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Braden Daniels

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### **C. S. Lewis: An Inclusive Apologist**

C. S. Lewis is widely recognized for his ability to distill Christianity into its mere essence through his works on theology, apologetics, and Christian living. Lewis was not a specialist in theology and attempted to stay away from controversial topics of theology and exegesis like theories of the atonement and the relevance of the Virgin Mary. However, some of the general issues that Lewis encounters in theology and apologetics require an examination of topics that are more controversial, such as Lewis's views on theistic evolution and the nature of the Old Testament. Eschatology is one of these areas, and Lewis often makes controversial theological statements about heaven, hell, and justification throughout his works. One of Lewis's controversial opinions about justification is his belief that some will come to faith outside of a belief in the explicit Gospel of Jesus Christ. This position is called inclusivism.

Subject to different names or classifications, four general views of the extent of salvation flow out of a Christian framework: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and universalism.<sup>1</sup> Exclusivism is the idea that justification and eternal life can only come by explicit, repentant faith in Jesus Christ alone. Inclusivism is the idea that salvation is possible without explicitly hearing and responding to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This view maintains Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as the basis, allowing for more flexibility in the name and specific attributes ascribed to God. Pluralism is the teaching that says that God's salvation is found in many different religious traditions as all people attempt to understand the ultimate mystery. Lastly, universalism is the teaching that all persons, religious or not, will be saved and accepted by God.

Lewis is not a universalist. Lewis's belief in Hell is present throughout his works, most notably in Chapter 8 of *The Problem of Pain*, *The Great Divorce*, and numerous other works. An example of this is two lines from Lewis's poem "Divine Justice": "God in His mercy made The

fixed pains of Hell.”<sup>2</sup> Lewis’s belief in Hell to which unjustified humans go in it means that he is not, by definition, be a universalist.

Lewis is also not a pluralist. Although he has a profound respect for the mythology and beliefs of other religions, he argues against their beliefs and validity. In fact, Lewis counters pluralism in the very first chapter of *Mere Christianity* (“Rival Conceptions of God”) in which he counters both pantheism and atheism.<sup>3</sup> Lewis’s ideas of Christianity as the “myth that became fact” further remove any possibility of any non-pantheistic religion, like Judaism or Islam, being a teaching of God’s salvation found in another culture.<sup>4</sup> If the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are true myths, then Judaism is an incomplete and legalized form of Christianity while Islam is a corrupted syncretism of early Catholic Christianity, legalized Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and other local Arabian religions. There is no room, in Lewis’s thought, for any religion other than Christianity, whether atheistic, pantheistic, or Judaic, to be a version of God’s salvation found in a different culture. Therefore, Lewis is not, by definition, a pluralist.

With both pluralism and universalism out of the picture, Lewis’s view on the extent of salvation falls comfortably within orthodox Christianity as either exclusivism or inclusivism. Lewis describes justification in a variety of works, but his most foundational description may be found in his theological exposition of the Trinity and salvation in Book IV titled *Beyond Personality* of *Mere Christianity*. Lewis used several metaphors to describe salvation: like changing from a statute into a real man, catching a good infection, or turning from a tin soldier into a little man.<sup>5</sup> Lewis’s favorite analogy for salvation is a change from the biological life (*Bios*) into the spiritual life (*Zoe*).<sup>6</sup> *Bios* is the life that is made by God through Nature and kept up by Nature.<sup>7</sup> It is a self-centered, exploitive, independent, and fearful shadow of *Zoe*.<sup>8</sup> *Zoe*, on the other hand, is an invitation into Jesus Christ’s begotten life sustained by the Trinity through

all eternity.<sup>9</sup> Paul S. Fiddes says Lewis sees this transformation as “being caught up in the divine dance of the Trinity.”<sup>10</sup> *Zoe* begins to mortify the negative qualities of *Bios* and bring the new sons of God into conformity with their new life in Christ.<sup>11</sup> Humans could never accomplish this transformation from the *Bios* into the *Zoe* by themselves, but Christ has already done all the hard work.<sup>12</sup> The world is already saved in principle, and humans just have to appropriate that salvation.<sup>13</sup> Although not distinctively inclusive, this transformation from *Bios* to *Zoe* became Lewis’s foundation for inclusivism. One line from Book III is characteristic of the rest of Lewis’s more nuanced inclusive theology. In referring to the eschaton, Lewis quips, “We shall then for the first time see everyone as he really was. There will be surprises.”<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s most informative apologetic description of his inclusivism comes in his chapter on “Heaven” in *The Problem of Pain*. Again, Lewis refrains from explicitly approving either exclusivism or inclusivism in *The Problem of Pain*, but he posits several ideas that point to it. Much of *The Problem of Pain* is a systematization of Lewis’s ideas from across his *corpus*. One of these ideas is the idea of Joy or *Sehnsucht*, most notably found in his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Every human soul is desiring Heaven; many just do not realize it.<sup>15</sup> This search for the fulfillment of Joy is one of the mechanisms Lewis proposes for the inclusion of those who have not heard the Gospel in Heaven.

However, Lewis’s beliefs that point the most to inclusivism in this chapter of *The Problem of Pain* are three of his beliefs on the purpose of uniqueness. Lewis states that God creates each soul uniquely, through heredity and environment.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, God would not have created uniqueness without a purpose for it.<sup>17</sup> The purpose for creating uniqueness in a human’s soul is for each soul to fit into a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the Divine Substance at the end of time.<sup>18</sup> These beliefs can be brought together with one other premise

from Lewis's *The Last Battle* to demonstrate his inclusivism: if there are aspects of creation that only a culture set in a time in which it has yet to hear the Gospel uniquely possesses, then God must have created at least one soul from that culture to fill a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the Divine Substance. Next, a new premise from *The Last Battle*: There are aspects of creation that only a culture set in a time in which it has yet to hear the Gospel would possess. Therefore, at least one soul from at least one culture who has yet to hear the Gospel will get into Heaven.

Two more of Lewis's ideas are relevant to Lewis's inclusivism—his conceptions of Hell and Heaven. He summarizes his belief about Hell in the following quote from *The Great Divorce*, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis believes that everyone in Hell has consciously chosen to be there, not just on earth but also while in Hell. It does not matter to Lewis if the door out of Hell is locked by God since those in Hell lock the door from the inside.<sup>20</sup> Those in Hell prefer Hell to Heaven, thinking, “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”<sup>21</sup>

The reverse side of Lewis's theology of Hell is Lewis's inclusivism for Heaven. His theology of Heaven is summarized in the second half of the quote from *The Great Divorce* cited above: “No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock, it is opened.”<sup>22</sup> Lewis consistently points to the inclusion of all people who earnestly follow Joy to its otherworldly source Heaven. He sees following Joy as so important to salvation that he has titled his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. He points to Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* as an allegory for people “who devote [their] whole [lives] to seeking heaven”.<sup>23</sup> Emmeth's inclusion in Heaven in *The Last Battle* is a further allegorical

example of a pursuit of Joy leading to salvation and shows that Lewis does not believe that this path is limited to those who have never heard the Gospel.<sup>24</sup>

Lewis's vagueness was only due to his position as an expositor of the foundations of Christianity. Lewis declined to formulate more specific personal beliefs about how inclusivism works or to what extent salvation apart from the explicit Gospel occurs. In a letter, he stated, "I don't think we know all the details; we must just stick to the view that all justice and mercy will be done, but nevertheless it is our duty to do all we can to convert unbelievers."<sup>25</sup>

Despite his objection to expressing his views on controversial theology, Lewis's inclusivism is revealed in a variety of his works, especially when discussing Heaven and Hell. The struggle Lewis faced with the concept of Hell became his avenue to belief in inclusivism. Although he declined to dive into the specifics of inclusivism or the mechanics of how someone who had not received the Gospel would be saved, his writings speak for his position on these matters.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This classification is taken generally from the teachings of Dr. Christopher Gnanakan in his RLGN 350: World Religions class at Liberty University.
- <sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Divine Justice," in *Poems*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 98.
- <sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 35-39.
- <sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), page number.
- <sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 157, 159, 177, 180.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159, 177-181.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159, 178.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-179.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, "On Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, ed. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 101.
- <sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 179.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 92.
- <sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 150-151.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.
- <sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 72-73.
- <sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 105; Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 127.
- <sup>21</sup> Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 69-70.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.
- <sup>23</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Children* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2000), 45.
- <sup>24</sup> Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 81-85.
- <sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 238.

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