



The Legacy of C. S. Lewis, Part II

- Joel D. Heck

“A Christmas Sermon for Pagans”

December 1946 issue of *The Strand Magazine*.

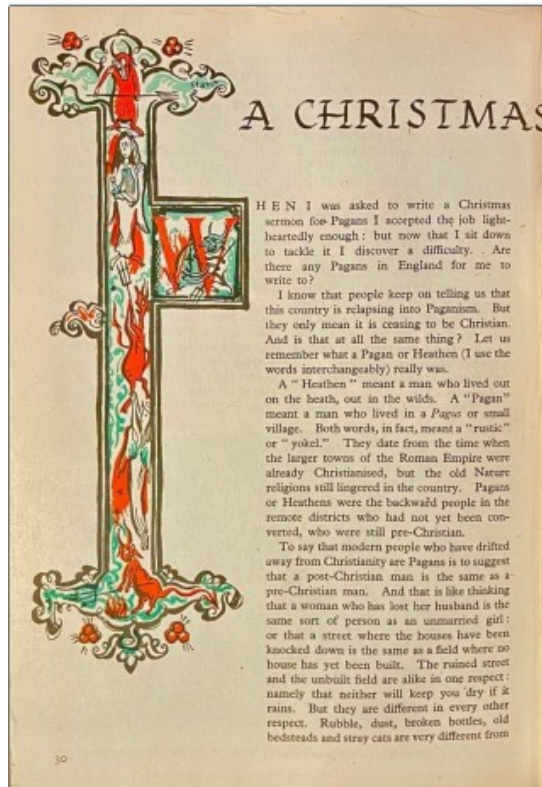
The Strand Magazine was in decline (it ceased in 1950) and published in limited numbers, which contributed to the “disappearance” of this article.

Unknown for decades until New Zealander Christopher Marsh discovered it and contacted me to authenticate the article.

We subsequently co-authored an article about it. The article was published in 2017 in *VII*.



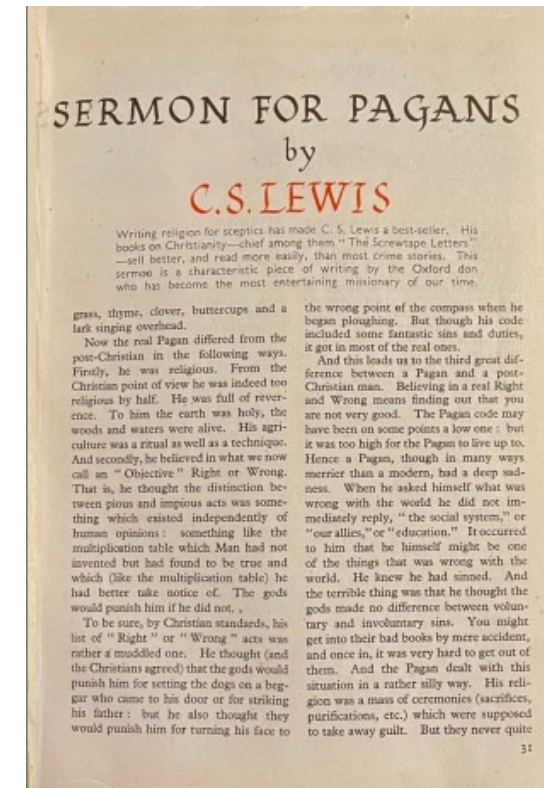
Themes in *A Christmas Sermon*



- The reader sees the Lewis who loved words and their meanings. He later published *Studies in Words*.
- The Lewis who championed an objective standard of right and wrong, echoed in *The Abolition of Man* and *Mere Christianity, Book 1*.

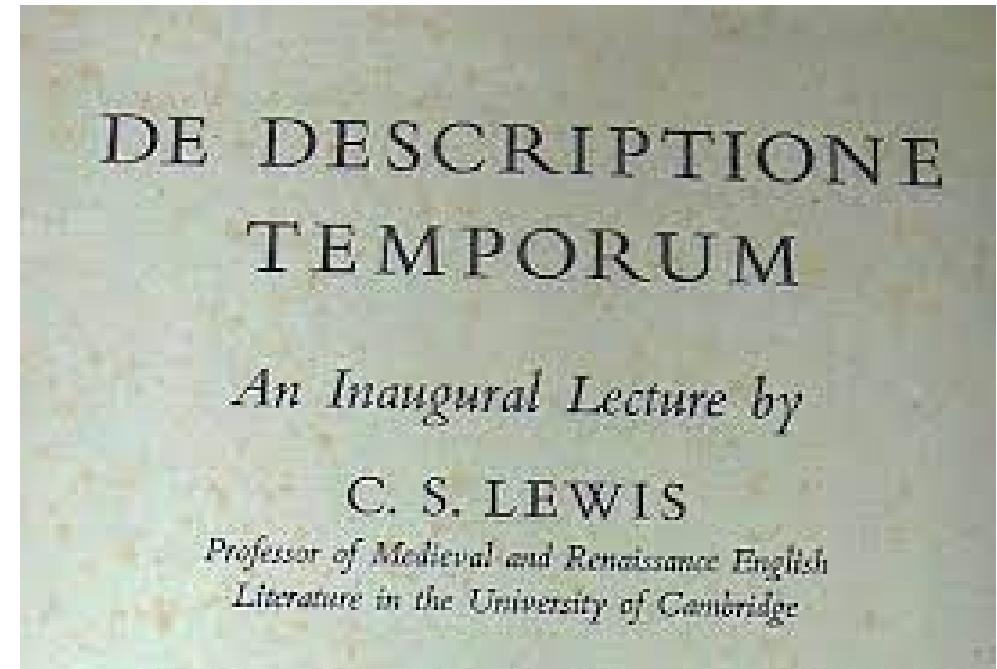
Themes in *A Christmas Sermon*

- The idea of myth, which Lewis developed in several places, especially in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his essay "Myth Became Fact."
- The distinction between the pre-Christian and the post-Christian, especially described in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University.



The Gap between ...

- Lewis would later assert in that inaugural lecture, "*De Descriptione Temporum*," at the University of Cambridge that the "gap between those who worship different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship different gods and those who do not."
- This essay is a example of Lewis's belief that any possible Christian apologetic must render Paganism due respect.



Pagans, Then and Now

1. First, the ancient Pagan believed in the reality of and due reverence toward supernatural beings.
2. He also held to an (albeit somewhat muddled) objective standard of right and wrong and a belief that the gods would hold him accountable for adhering to it.
3. The Pagan knew he knew he had frequently fallen short of this moral standard and despite his best efforts to remedy his situation, “his conscience was not at ease.” (cont’d.)

Pagans, Then and Now

3.... Lewis argues that the skeptical post-Christian is totally at odds with these views. For Lewis, the post-Christian holds to a skeptical belief that the earth is a spiritless realm of physical matter with mankind its highest level of being. What was once revered by Pagan men as a divine creation full of supernatural beings is now viewed by many post-Christians as a mere resource to be exploited.

“A mere resource to be exploited,” or, a naturalistic world devoid of any evidence of a Creator.

The True Pagan (cf. “the good atheist”)

- “A Christmas Sermon for Pagans” has sympathy for the true Pagan, acknowledging that while every bit as “sick” or sinful as the post-Christian, the Pagan had what Lewis calls a “deep sadness,” an innate awareness of his own moral failure before the divine. Lewis even half-heartedly suggests to his readers that true Paganism might be a necessary stage to becoming Christian.
- We must respect the unbeliever!

The Rephrased Gospel Message

- Lewis then rephrases the Gospel message into distinctly Pagan sounding terms for a modern readership who were about to celebrate something very reminiscent of a Pagan festival, the birth of a god. For Lewis, Christ (to whom he refers as the “Mighty One”) is a god who could perform a “wonder” that no Pagan god of any age could—the removal of guilt and the reconciliation of humanity to the divine.

Modern Pagans are Different

- Lewis makes an identical suggestion in his “Modern Man and his Categories of Thought” (October 1946).
- Written around the same time as “A Christmas Sermon for Pagans,” Lewis adds, “If they were Stoics, Orphics, Mithraists, or (better still) peasants worshipping the earth, our task might be easier. That is why I do not regard contemporary Paganisms (Theosophy, Anthroposophy, etc.) as a wholly bad symptom.”

A Footnote on Pagan “Christs”

- Some claim that Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection bears a resemblance to the myths of Balder, Osiris, and other stories. Therefore, they claim, the Christian “myth” is no more valid than these other myths.
- Lewis was willing to call the story of Christ a myth, but a myth that “really happened.”

A Footnote on Pagan “Christs”

- He also wrote, “We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘Pagan Christ’: they ought to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t.”
- And, in *Miracles*, he called myth “a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination.”



Three Kinds of People in “A Christmas Sermon for Pagans”

- (1) Those who are sick and don't know it (the post-Christians).
 - (2) Those who are sick and know it (Pagans).
 - (3) Those who have found the cure. And if you start in the first class you must go through the second to reach the third. For (in a sense) all that Christianity adds to Paganism is the cure.
- D. T. Niles: one beggar telling ...

Three Kinds of People in “A Christmas Sermon for Pagans”

- “We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.” (“God in the Dock,” 244)
- “Knowledge of broken law precedes all other religious experiences.” (Heading to Chapter I, *Regress*, 1933)
- Don’t talk about sin but about broken promises, tension in a relationship, fudging the truth, etc.



“Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism”

- In 1958, Alec R. Vidler published a book called *Windsor Sermons*. Fr. Alec Vidler was a noted liberal scholar and Dean of King's College, Cambridge. One day Lewis was conversing with the Principal of Westcott House, Cambridge, later the Bishop of Edinburgh, The Rt. Rev. Kenneth Carey.
- After reading at least part of one of Vidler's sermons in *Windsor Sermons*, entitled “The Sign at Cana,” the Bishop asked Lewis what he thought about it. Lewis “expressed himself very freely about the sermon and said that he thought that it was quite incredible that we should have had to wait nearly 2000 years to be told by a theologian called Vidler that what the Church has always regarded as a miracle was, in fact, a parable!”



Entrance to Westcott House, Cambridge

Location of the Lecture



The Room where the Lecture was given



The Address

- 1) Some biblical critics lack literary judgment (they read between the lines of ancient texts, not understanding extra-biblical literary genres, e.g., reading John's Gospel as a romance);
- 2) Some wrongly claim that the real teaching of Christ came rapidly to be misunderstood and has only been recovered by modern scholars (Vidler is an example);
- 3) Some wrongly claim that miracles don't occur;
- 4) Attempts to recover the origin of a text often err (as has happened with some of Plato's and Shakespeare's works).

Four Points/Four Perspectives

- 1) A scholar of English literature
- 2) A student of history and a lay reader of the New Testament
- 3) The author of *Miracles*
- 4) The writer speaking from personal experience, but once again as a scholar of literature

The Arguments of Don Cupitt



- Translation
- Regius Professor of Divinity, Leonard Hodgson
- Rudolf Bultmann
- The Jesus Seminar and Dominic Crossan
- Thomas L. Thompson

John A. T. Robinson (1919–1983)

- *Honest to God* (1963)
- On March 17, 1963, just prior to the release of that book, Bishop Robinson, then Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, had an article published in *The Observer* entitled "Our Image of God Must Go."
- Lewis: "Must Our Image of God Go?" (*The Observer*, one week later)
- "reportage"
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006)



Conclusion

- A negative reaction to Lewis's combative style?
- A question of Lewis's theological credentials?
- But Lewis admitted to a lack of theological training, a note he sounded in other writings
- A challenge to Lewis's literary competence?
- Or a matter of theological differences?
- Lewis was not challenged on theological or literary points. Why not?
- I submit that it was theological differences, represented especially by Alec Vidler and John Robinson, which could not be refuted by opponents in his audience, so they questioned his credentials.

The Argument from Desire

- “If I find in myself a desire ...”

Mere Christianity, "Hope"

- The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If 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. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud...."

Mere Christianity, "Hope"

... Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same."



Analogy and Illustration

Analogy and Illustration

When Lewis is writing Christian apologetics or in any other genre, his writing is full of analogies, metaphors, and picture language, creating imaginative ground for a response. A brief survey of *Mere Christianity* produces the following list:

Coming to faith in Christ is like ...

- ... joining a campaign of sabotage
- Falling at someone's feet
- or putting yourself in someone's hands

Analogy and Illustration

- Taking on board fuel or food
- Laying down your rebel arms and surrendering
- Saying you're sorry
- Laying yourself open
- Turning full speed astern
- Like killing part of yourself

Analogy and Illustration

- Learning to walk or to write
- Buying God a present with His own money
- A drowning man clutching at a rescuer's hand
- A tin soldier or a statue becoming alive
- Waking after a long sleep
- Getting close to someone or becoming infected

Analogy and Illustration

- Like dressing up or pretending or playing
- Emerging from the womb or hatching from an egg
- A compass needle swinging to the north
- A cottage being made into a palace
- A field being plowed and resown
- A horse turning into a Pegasus

Analogy and Illustration

- A greenhouse roof becoming bright in the sunlight
- Coming around from anesthetic
- Coming in out of the wind
- Or like going home (like Timothy Keller so powerfully demonstrates in his explanation of the parable of the Prodigal God).

Miscellaneous Insights from various articles

- From "God and Evil": "If thought is the undesigned and irrelevant product of cerebral motions, what reason have we to trust it?"
- The same article addresses the fatal difficulties of Dualism, although that is a belief that we seldom encounter today.
- From "God in the Dock": "I have been asked to write about the difficulties which a man must face in trying to present the Christian Faith to modern unbelievers." Lewis goes on to write about a skepticism about history from the average person, the importance of knowing the language and vocabulary people use, and "the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin." Hence, he writes "We Have Cause to be Uneasy." (in *MC*)

Miscellaneous Insights from various articles

- From “Religion and Rocketry”: two opposite arguments have been used against the Christian faith, i.e., that we are “alone in an infinite desert” and, therefore, a creator couldn’t be interested in us vs. “university was probably quite well provided with inhabitable globes and with livestock to inhabit them” and, therefore, it’s the height of parochialism to think that we could be important to God.

Miscellaneous Insights from various articles