effective as an apologist?

- Austin Farrer (Lewis' close friend and one of the greatest preachers of his generation):
 - “Lewis was an apologist from temper, from conviction, and from modesty. From temper, for he loved an argument. From conviction, being traditionally orthodox. From modesty, because he laid no claim either to the learning which would have made him a theologian or to the grace which would have made him a spiritual guide” (“The Christian Apologist,” p. 24).
- Lewis integrated truth, beauty, and goodness.
 - Truth in his incisive use of reason.
 - Beauty in his experiences of joy and his ability to use the imagination to allow his readers to have similar experiences.
 - Goodness—in his humble confidence and his self-sacrificial servant's heart.