

The Meaning of Lewis When He Writes, 'how to emotionalise and mythologise their science'

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(This article is adapted from the full-length study guide and commentary I wrote on the Screwtape Letters book. You can learn more at screwtapestudyguide.com)

From Letter #7, 1st paragraph.

"We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence, we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and sceptics. At least, not yet. I have great hopes that we shall learn in due time how to emotionalise and mythologise their science to such an extent that what is, in effect, belief in us, (though not under that name) will creep in while the human mind remains closed to belief in the Enemy."

(The spelling of emotionalize and mythologize follows the British spelling written by Lewis)

Commentary

This is truly brilliant thinking by Lewis and has only become more relevant in the 80 years since he wrote the letters. When we examine this in the present cultural context of a worldwide pandemic, we often see politicians or others simply appealing to "science" as an absolute authority in trying to advocate their particular agenda. Regardless of one's perspective, the appeal to "science" has been attempted to be used to demean or shame others who are subsequently labeled as "ignorant" or "unscientific." In fact, a preliminary understanding needs to be established.

Science in its purest form can be found in what we call the empirical method. This can be described as that which is experimental, testable, observable, repeatable, and quantifiable. On the other hand, we recognize that "science" by a different definition is the body of knowledge that changes based on new data being revealed through the continued implementation of the empirical method and advancing technology (e.g., larger telescopes or testing procedures). Which of us would take an astronomy class with a 1970s textbook? The science has changed.

Getting back to Lewis, he has written much about this topic in his other writings and I will seek to share some of those writings here. Lewis intuitively recognized that if science could somehow be "emotionalized and mythologized," then the result could be a materialist skeptic who ultimately gave worshipful devotion to their belief in "science." In essence, they would be "worshipping" a false system and it would have the same effect of believing and worshipping demons; this being the idolatrous road to destruction.

The **first** objective of Screwtape is to emotionalize science and this has continued to come to pass in modern times. For example, various forms of "emotionalizing" have become quite evident in the past few years in the debate concerning intelligent design. One aim of intelligent

design is not to teach any specific religious doctrine or dogma, but to simply address the scientific evidence that precludes evolution to have occurred solely through unguided natural processes. However, during various discussions and debates, those from the evolutionary side are passionately, emotionally, and sometimes hysterically adamant that there is no other viable option to their particular theory of origins. They are unyielding in their opposition to any form of communicating the multitude of weaknesses in the theory of evolution in the public arena (schools, universities, public television, etc.). What Lewis describes is the emotionally blind commitment and reverence evolutionists have to their version of “science” and/or their theories masquerading as science; science being defined as empirical (experimental, testable, observable, repeatable, quantifiable). Lewis is certainly not anti-science, but he is alluding to the ways in which their particular devotion or interpretation of science is idolized and emotionally defended.

Lewis saw these first hand in conflicts that raged between evolutionists and anti-evolutionists in his time. For the most part, Lewis did not get involved in the various bantering that went back and forth thinking that it was not a largely important issue to Christianity’s truthfulness or trustworthiness. However, he wrote on September 13, 1951 to a friend and staunch anti-evolutionist named Bernard Acworth, “I have read nearly the whole of [your book *The Tragedy of Evolution* and am glad you sent it. I must confess it has shaken me: not in my belief in evolution, which was of the vaguest and most intermittent kind, but in my belief that the question was wholly unimportant. I wish I were younger. What inclines me now to think that you may be right in regarding it as “*the*” central and radical lie in the whole web of falsehood that now governs our lives is not so much your arguments against it as the fanatical and twisted attitudes of its defenders” (CL3, 138). See *Bibliography at the end of this article for the key to Lewis’ other works highlighted here in bold.*

Interestingly, Lewis saw the defenders of popular evolutionary thinking as fanatics and twisted in their emotionally charged attitudes. Lewis would have various viewpoints through his career on “strict biological evolution” (what today is usually distinguished as “micro-evolution”). Yet he clearly rejected “philosophical evolutionism” or what he also called “popular evolutionism” or “universal evolutionism of modern thought” (see below).

The **second** goal of *Screwtape* is to *mythologize* science enough that “belief” in them (devils, forces, etc.) will creep in while belief in God will be prevented. The non-specialist (average every day use) utilizes the word “myth” differently than those studying the literature of myths, legends, and folklore. It is common today to equate myth with something that is inherently untrue or unhistorical. We must realize that Lewis does not use the word in this way. In order to grasp this, we must remember that Lewis’ strength is as a literary master and the breadth and depth of his understanding of literature is staggering. He illuminates what he means by “myth” in an article entitled, “On Myth” in *An Experiment in Criticism* (pp. 40-49). For Lewis, a myth is a grand story that impacts the reader in a powerful, unforgettable way. It has the characteristics of: 1) Having a greater value that is independent of its embodiment in any literary work; 2) The pleasure it evokes is not connected to its narrative quality; 3) Does not

depend on overt sentimentalism; 4) Contains qualities of the “fantastic”; 5) The experience may be sad or joyful, but it is always grave; 6) Awe-inspiring and numinous (**EIC**, 41-44).

It bears repeating that for Lewis, myths are not inherently false. In fact, Lewis has received unnecessary criticism for calling Christianity a myth. Yet in his definition above he can write in an article entitled “Myth became Fact,” that “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact” (**GID**, 66). I share all of this to help the reader understand the way in which Lewis was speaking of the ramifications of “mythologizing” science. Lewis is using it in its literary sense to refer to the creation of a narrative in order to provide an understanding for the origin of the world and its current form which in turn can have “sacred” undertones and “religious” connotations. He is not remarking that scientists, as an example, have become religious in the traditional sense, but instead they indeed have developed a narrative or belief of how the world came to be in its present form under the rubric of “science.”

Even though Lewis rejected the veracity of popular universal evolutionism (i.e., macro-evolution of amoeba to man), he could appreciate its grandeur as a myth (story) of human origins. He writes in his essay, “Is Theology Poetry?” concerning the scientific community’s narrative (myth) of origins as found in their theory of evolution, “Supposing it to be a myth, is it not one of the finest myths, which human imagination has yet produced?” (**WOG**, 123). Lewis continues in the same essay, “There is a beauty in this myth which well deserves better poetic handling than it has yet received... 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” (**WOG**, 126). Even though he appreciated the “mythical qualities” of the popular evolutionary narrative of origins, he was quick to distance himself from the view that it was inherently scientific while belief in Christianity was scientifically ignorant.

Lewis was an astute thinker and was an intellectual atheist at one time. Yet Lewis identifies that it was reason and logic that persuaded him to abandon atheism. He writes, “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 [evolutionism] 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... 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” (**WOG**, 135, 138).

Concerning the emotionalizing and mythologizing science, we can ask in our modern situation, “Is our society there yet?” It is very clear that what Lewis saw in the early 20th century in the

reverence given towards science, is now full blown. As we assess our present 21st century milieu, Lewis was even more prophetic in his concept of science coming to be “mythologized” than he probably realized at the time. Lewis was a man who honored the self-evident value of reason and logic. He wrote in his essay, “The Funeral of a Great Myth” that the mythical narrative or story of “evolution” preceded the endeavors by Darwin and others (1859) to provide a scientific foundation for it (CR, 82-85). It is important to understand exactly what Lewis was saying. He was very determined to distinguish between what could be demonstrated empirically concerning biological evolution and the broader dramatic story (“Myth”) of philosophical “evolution” that asserted the origin and development of all things that exist.

Lewis did not reject the fact that biologists have verified and labeled small changes *within* species as “evolution” (e.g., Darwin and the minute changes in his observations concerning the beaks of finches from the Galapagos islands). Even knowledgeable Christian scientists who reject macro-evolution do not argue against labeling these adaptations within species as a type of evolution (“micro-evolution”). It is now commonly recognized as the “adaptation ability” within species which stems from the tremendous bio-diversity and versatility which we observe as God’s intelligence in designing DNA. The empirical evidence for this adaptation is overwhelming and provides no threat to the Christian views of origins or the Biblical record according to Lewis. These small changes are generally labeled as “micro-evolution” which does not reflect one species changing into a completely different species. What Lewis did reject was the grand statements of philosophical or even biological evolutionists promoting the idea of “macro-evolution.”

This view asserts that over billions of years, life *somehow* arose from non-life with single celled organisms eventually evolving in a grand scale into all life including mankind. This is what he describes as the “Great Myth.” He writes, “Again, for the scientist Evolution is a purely biological theorem. It takes over organic life on this planet as a going concern and tries to explain certain changes within that field [micro-evolution]. It makes no cosmic statement, no metaphysical statements, no eschatological statements. Granted that we now have minds we can trust, granted that organic life came to exist, it tries to explain, say, how a species that once had wings came to lose them. It explains this by the negative effect on environment operating on small variations. It does not itself explain the origin of organic life, nor of the variations, nor does it discuss the origin and validity of reason. It may tell you how the brain, through which reason now operates arose, but that is a different matter. Still less does it even attempt to tell you how the universe as a whole arose, or what it is or whither it is tending. But the Myth [macro-evolution] knows none of these reticences. Having first turned what was a theory of change into a theory of improvement, it then makes this a cosmic theory. Not merely terrestrial organisms but everything is moving ‘upwards and onwards.’ Reason has ‘evolved’ out of instinct, virtue out of complexes, poetry out of erotic howls and grunts, civilization out of savagery, the organic out of inorganic, the solar system out of some sidereal soup or traffic block. And conversely, reason, virtue, art and civilization as we know them are only the crude or embryonic beginnings of far better things...for in the Myth ‘Evolution’ (as the Myth understands it) is the formula for *all* existence” (CR, 86, italics his). When we ask if we are there yet, I do not

think it would be possible to say it better than Lewis did in this prophetic 1945 essay. It is quite evident that the “mythical” aspects pondered by Lewis have indeed taken over.

Those professing to be scientists today, undeniably have come to propose theories which explain the origin of life and or variations as well as full blown cosmologies [e.g., “Big Bang”]. Somewhat ironic, though, is that Lewis believed that this Myth of evolutionary thinking would eventually die off because it was so far removed from astute rational thinking and empirical evidence. That is why he titled his essay “The Funeral of a Great Myth” and explains, “I have been speaking hitherto of this Myth as of a thing to be buried because I believe that its dominance is already over...We must therefore expect that it will survive in the popular press (including the ostensibly *comic* press) long after it has been expelled from educated circles” (CR, 89... 93, italics his).

In fact, to the contrary, recent polls by Gallup showed that those *most* educated are the ones who believe stronger that evolution is a viable scientific explanation for all that we observe in nature (<<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114544/Darwin-Birthday-Believe-Evolution.aspx>>, accessed 10/12/20). This idea that the most educated still strongly believe in unguided evolution was reaffirmed in another study done in 2017 (<<https://news.gallup.com/poll/210956/belief-creationist-view-humans-new-low.aspx>>, accessed 10/12/20).

In summary, scientists have devoted themselves to invariably worshipping science in a way that is reminiscent of Christians passionately worshipping the true God. What Lewis wrote in 1941 in letter #7 has come true in that their “science” has become emotionalized and mythologized in such a way that they have come to venerate it while their minds have remained closed to God. The real Screwtapes of our world have finally produced their perfect work, the “Materialist Magician.”

Psalms 11:3 says, “If the foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do?” This applies to what we are observing in our “scientific” culture because Satan has most definitely sought to destroy the foundation of trust in the authority of the Scripture through the dissemination of evolutionary thinking. The more wide-spread belief in evolution occurs, the more people will begin to doubt that the Bible is trustworthy, especially as it relates to Genesis 1 and the creation account. If Genesis 1-2 is wrong, then why would someone trust the rest of the Bible? We need to be aware of this tactic of Satan as being very dangerous. Screwtape encourages people to consider whatever claims “scientists” make as being absolute fact. The Christian needs to examine the data, but first through the lens of the absolute authority of the Bible.

Romans 12:2 *Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God— what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.*

For

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