IS THEOLOGY POETRY?

BY C. S. LEWIS

SAMIZDAT
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The essay, *'Is Theology Poetry?'* was originally presented in 1944 at an Oxford debating society called the "Socratic Club". Later on, it was published in the collection of essays entitled: They Asked for a Paper (1962).

Samizdat, March 2014 (public domain under Canadian copyright law)

Fonts:
Berthold Baskerville
Classix

The question I have been asked to discuss tonight – "Is Theology Poetry?" – is not of my own choosing. I find myself, in fact, in the position of a candidate at an examination, and I must obey the advice of my tutors by first making sure that I know what the question means.

By Theology we mean, I suppose, the systematic series of statements about God and about man's relation to Him which the believers of a religion make. And in a paper sent me by this Club I may perhaps assume that Theology means principally Christian Theology. I am the bolder to make this assumption because something of what I think about other religions will appear in what I have to say. It must also be remembered that only a minority of the religions of the world have a theology. There was no systematic series of statements which the Greeks agreed in believing about Zeus.

The other term, Poetry , is much harder to define, but I believe I can assume the question which my examiners had in mind without a definition. There are certain things which I feel sure they were not asking me. They were not asking me whether Theology is written in verse. They were not asking me whether most theologians are masters of a "simple, sensuous, and passionate" style. I believe they meant, "Is Theology *merely* poetry?" This might be expanded: "Does Theology offer us, at best, only that kind of truth which, according to some critics, poetry offers us?" And the first difficulty of answering the question in that form is that we have no general agreement as to what "poetical truth" means, or whether there is really any such thing. It will be best, therefore, to use for this paper a very vague and modest notion of poetry, simply as writing which arouses and in part satisfies the imagination. And I shall take it that the question I am to answer is this: Does Christian Theology owe its attraction to its power of arousing and satisfying our imaginations? Are those who believe it mistaking aesthetic enjoyment for intellectual assent, or assenting because they enjoy? Faced with this question, I naturally turn to inspect the believer whom I know best – myself. And the first fact I discover, or seem

to discover, is that for me at any rate, if Theology is Poetry, it is not very good poetry.

Considered as poetry, the doctrine of the Trinity seems to me to fall between two stools. It has neither the monolithic grandeur of strictly Unitarian conceptions nor the richness of Polytheism. The omnipotence of God is not, to my taste, a poetical advantage. Odin, fighting against enemies who are not his own creatures and who will in fact defeat him in the end, has a heroic appeal which the God of Christians cannot have. There is also a certain bareness about the Christian picture of the universe. A future state and orders of superhuman creatures are held to exist, but only the slightest hints of their nature are offered. Finally, and worst of all, the whole cosmic story, though full of tragic elements, yet fails of being a tragedy. Christianity offers the attractions neither of optimism nor of pessimism. It represents the life of the universe as being very like the mortal life of men on this planet – of a mingled yarn, good and ill together." The majestic simplifications of Pantheism and the tangled wood of Pagan animism both seem to me, in their different ways, more attractive. Christianity just misses the tidiness of the one and the delicious variety of the other. For I take it there are two things the imagination loves to do. It loves to embrace its object completely, to take it in at a single glance, and see it as something harmonious, symmetrical, and self-explanatory. That is the classical imagination; the Parthenon was built for it. It also loves to lose itself in a labyrinth, to surrender to the inextricable. That is the romantic imagination; the *Orlando Furioso* was written for it. But Christian Theology does not cater very well for either.

If Christianity is only a mythology, then I find the mythology I believe in is not the one I like best. I like Greek mythology much better, Irish better still, Norse best of all.

Having thus inspected myself, I next inquire how far my case is peculiar. It does not seem, certainly, to be unique. It is not at all plain that men's imaginations have always delighted most in those pictures of the supernatural which they believed. From the twelfth to the seventeenth century Europe seems to have taken an unfail-

ing delight in classical mythology. If the numbers and the gusto of pictures and poems were to be the criterion of belief, we should judge that those ages were pagan, which we know to be untrue.

It looks as if the confusion between imaginative enjoyment and intellectual assent, of which Christians are accused, is not nearly so common or so easy as some people suppose. Even children, I believe, rarely suffer from it. It pleases their imagination to pretend that they are bears or horses, but I do not remember that one was ever under the least delusion. May it not even be that there is something in belief which is hostile to perfect imaginative enjoyment? The sensitive, cultured atheist seems at times to enjoy the aesthetic trappings of Christianity in a way which the believer can only envy. The modern poets certainly enjoy the Greek gods in a way of which I find no trace in Greek literature. What mythological scenes in ancient literature can compare for a moment with Keats's *Hyperion*? In a certain sense we spoil a mythology for imaginative purposes by believing in it. Fairies are popular in England because we don't think they exist; they are no fun at all in Arran or Connemara.

But I must beware of going too far. I have suggested that belief spoils a system for the imagination "in a certain sense." But not in all senses. If I came to believe in fairies, I should almost certainly lose the particular kind of pleasure which I now get from them when reading the *Midsummer' Night's Dream.* But later on, when the believed fairies had settled down as inhabitants of my real universe and had been fully connected with other parts of my thought, a new pleasure might arise. The contemplation of what we take to be real is always, I think, in tolerably sensitive minds, attended with a certain sort of aesthetic satisfaction – a sort which depends precisely on its supposed reality. There is a dignity and poignancy in the bare fact that a thing exists. Thus, as Balfour pointed out in *Theism and Humanism* (a book too little read), there are many historical facts which we should not applaud for any obvious humour or pathos if we supposed them to be inventions; but once we believe them to be real, we have, in addition to our intellectual satisfaction, a certain aesthetic delight in the idea of them. The story of the Trojan War and the story of the Napoleonic Wars

both have an aesthetic effect on us. And the effects are different. And this difference does not depend solely on those differences which would make them different as stories if we believed neither. The *kind* of pleasure the Napoleonic Wars give has a certain difference simply because we believe in them. A believed idea *feels* different from an idea that is not believed. And that peculiar flavour of the believed is never, in my experience, without a special sort of imaginative enjoyment. It is therefore quite true that the Christians do enjoy their world picture, aesthetically, once they have accepted it as true. Every man, I believe, enjoys the world picture which he accepts, for the gravity and finality of the actual is itself an aesthetic stimulus. In this sense, Christianity, Life-force-Worship, Marxism, freudianism all become "poetries" to their own believers. But this does not mean that their adherents have chosen them for that reason. On the contrary, this kind of poetry is the result, not the cause, of belief. Theology is, in this sense, poetry to me because I believe it; I do not believe it because it is poetry.

The charge that Theology is mere poetry, if it means that Christians believe it because they find it, antecedently to belief, the most poetically attractive of all world pictures, thus seems to me unplausible in the extreme. There may be evidence for such a charge which I do not know of, but such evidence as I do know is against it.

I am not, of course, maintaining that Theology, even before you believe it, is totally bare of aesthetic value. But I do not find it superior in this respect to most of its rivals. Consider for a few moments the enormous aesthetic claim of its chief contemporary rival – what we may loosely call the Scientific Outlook[1], the picture of Mr. [H. G.] Wells and the rest. Supposing this to be a myth, is it not one of the finest myths which human imagination has yet produced? The play is preceded by the most austere of all preludes: the infinite void, and matter restlessly moving to bring forth it knows not what. Then, by the millionth millionth chance – what tragic irony – the conditions at one point of space and time bubble up into that tiny fermentation which is the beginning of

1 I am not suggesting that practising scientists believe it as a whole. The delightful name 'Wellsianity' (which another member invented during the discussion) would have been much better than 'the Scientific Outlook'.

life. Everything seems to be against the infant hero of our drama – just as everything seems against the youngest son or ill-used stepdaughter at the opening of a fairy-tale.[2] But life somehow wins through. With infinite suffering, against all but insuperable obstacles, it spreads, it breeds, it complicates itself, from the amoeba up to the plant, up to the reptile, up to the mammal. We glance briefly at the age of monsters. Dragons prowl the earth, devour one another, and die. Then comes the theme of the younger son and the ugly duckling once more. As the weak, tiny spark of life began amidst the huge hostilities of the inanimate, so now again, amidst the beasts that are far larger and stronger than he, there comes forth a little naked, shivering, cowering creature, shuffling, not yet erect, promising nothing, the product of another millionth millionth chance. Yet somehow he thrives. He becomes the Cave Man with his club and his flints, muttering and growling over his enemies' bones, dragging his screaming mate by her hair (I never could quite make out why), tearing his children to pieces in fierce jealousy till one of them is old enough to tear him,[3] cowering before the horrible gods whom he created in his own image. But these are only growing pains. Wait till the next act. There he is becoming true Man. He learns to master Nature. Science comes and dissipates the superstitions of his infancy. More and more he becomes the controller of his own fate. Passing hastily over the present (for it is a mere nothing by the time scale we are using), you follow him on into the future. See him in the last act, though not the last scene, of this great mystery. A race of demigods now rules the planet – and perhaps more than the planet – for eugenics have made certain that only demigods will be born, and psychoanalysis that none of them shall lose or smirch his divinity, and communism that all which divinity requires shall be ready to their hands. Man has ascended his throne. Henceforward he has nothing to do but to practise virtue, to grow 10 wisdom, to be happy. And now, mark the final stroke of genius. If the myth stopped at that point, it might be a little bathetic. It would lack the

2 [Editor's note]: One almost gets the impression here that Lewis had read or had heard of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp's work, *Morphology of the Folktale*. There is some chance this may have happened, as the first (Russian) edition of *Morphology* was published in 1928.

3 [Editor's note]: Lewis is obviously referring to Freud and his "primal horde" concept which Freud explored in his book *Totem and Taboo*.

highest grandeur of which human imagination is capable. The last scene reverses all. We have the Twilight of the Gods. All this time, silently, unceasingly, out of all reach of human power, Nature, the old enemy, has been steadily gnawing away. The sun will cool – all suns will cool – the whole universe will run down. Life (every form of life) will be banished, without hope of return, from every inch of infinite space. All ends in nothingness, and "universal darkness covers all." The pattern of the myth thus becomes one of the noblest we can conceive. It is the pattern of many Elizabethan tragedies, where the protagonist's career can be represented by a slowly ascending and then rapidly falling curve, with its highest point in Act IV. You see him climbing up and up, then blazing in his bright meridian, then finally overwhelmed in ruin.

Such a world drama appeals to every part of us. The early struggles of the hero (a theme delightfully doubled, played first by life, and then by man) appeal to our generosity. His future exaltation gives scope to a reasonable optimism, for the tragic close is so very distant that you need not often think of it – we work with millions of years. And the tragic close itself just gives that irony, that grandeur, which calls forth our defiance, and without which all the rest might cloy. There is a beauty in this myth which well deserves better poetic handling than it has yet received; I hope some great genius will yet crystallise it before the incessant stream of philosophic change carries it all away. I am speaking, of course, of the beauty it has whether you believe it or not. There I can speak from experience, for I, who believe less than half of what it tells me about the past, and less than nothing of what it tells me about the future, am deeply moved when I contemplate it. The only other story – unless, indeed, it is an embodiment of the same story – which similarly moves me is the Nibelung's Ring. *Enden sah ich die Welt.*

We cannot, therefore, turn down Theology, simply because it does not avoid being poetical. All world views yield poetry to those who believe them by the mere fact of being believed. And nearly all have certain poetical merits whether you believe them or not. This is what we should expect. Man is a poetical animal and touches nothing which he does not adorn.

There are, however, two other lines of thought which might lead us to call Theology a mere poetry, and these I must now consider. In the first place, it certainly contains elements similar to those which we find in many early, and even savage, religions. And those elements in the early religions may now seem to us to be poetical. The question here is rather complicated. We now regard the death and return of Balder as a poetical idea, a myth. We are invited to infer thence that the death and resurrection of Christ is a poetical idea, a myth. But we are not really starting with the *datum* "Both are poetical" and thence arguing "Therefore both are false." Part of the poetical aroma which hangs about Balder is, I believe, due to the fact that we have already come to disbelieve in him. So that disbelief, not poetical experience, is the real starting point of the argument. But this is perhaps an oversubtlety, certainly a subtlety, and I will leave it on one side.

What light is really thrown on the truth or falsehood of Christian Theology by the occurrence of similar ideas in Pagan religion? I think the answer was very well given a fortnight ago by Mr. Brown. Supposing, for purposes of argument, that Christianity is true; then it could avoid all coincidence with other religions only on the supposition that all other religions are one hundred percent erroneous. To which, you remember, Professor H. H. Price replied by agreeing with Mr. Brown and saying, "Yes. From these resemblances you may conclude not 'so much the worse for the Christians' but 'so much the better for the Pagans.'" The truth is that the resemblances tell nothing either for or against the truth of Christian Theology. If you start from the assumption that the Theology is false, the resemblances are quite consistent with that assumption. One would expect creatures of the same sort, faced with the same universe, to make the same false guess more than once. But if you start with the assumption that the Theology is true, the resemblances fit in equally well. Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians and (earlier) to Jews, also says that there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, "lighteneth every man." We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpse of

that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic: story – the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth. And the differences between the Pagan Christs (Balder, Osiris, etc.) and the Christ Himself is much what we should expect to find. The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other. It is like watching something come gradually into focus; first it hangs in the clouds of myth and ritual, vast and vague, then it condenses, grows hard and in a sense small, as a historical event in first century Palestine. This gradual focussing goes on even inside the Christian tradition itself. The earliest stratum of the Old Testament contains many truths in a form which I take to be legendary, or even mythical – hanging in the clouds, but gradually the truth condenses, becomes more and more historical. From things like Noah's Ark or the sun standing still upon Ajalon, you come down to the court memoirs of King David. Finally you reach the New Testament and history reigns supreme, and the Truth is incarnate. And "incarnate" is here more than a metaphor. It is not an accidental resemblance that what, from the point of view of being, is stated in the form "God became Man," should involve, from the point of view of human knowledge, the statement "Myth became Fact." The essential meaning of all things came down from the "heaven" of myth to the "earth" of history. In so doing, it partly emptied itself of its glory, as Christ emptied Himself of His glory to be Man. That is the real explanation of the fact that Theology, far from defeating its rivals by a superior poetry, is, in a superficial but quite real sense, less poetical than they. That is why the New· Testament is, in the same sense, less poetical than the Old. Have you not often felt in Church, if the first lesson is some great passage, that the second lesson is somehow small by comparison – almost, if one might say so, humdrum? So it is and so it must be. That is the humiliation of myth into fact, of God into Man; what is everywhere and always, imageless and ineffable,

only to be glimpsed in dream and symbol and the acted poetry of ritual becomes small, solid – no bigger than a man who can lie asleep in a rowing boat on the Lake of Galilee. You may say that this, after all, is a still deeper poetry. I will not contradict you. The humiliation leads to a greater glory. But the humiliation of God and the shrinking or condensation of the myth as it becomes fact are also quite real.

I have just mentioned symbol, and that brings me to the last head under which I will consider the charge of "mere poetry." Theology certainly shares with poetry the use of metaphorical or symbolical language. The first Person of the Trinity is not the Father of the Second in a physical sense. The Second Person did not come "down" to earth in the same sense as a parachutist, nor reascend into the sky like a balloon, nor did He literally sit at the right hand of the Father. Why, then, does Christianity talk as if all these things did happen? The agnostic thinks that it does so because those who founded it were quite naively ignorant and believed all these statements literally, and we later Christians have gone on using the same language through timidity and conservatism. We are often invited, in Professor [H. H.] Price's words, to throw away the shell and retain the kernel.

There are two questions involved here.

1. What did the early Christians believe? Did they believe that God really has a material palace in the sky and that He received His Son in a decorated state chair placed a little to the right of His own? – or did they not? The answer is that the alternative we are offering them was probably never present to their minds at all. As soon as it was present, we know quite well which side of the fence they came down. As soon as the issue of Anthropomorphism was explicitly before the Church in, I think, the second century, Anthropomorphism was condemned. The Church knew the answer (that God has no body and therefore couldn't sit in a chair) as soon as it knew the question. But till the question was raised, of course, people believed neither the one answer nor the other. There is no more tiresome error in the history of thought than to try to sort our ancestors on to this or that

side of a distinction which was not in their minds at all. You are asking a question to which no answer exists.

It is very probable that most (almost certainly not all) of the first generation of Christians never thought of their faith without anthropomorphic imagery, and that they were not explicitly conscious, as a modern would be, that it was mere imagery. But this does not in the least mean that the essence of their belief was concerned with details about a celestial throne room. That was not what they valued, or what they were prepared to die for. Any one of them who went to Alexandria and got a philosophical education would have recognised the imagery at once for what it was, and would not have felt that his belief had been altered in any way that mattered. My mental picture of an Oxford college, before I saw one, was very different from the reality in physical details. But this did not mean that when I came to Oxford I found my general conception of what a college means to have been a delusion. The physical pictures had inevitably accompanied my thinking, but they had never been what I was chiefly interested in, and much of my thinking had been correct in spite of them. What you think is one thing; what you imagine while you are thinking is another.

The earliest Christians were not so much like a man who mistakes the shell for the kernel as like a man carrying a nut which he hasn't yet cracked. The moment it is cracked, he knows which part to throw away. Till then he holds on to the nut, not because he is a fool but because he isn't.

2. We are invited to restate our belief in a form free from metaphor and symbol. The reason we don't is that we can't. We can, if you like, say "God entered history" instead of saying "God came down to earth." But, of course, "entered" is just as metaphorical as "came down." You have only substituted horizontal or undefined movement for vertical movement. We can make our language duller; we cannot make it less metaphorical. We can make the pictures more prosaic; we cannot be less pictorial. Nor are we Christians alone in this disability. Here is a sentence from a celebrated anti-Christian writer, Dr. I. A. Richards.[4] "Only that part of

4 *Principles of Literary Criticism*, cap. XI.

the cause of a mental event which takes effect through incoming (sensory) impulses or through effects of past sensory impulses can be said to be thereby known. The reservation no doubt involves complications." Dr. Richards does not mean that the part of the cause "takes" effect in the literal sense of the word takes, nor that it does so *through* a sensory impulse as you could take a parcel *through* a doorway. In the second sentence "The reservation involves complications," he does not mean that an act of defending, or a seat booked in a train, or an American park, really sets about rolling or folding or curling up a set of coilings or rollings up. In other words, all language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical.

For all these reasons, then, I think (though we knew even before Freud that the heart is deceitful) that those who accept Theology are not necessarily being guided by taste rather than reason. The picture so often painted of Christians huddling together on an ever narrower strip of beach while the incoming tide of "Science" mounts higher and higher corresponds to nothing in my own experience. That grand myth which I asked you to admire a few minutes ago is not for me a hostile novelty breaking in on my traditional beliefs. On the contrary, that cosmology is what I started from. Deepening distrust and final abandonment of it long preceded my conversion to Christianity. Long before I believed Theology to be true I had already decided that the popular scientific picture at any rate was false. One absolutely central inconsistency ruins it; it is the one we touched on a fortnight ago.3. The whole picture professes to depend on inferences from observed facts . Unless inference is valid, the whole picture disappears. Unless we can be sure that reality in the remotest nebula or the remotest part obeys the thought laws of the human scientist here and now in his laboratory – in other words, unless Reason is an absolute – all is in ruins. Yet those who ask me to believe this world picture also ask me to believe that Reason is simply the unforeseen and unintended by-product of mindless matter at one stage of its endless and aimless becoming. Here is flat contradiction. They ask me at the same moment to accept a conclusion and to discredit the only testimony on which that conclusion can be based. The difficulty is to me a fatal one; and the fact that when you put it to many scien-

tists, far from having an answer, they seem not even to understand what the difficulty is, assures me that I have not found a mare's nest but detected a radical disease in their whole mode of thought from the very beginning. The man who has once understood the situation is compelled henceforth to regard the scientific cosmology as being, in principle, a myth; though no doubt a great many true particulars have been worked into it.[5]

After that it is hardly worth noticing minor difficulties. Yet these are many and serious. The Bergsonian critique of orthodox Darwinism is not easy to answer. More disquieting still is Professor D.M.S. Watson's defence. "Evolution itself," he wrote,[6] "is accepted by zoologists not because it has been observed to occur or ... can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is dearly incredible." Has it come to that? Does the whole vast structure of modern naturalism depend not on positive evidence but simply on an a priori metaphysical prejudice? Was it devised not to get in facts but to keep out God? Even, however, if Evolution in the strict biological sense has some better grounds than Professor Watson suggests – and I can't help thinking it must – we should distinguish Evolution in this strict sense from what may be called the universal evolutionism of modern thought. By universal evolutionism I mean the belief that the very formula of universal process is from imperfect to perfect, from small beginnings to great endings, from the rudimentary to the elaborate, the belief which makes people find it natural to think that morality springs from savage taboos, adult sentiment from infantile sexual maladjustments, thought from instinct, mind from matter, organic from inorganic, cosmos from chaos. This is perhaps the deepest habit of mind in the contemporary world. It seems to me immensely unplausible, because it makes the general course of nature so very unlike those parts of nature we can observe. You remember the old puzzle as to whether the owl came from the egg or the egg from the owl. The modern acquiescence in universal evolutionism is a kind of optical illusion, produced by attending exclusively to the owl's

5 It is not irrelevant, in considering the mythical character of this cosmology to notice that the two great imaginative expressions of it are *earlier* than the evidence: Keats's *Hyperion* and the *Nibelung's Ring* are pre-Darwinian works.

6 Quoted in *Science and the B.B.C.*, Nineteenth Century, April, 1943.

emergence from the egg. We are taught from childhood to notice how the perfect oak grows from the acorn and to forget that the acorn itself was dropped by a perfect oak. We are reminded constantly that the adult human being was an embryo, never that the life of the embryo came from two adult human beings. We love to notice that the express engine of today is the descendant of the "Rocket"; we do not equally remember that the "Rocket" springs not from some even more rudimentary engine, but from something much more perfect and complicated than itself – namely, a man of genius. The obviousness or naturalness which most people seem to find in the idea of emergent evolution thus seems to be a pure hallucination.

On these grounds and others like them one is driven to think that whatever else may be true, the popular scientific cosmology at any rate is certainly not. I left that ship not at the call of poetry but because I thought it could not keep afloat. Something like philosophical idealism or Theism must, at the very worst, be less untrue than that. And idealism turned out, when you took it seriously, to be disguised Theism. And once you accepted Theism, you could not ignore the claims of Christ. And when you examined them it appeared to me that you could adopt no middle position. Either He was a lunatic, or God. And He was not a lunatic.

I was taught at school, when I had done a sum, to "prove my answer." The proof or verification of my Christian answer to the cosmic sum is this. When I accept Theology I may find difficulties, at this point or that, in harmonising it with some particular truths which are imbedded in the mythical cosmology derived from science. But I can get in, or allow for, science as a whole. Granted that Reason is prior to matter and that the light of the primal Reason illuminates finite minds, I can understand how men should come, by observation and inference, to know a lot about the universe they live in. If, on the other hand, I swallow the scientific cosmology as a whole, then not only can I not fit in Christianity, but I cannot even fit in science. If minds are wholly dependent on brains, and brains on biochemistry, and biochemistry (in the long run) on the meaningless flux of the atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any

more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees. And this is to me the final test. This is how I distinguish dreaming and waking. When I am awake I can, in some degree, account for and study my dream. The dragon that pursued me last night can be fitted into my waking world. I know that there are such things as dreams; I know that I had eaten an indigestible dinner; I know that a man of my reading might be expected to dream of dragons. But while in the nightmare I could not have fitted in my waking experience. The waking world is judged more real because it can thus contain the dreaming world; the dreaming world is judged less real because it cannot contain the waking one. For the same reason I am certain that in passing from the scientific points of view to the theological, I have passed from dream to waking. Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

The Oxford Socratic Club, 1944