

Why C. S. Lewis Is Not a Culture Warrior

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We must be ever so cautious not to turn this happy moment into an unhappy misuse of Lewis. Aslan will roar with real wrath if we make this movie into an occasion for Christian clucking. It is absolutely imperative that we not make a classic Christian story such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* into the latest weapon in the culture wars. If like *The Passion of the Christ* this film becomes hugely successful, certain Christians will be all too tempted to declare, with thumping self-satisfaction: “Look, we told you so long ago. We’re right, you’re wrong, and this movie proves it. So get on board the Christian juggernaut and stop your whining about peace and justice. *We’re* running this country now, and we have Aslan as our King, the Lion who will devour anyone who gets in our way.”

C.S. Lewis himself rejected all such Christian triumphalism. He knew, all too well, that we Christians have been guilty of terrible sins, and he called for us to repent of them, to make “full confession of . . . Christendom’s specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery. Large areas of ‘the World’ will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past. Why should they? We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch” (*The Four Loves*, 49). Moloch is the pagan deity whose worship requires the sacrifice of children. In making this startling claim, Lewis has in mind not only the medieval pogroms against Jews, not only the Crusades and the Inquisition, but also our own Protestant sins: Luther’s slaughter of 20,000 peasants, Calvin’s burning of Servetus at the stake, the Salem Witchcraft trials in Massachusetts, as well as our Christian complicity in the German Holocaust, not to mention our sins of commission and omission at Hiroshima and My Lai and Darfur. Not least abominable has been our demonizing of homosexuals, as if their sins were uniquely evil, when self-righteousness has always been deemed the deadliest of Christian crimes. Lewis never apologized for, nor tried to hide the fact, that his closest childhood friend, Arthur Greeves, was a homosexual. Thus do we Christians have shame on our faces and blood on our hands, and thus do we have no business setting ourselves up as some pristine company of the pure and the holy. Hence Lewis’s repeated objections to the creation of any “Christian” political party. All too well did he understand that Christians already belong to such a “party,” and that it’s called the Body of Christ, the church.

Lewis also abominated all attempts to politicize his own work, knowing well that all too many Conservatives would have been eager to make him their literary saint. When in 1951 the Tory government of Winston Churchill offered Lewis the extraordinary distinction of being made a Commander of the British Empire, he politely declined: “There are always knaves . . . who say, and fools who believe, that my religious writings are all covert anti-Leftist [i.e., right-wing] propaganda, and my appearance in the Honours List wd. of course strengthen their hands. It is therefore better that I shd. not appear there” (*Letters*, p. 235). Though a political conservative himself, Lewis expressed gratitude to Britain’s welfare state for providing a ground floor of economic security to every citizen, thus protecting the natively weak against the all-devouring strong. “Legal and economic equality are absolutely necessary remedies for the Fall,” he wrote in 1943; they are necessary protections “against cruelty.” “We Britons,” Lewis added, “should rejoice that we have contrived to reach much legal democracy.” He concluded, ever so tellingly, that “we still need more of the economic” kind of democracy (*Present Concerns*, 18, 20).

Any person who is not a Marxist at age 20 has no heart, wags have noted, but anyone who is still a Marxist at 30 has no head. Lest we think Lewis soft-headed when he wrote his 1943 essay on equality, we should remember that there he also confessed the limits of economic democracy. It provides a necessary prophylactic against certain social ills; but, as he said, man cannot live by medicine alone. Yet Lewis never relented in his critique of unbridled capitalism, as if man could live by that lucre which the New Testament calls the root of all evil. On the contrary, he feared that ours has become an irredeemably avaricious age, as we pad ourselves against the chances and changes of time by means of pleasures and comforts that leave us materially satisfied but spiritually vacuous. Well would he have approved Chesterton’s reminder that “there is only an inch of difference between the padded chair and the padded cell.” Though Lewis became a wealthy man, he continued to wear the same out-at-the-elbows coats and down-at-the-heel shoes. Nor did he ever change houses, living in the same modest home called the Kilns in a nondescript suburb outside Oxford. When Lewis married Joy Davidman in 1956, she was appalled at its ratty furnishings, not only the chairs and sofas but also the draperies: they were woolen blankets that Lewis and his brother Warnie had used to pull over the windows during the wartime blackout of the 1940s!

Once his royalties began to mount, Lewis created the Agape Fund, and through it he distributed roughly 90% of his income to charitable causes and needy persons. Most of the gifts were bestowed anonymously, so that no one could congratulate Lewis for his philanthropy or name a building after him because of his benevolence. His final essay, published shortly before his death on November 22, 1963, was entitled “We Have No ‘Right to Happiness.’” There Lewis warns against a culture bent on individual satisfaction, especially of the sexual sort. Lewis denounces those men who cast aside their wives when they lose their youthful good looks, seeking instant sexual bliss from young secretaries. How much more might he lament the state of our culture if he had lived to see the divorce rate rise to nearly 60%, especially among evangelicals? Yet it isn’t the divorce disaster alone that Lewis addresses; it’s also our fatal delusion that the purpose of life is to have a good time, to be immediately and perpetually gratified. Thus do we advance, Lewis darkly warned, “toward a state or a society in which not only each man but every impulse in man claims *carte blanche*. And then, though our technological skill may help us to survive a little longer, our civilization will have died at heart, and will—one dare not even add ‘unfortunately’—be swept away” (*God in the Dock*, 322). Before applauding with smug self-assurance when good triumphs over evil in the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we would do well to be soberly reminded that, while 40,000 people have been killed by terrorists during the last ten years, 40,000 children die *daily* from preventable diseases.