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# ABSTRACT

## **The Philosophical Christianity of C. S. Lewis: Its Sources, Content and Formation**

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This thesis first began to take shape when I noticed that C. S. Lewis, a man who studied and taught philosophy at Oxford University and who sparred with the best philosophers of his day both in person and in writing, is almost completely ignored in philosophical circles and the few who do discuss Lewis and philosophy usually do so only in regard to his natural theology and apologetics. The result of this is a dearth of knowledge concerning Lewis's philosophical formation and how this formation relates to Lewis's larger Christian thought. Consequently, in "The Philosophical Christianity of C. S. Lewis," I attempt to rectify this situation by focusing on Lewis's philosophical formation and how this formation, by complex interaction with literature and theology, ultimately gave birth to Lewis's mature Christian views.

To accomplish this, I begin by claiming that ultimately Lewis understood philosophy as the ancients did: as a complete way of life. Thus, in chapter one, drawing on French philosopher Pierre Hadot and many of the classical philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle and others, I claim that philosophy as a way of life means (1) a choice (2) made in a cultural context (3) to follow wholeheartedly a certain group of people who (4) have a

certain take on life which (5) demands training which (6) is the result of rational discourse, and which (7) ultimately leads to a fully converted life.

With this understanding of philosophy in place, I am then positioned, in chapter two, to show *how* Lewis eventually came to see philosophy as a way of life via seven different philosophical phases: Lucretian materialism, pseudo-Manichean dualism, Stoical materialism, subjective idealism, absolute idealism, theism, and Christian Neoplatonism. As one can guess, Lewis's belief-formation is not something that perfectly evolved each step of the way; rather, in each of his philosophical phases, I endeavour to find examples of things that may have compelled him toward his ultimate belief that philosophy is a way of life – the understanding of philosophy that he, as a Christian, held. For instance, during his Lucretian materialist phase, Lewis was tutored by W. T. Kirkpatrick, who instilled in Lewis a love of reason and logical consistency; during his pseudo-Manichean dualist phase, Lewis had his first ethical experience; during his Stoical materialist phase, Lewis, who was then studying at Oxford University, delved deeper into the classical philosophers, who believed that philosophy is a way of life; during his subjective and absolute idealist phases, Lewis began teaching philosophy at Oxford University, which had the beneficial effect of bringing him into greater community with likeminded men; during his theist phase, Lewis began to exercise his philosophical beliefs in concrete ways, such as through prayer; and finally, during his Christian Neoplatonist phase, Lewis came to fully embrace the idea of philosophy as a way of life.

However, like Plato, Augustine and others before him, Lewis knew from firsthand experience that without desire, reason is impotent to move man from false images and philosophies to truer ones. Hence, Lewis devoted a lot of his time – and I devote chapter

three – to exploring the nature of that important affect in the soul called “heavenly desire,” a term which I coin in order to unify all the other words Lewis used to describe this effect, such as Platonic *eros*, “Romanticism,” the *numinous*, *sehnsucht*, and “Joy.” Additionally, since heavenly desire is so central to Lewis’s philosophical formation and, ultimately, his philosophical Christianity, I spend some extra time discussing the natural theological argument related to heavenly desire, Lewis’s Argument from Desire.

Yet as I say, heavenly desire is a blanket word for many different desires that have many different, though broadly related, objects. My argument in chapter four, therefore, is to show how Lewis eventually came to understand that one object of heavenly desire in particular, Myth, which is a mysterious and supra-rational aspect of God’s fuller nature, enters the poetic imagination *via* mythical literature, whose mythical images, in turn, are evaluated by reason (i.e. as being potentially true or false) and subsequently become vital facts to understand, and compel conversion to, Christianity. Hence, for Lewis, the true philosophy – Christianity – is the proper unity of myth and reason.

Finally, in order to tie all this together, I need to put Lewis into his cultural context and then engage with his cultural ideal and his cultural identity that flowed from this. My conclusion is that Lewis the Christian Neoplatonist saw himself as an Old Western Man, which, through some complex assembly, I claim has eight elements: (1) an Old Western Man identifies with western culture, which is to say that he is a person who relates to the conglomerate that is Judaic-European pagan-Christian thought, though, of course, Judaic thought obviously has its roots in Asia and even European paganism has been influenced by Egypt and the Middle East; (2) an Old Western Man is either a pre-Christian or a Christian, but not a post-Christian; (3) it follows, then, that an Old Western Man, though

called “old,” does not suggest only dead Europeans; rather, it indicates the person described in (1) of any time period – past, present or future – who happens to identify with the culture we are now defining; (4) an Old Western Man is one who respects tradition and history; (5) consequently, an Old Western Man, while he may believe in teleology and even biological evolution, rejects the grand evolutionary myth of progress in the form of such theories as Hegelian historicism or Darwinianism; (6) one of the key elements in tradition and history that an Old Western Man endorses is a hierarchical, not an egalitarian, conception of existence in some form or another (politically, ecclesiastically and / or socially); (7) an Old Western Man, as a lover of Nature, does not overvalue or worship technology and machinery; and (8) yet, an Old Western Man neither doubts the power of reason to apprehend objective truth nor is skeptical of objective values in ethics and aesthetics.

What I conclude from these five chapters is that it is undeniable that Lewis should be called a philosophical Christian, for like the ancient philosophers before him, Lewis made a choice in a certain cultural context (twentieth century Oxford) to follow wholeheartedly a certain group of beliefs (Christian Neoplatonism *qua* Old Western Culture) which demanded training (prayer, mythmaking, reading etc.) which was the result of submission to reason, all of which ultimately led to a fully converted life.