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PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY: A COMMENTARY ON C.S. LEWIS' NOVEL *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

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Lewis' brilliant novel, Till We Have Faces is unfortunately overlooked by many Christians who are familiar with only his more popular works. In this, her first essay for Faith & Reason, Dr. Chervin probes Lewis' didactic efforts which undergird the novel and lead the reader to a Christian synthesis.



ALTHOUGH C.S. LEWIS IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR OF TWENTIETH CENTURY Christian writers, his late novel, *Till We Have Faces*¹, has not enjoyed the fame it deserves. In some ways the best written of Lewis' novels: compact, dramatic, with more real, many-sided, characters than some of his other fictional creations; *Till We Have Faces* displays themes of special importance for today.

In this article, I would like to explore the dialectic set up in the novel between primitive religion (the pagan "thesis"), Greek philosophy (the pagan intellectual "antithesis"), and Christianity (as the transformed "synthesis"). For readers less than familiar with the novel, I will include short explanations concerning plot and character.

Till We Have Faces opens with a complaint lodged against the pagan gods by one Queen Orual of the pre-Christian town of Glome. The brutal King of Glome takes into service as a slave a Greek who has studied the wisdom of the philosophers. During the course of the tale, Orual interiorizes the Greek philosophical scepticism toward primitive religion, but finally is brought to realize that the element of fear and awe in the face of the holy is indispensable in the understanding of the beauty and love that is in the Divine.

The progress of , the dialectic involved might be likened to what might occur in the soul of a young person of our times reared with a "new age consciousness," lapsing then into "enlightenment" at the hands of philosophy professors at college, only to find as a convert Christian that God was even more mysterious and thrilling than the occult.

PRIMITIVE RELIGION

Let us first take a look at the nature of primitive religion as Lewis depicts it in his fictional piece. Ritual life in Glome surrounds the temple of a goddess called Ungit, a shapeless headless stone like idol who lives in a dark cone-shaped



C.S. Lewis

house full of the “holy” smells of incense and bloody sacrifices of animals. Her cult is presided over by a priest who wears a ceremonial headdress of a fierce bird. He is assisted by temple maidens covered with stylized dress and cosmetics to look like painted dolls.

The Divine in Glome is seen as personal, brutal, irrational, local, dark and supremely envious. Here are some passages suggestive of these experiences:

(Orual reports that she) had a fear of that Priest which was quite different from my fear of my father. I think that what frightened me (in those early days) was the holiness of the smell that hung about him - a temple-smell of blood (mostly pigeons’ blood, but he had sacrificed men, too) and burnt fat and singed hair and wine and stale incense. It is the Ungit smell...²

(Orual exclaims in perplexity that the Gods) set the riddle and then allow a seeming that can’t be tested and can only quicken and thicken the tormenting whirlpool of your guesswork. If they had an honest intention to guide us, why is their guidance not plain? Psyche (one of the heroines) could speak plain when she was three; do you tell me the gods have not yet come so far?³

I did not know then, however, as I do now, the strongest reason for distrust. The gods never send us this invitation to delight so readily or so strongly as when they are preparing some new agony. We are their bubbles; they blow us big before they prick us.⁴

The enviousness of the gods is shown by means of a retelling of the ancient myth of Cupid (Eros/Amor) and Psyche. In Lewis’ version for *Till We Have Faces*, the princess Psyche is so beautiful of body and soul that she comes to be adored by the populace of Glome. They believe that her hands have healing power and that she can cure them of the plague which is decimating the land. The Priest soon decides that her cult is rivalling that of the gods and that she must be done away with. Evils of famine and drought are attributed to the anger of the gods, and it is decided that Psyche must be sacrificed to their wrath if well-being is ever to return to Glome.⁵

The Priest once tells the King that “holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and

thin like water, but thick and dark like blood...⁶ And it is because of the dark character of religion that the relationship of the suppliant to the personal divinities is not one of reason to the light but of fear and propitiation: (About Ungit, Orual tells the Fox - the nickname of the wise man from Greece) “. . . the presents that brides have to make to her, and how we sometimes, in a bad year, have to cut someone’s throat and pour the blood over her. ...”⁷

The mark of a god-fearing person in primitive religion was to make sacrifices to the gods - special ones to bring a child:

Of course no one in the house went to bed on the night of the birth, for that, they say, will make the child refuse to wake into the world. We all sat in the great hall between the Pillar Room and the Bedchamber, in a red glare of birth-torches. The flames swayed and guttered terribly, for all the doors must be open; the shutting of a door might shut up a mother’s womb. In the middle of the hall burned a great fire. Every hour the Priest of Ungit walked round it nine times and threw in the proper things...⁸

If such be the nature of the divine in primitive religion, according to Lewis, what about love between human persons? Here Lewis portrays the basic familial hate/love relationships he describes so well on a conceptual level in *The Four Loves*. In spite of the cruelty Orual suffers from in her youth and twenties from her kin, Orual is deeply attached to them, and it is only in old-age that she sets forth to see other lands. Sexual eros, is, of course, another kind of love that seeks fulfillment in Glome. There is a rudimentary comradely philia amongst the menfolk, especially the guards. Agapic love is little admired until the time that we see it blossoming in Orual as Queen, but this is already an anticipation of the Christianity that is about to overtake pagan ideas.

What do we find of this pagan “thesis” in our own times? To relay my own observations - it makes me smile ruefully to find ex-Catholic teenagers adopting old superstitions, horoscopes, Tarot Cards, reincarnation myths. More terrifying is the move toward Satanism. Dark religion flourishes with strange rites and dreadful sacrifices.

For some, however, various forms of spiritualism, once rejected, provide a ladder of sorts from total

materialism toward a sense for the mysterious, together with a belief that one's individual destiny is tied up with divine realities.

PHILOSOPHICAL PAGANISM

We now turn to the “antithesis” posed by philosophical paganism as manifested by the concepts of the Greek slave called the Fox, who is appointed as tutor to the princesses: Orual, Redival and Psyche.

For readers acquainted with the history of ancient philosophy, the words of the Fox are deliciously evocative of the well-known passages from the Sceptics and the Stoics, with occasional references to Platonic thought.

The Divine is impersonal and distant. “The divine nature is without jealousy.”⁹ Trying to mingle with the gods, even by accident, brings death.¹⁰

Reality is described as dualistic. There is the world of the immaterial - of Justice, Equality, Soul ...¹¹ The purely material world of bodies is so distinct as to make the idea of a resurrected body unthinkable, as becomes clear when Orual tells the Fox of her encounter with the “resurrected” luminously beautiful Psyche.¹² Only the soul escapes as to the Sun.

As to the Greek gods of myth and the idols of Glome, these are pure folly, lies of poets, to be enjoyed as tales but not to be worshipped and certainly not to be propitiated by superstitious rites.¹³

Clear-headed scepticism should be our response to unproven phantoms. With regard to the ominous visits to the town of the “Shadowbrute,” the Fox declares “the shepherd’s tale is very questionable. If the man had a torch, of necessity the lion would have a big black shadow behind it. The man was scared and newwaked from sleep. He took a shadow for a monster.”¹⁴

The Fox exhibits all the virtues encouraged by the Stoic philosophers. Orual reports that she:

loved the Fox ... better than anyone I had ever known. You would have thought that a man who had been free in the Greeklands and then been taken in war and sold far away among the barbarians, would be downcast. And so he was sometimes, possibly more often than I, in my childish-

ness, guessed. I never heard him complain; and I never heard him boast about the great man he had been in his own country. He had all sorts of sayings to cheer himself up with: ‘No man can be an exile if he remembers that all the world is one city,’ and ‘Everything is as good or bad as our opinion makes it.’¹⁵

In the Stoic manner, the Fox is always concerned to make nature a norm and not to fear what she brings.¹⁶ However, the escape door of suicide, if life becomes too unbearable, is left ajar.¹⁷

With respect to love between humans, we find the Stoic sense of the brotherhood of all.¹⁸ We are to have great compassion for others, even enemies, for these are seen as victims of their own ignorance. When Orual is outraged that the King is ready to sacrifice the beautiful good Princess Psyche to the blood-lust of the Shadowbrute, Psyche replies with Stoic calm:

Have you forgotten what we are to say to ourselves every morning? “Today I shall meet cruel men, cowards, liars, the envious and the drunken. They will be like that because they do not know what is good from what is bad. This is an evil which has fallen upon them not upon me. They are to be pitied.. .”¹⁹



Eros love is present but to be ordered rationally. Psyche thinks it right to place loyalty to the God-lover who has saved her even above the claims of Orual. The Fox considers it base of Orual to use the emotional blackmail of threatened suicide to win Psyche away from her divine lover, even should he be illusory.²⁰

Although the reasonableness of the Stoic with regard to passions enrages Orual, Lewis manages to show the nobility of this philosophy, for the Fox is ready to sacrifice even his own freedom to his notion of duty. Being set at liberty to return to his beloved Greece by the newly queened Orual, he chooses to stay in dark Glome to help her govern her people: “What is best for his fellows must be best for a man. I am but a limb of the Whole and must work in the socket where I’m put.”²¹

Yet, after death, the Fox appears to Orual and admits to having been too proud of his all-knowingness; to having shut himself off from deeper mysteries.

To what does philosophical paganism correspond in our culture today? Perhaps to the shrinking yet still visible number of upright humanists; those who without faith yet cling to ethical goodness, even at the expense of great personal sacrifice.

Still, as the apologist so often has to respond, what would a person of such natural virtues not be if graced as well with faith, hope and charity?

THE CHRISTIAN SYNTHESIS

We can best show how Lewis depicts Christianity as a synthesis of the best elements of primitive and philosophical paganism, crowned with an utterly sublime new revelation, by tracing Orual's inner dialogue with her hated gods.

I am old now and have not much to fear from the anger of gods. I have no husband nor child, nor hardly a friend, through whom they can hurt me. My body, this lean carrion that still has to be washed and fed and have clothes hung about it daily with so many changes, they may kill as soon as they please. The succession is provided for. My crown passes to my nephew.

Being, for all these reasons, free from fear, I will write in this book what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning, as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge. But there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me. Terrors and plagues are not an answer. I write in Greek as my old master taught it to me. It may some day happen that a traveller from the Greeklands will again lodge in this palace and read the book. Then he will talk of it among the Greeks, where there is great freedom of speech even about the gods themselves. Perhaps their wise men will know whether my complaint is right or whether the god could have defended himself if he had made an answer.²²

As a result of her study with the Fox, Orual becomes somewhat sceptical of the primitive gods on an

intellectual level, but is still in bondage to them by her powerful fears. That the Divine might be good, as the Fox believes, is a thought that operates as a haunting but hardly plausible possibility.

“Blessed be the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” It is the pure receptive Psyche, not the ugly, jealous, raging Orual, who begins to glimpse the fact that the dark primitive rites of sacrifice might be combined with the philosophical idea of goodness. When she is about to be sacrificed to relieve the plague-stricken Glome, she explains to Orual:

The Priest has been with me. I never knew him before. He is not what the Fox thinks. Do you know, Sister, I have come to feel more and more that the Fox hasn't the whole truth. Oh, he has much of it. It'd be dark as a dungeon within me but for his teaching. And yet ... I can't say it properly.²³

Orual replies:

Of course the Fox is wrong. He knows nothing about her (the goddess Ungit). He thought too well of the world. He thought there were no gods, or else (the fool!) that they were better than men. It never entered his mind - he was too good for that - to believe that the gods are real, and viler than the vilest men.²⁴

In prophetic fashion, Psyche rejoins:

Or else ... they are real gods but don't really do these things. Or even - mightn't it be - they do these things and the things are not what they seem to be? How if I am indeed to wed a god?²⁵

The actual rite for the sacrifice of Psyche is made to resemble that of Christ.²⁶ It is the High Priest who decides she should be sacrificed for the people. She is drugged, brought in a procession to the hill where she is tied to a tree and left in terrible thirst to await the Shadowbrute who is to devour her, as death was to come to devour the Christ.

Later, when Orual comes to bury her bones, she is seen as a resurrected body. She proclaims the new kingdom with many signs. Orual sees some of these but not others and in this way she is forced into the alternative: a leap of faith or desperate denial. Up until the end, Orual clings to what Kierkegaard called despair of defiance. Because the loss of Psyche to the lover-God has poisoned eros for Orual, we find that her only satisfac-

tion becomes agapic works of love for her people. And in the end the gods and the populace honor the Queen for her selfless outpouring of compassionate love.

It is Psyche who images for us the steps of true faith and fulfillment that are to come with the dawn of Christianity in the pagan lands.

It begins with Psyche's yearning from childhood, as did C.S. Lewis himself, for the fullness of a joy hinted at yet not present:

It was when I was happiest that I longed most. It was on happy days when we were up there on the hills, the three of us, with the wind and the sunshine ... where you couldn't see Glome or the palace. Do you remember? The colour and the smell, and looking across at the Grey Mountain in the distance? And because it was so beautiful, it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seemed to be saying, Psyche come! But I couldn't (not yet) come and I didn't know where I was to come to. It almost hurt me. I felt like a bird in a cage when the other birds of its kind are flying home.²⁷

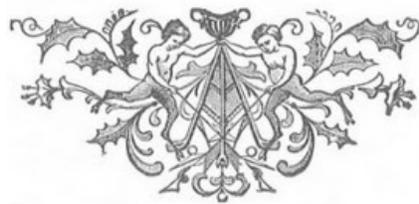
The presentiment of eternity gives Psyche the courage to accept the sacrifice laid upon her, for death might be the entrance to bliss. When the god of the West-Wind comes to rescue Psyche on her tree of pain, her response is awe and then reverent creaturely fear.²⁸ Psyche's experiential knowledge of the Divine gives her a mystical certainty that goes beyond the darkness of faith.²⁹

If Lewis gives us in *Psyche* an archetype of holy faith and joy; Orual shows us the path that must always be that of the contorted sinful soul. Intense writhing questioning of the gods can be answered not by philosophical wisdom but only by the person of God Himself.

The last part of *Till We Have Faces* presents a coda-like recapitulation of themes. The hideous primitive goddess Ungit is shown to be superior to the more graceful Greek feminine deity, for Ungit brings comfort.³⁰ (We might think here of certain aesthetically poor renditions of Our Lady, nevertheless bringing a comfort not to be had from more abstract pieces.)

Greek virtue is seen as an ideal, but one that cannot be attained without grace.³¹ Orual's fierce pride is vanquished. Reduced to nothing, she is finally receptive to the realization that the love of Psyche and of God is sheer gift.

For the contemporary Christian reader of Lewis' retold myth, *Till We Have Faces* presents a most powerful vision of suffering as an inescapable way to enter into the mystery of the God of love. If we are numbered among the good, then we are to suffer as victims of evil, in expiatory love for those who are weaker than ourselves. If we are among the evil, the way to God must be through a painful unveiling, so that we can see our ugliness, beg God for the gift of spiritual beauty, and win salvation in fear and trembling, above all in penitential service to our neighbor.



NOTES

1The edition I will be referring to here will be the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich pocketbook (New York, 1956).

2P. 11.

3P. 134.

4P. 97.

5P. 27ff.

6P. 50.

7P. 7.

8P. 14.

9P. 28.
10P. 8.
11P. 142.
12P. 142.
13See pp. 8,28.
14P. 48.
15P.7
16See pp. 14, 85.
17P. 17.
18See pp. 9,149.
19P. 68.
20 Pp. 177-178.
21P. 210.
22Pp. 3-4.
23P. 70.
24P. 71.
25P. 71.
26See p. 44ff.
27P. 74.
28See p. 111.
29See p. 123.
30P. 272.
31P. 282

