“AT THE MERCY OF THE METAPHOR”:
C. S. LEWIS AND THE NATURE OF
THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Whether or not there is a God has been a perennial question for philosophy. What may be said about God is a central concern of theology. That anything meaningful can be said about God has been challenged in the course of Western philosophical thought from different sides. Plato has his character, Timaeus, in his book of the same name assert that “to find the maker and father of this universe is hard enough, and . . . to declare him to everyone is impossible” (28c). In a famous passage from his Philosophical Investigations (§610), Ludwig Wittgenstein muses about the impossibility of describing the aroma of coffee. But if this already exceeds human capabilities, how much more the task of speaking about something or someone as unfathomable as God? As an outstanding and influential representative of Christianity in the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) had something to say about this problem. In this paper, I will explore his particular approach to the issue at hand. In five sections, I shall first briefly examine Lewis’s existential context and how it sets the stage for his giving primacy of the poetical over the analytical or abstract. Second, I will look at the central place metaphor takes in his overall understanding of language. In a third and fourth step, I shall look at his dealings with a central point of criticism as raised by the father of modern atheism, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Finally, I will look at Lewis’s use of certain Christian tenets and how their appropriation rationally grounded his assuming a basic reliability of Christian God-talk.

Keywords: Lewis; Feuerbach; God-talk; language; reason; metaphor; analogy; predication; truth; meaning; myth; epistemology; metaphysics.

Lewis was not a professional philosopher, though he received some philosophical training at Oxford. Nor was he a professional theologian, though many of his writings touch on themes of theological interest. Yet it is precisely this circumstance of laymanship in both areas that seemed to have enabled him, sharp thinker that he was, to shed different and innovative light on age-old theological issues and philosophical debates. Philosopher of Science, Thomas Kuhn, pointed out that new discoveries in science are often made by newcomers or by people working in other fields since those standing outside have the cognitive distance from the dominant paradigms inside, a distance that helps to see things differently. Lewis was clearly aware of his cognitive distance with regard to both philosophy and theology. As to the latter, Lewis echoes the insight of Kuhn in his essay “Fern-Seed and Elephants”, in which he finds modern liberal theology, especially of the Bultmannian kind, in its “undermining of the old orthodoxy” substantially wanting. The way this certain kind of theology strikes him as an outsider “is easy to overlook inside one’s own circle. The minds you daily meet have been conditioned by the same studies and prevalent opinions as your own. That may mislead you. . . . I am a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them” (Christian Reflections [hereafter CR] 193-4). As to his cognitive distance to pure philosophy, a letter written by young Jack to his father on 14 Aug 1925 (Collected Letters I) reveals the inner motives for his change of academic focus from philosophy to English:

I have not the brain and nerves for a life of pure philosophy. A continued search among the abstract roots of things, a perpetual questioning of all that plain men take for granted, a chewing the cud for fifty years over inevitable ignorance and a constant frontier watch on the little tidy lighted conventional world of science and daily life–is this the best life for temperaments such as ours? Is it the way of health or even of sanity? . . . I am not condemning philosophy. Indeed in turning from it to literary history and criticism, I am conscious of a descent: and if the air on the heights did not suit me, still I have brought back something of value.

This insight is of interest in at least a twofold respect. Not only does it reveal a natural disposition on his part that simply did not let him find his professional home in philosophy, thus revealing a healthy level of self-reflection at a young age. More importantly for our purposes, however, is the fact that this letter provides in part the existential context for his later approach to our issue at hand, namely, his understanding of the nature and function of God-talk, i.e. theological language. In discussing this issue (as well as others of theological nature), Lewis
was primarily interested not in abstract analysis of particular doctrines (though, of course, he also had the ability to engage in analytical discussion, as testified to by works such as *Miracles*), but rather in imaginatively communicating the central truths of his Christian worldview. In a letter to the Milton Society of America in 1954, he makes a statement that is illuminating in this respect: ¹

The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. . . . It was he who, after my conversion led me to embody my religious belief in symbolical or mythopoeic forms, ranging from *Screwtape* to a kind of theologised science-fiction. And it was, of course, he who has brought me, in the last few years to write the series of Narnian stories for children; not asking what children want and then endeavouring to adapt myself (this was not needed) but because the fairy-tale was the genre best fitted for what I wanted to say.

The memories of Lewis’s lifelong friend, Owen Barfield, concur with this self-portrait. Barfield writes of their first meeting as twenty-one-year-olds in November 1919 that his close friend-to-be had “a ruling ambition to become a great poet. At that time, if you thought of Lewis, you automatically thought of poetry” (Barfield 4). It is Lewis “the imaginative man” who not only continues to have such an appeal with a wide readership, but who was also himself attracted first and foremost to the greater mythopoeic vision of reality, the grander story which Christianity as a “true myth” offered. In the words of Lewis scholar Alister McGrath it is a decisive insight that what originally drew Lewis towards Christianity “was not a set of doctrines or moral principles, but a controlling grand narrative—a myth, in the true sense of the term—which generated and sustained such ideas and values” (McGrath 62). Here we must bear in mind that Lewis had a special understanding of the term “myth” which significantly differs from modern definitions generally encountered.² For our present purpose it suffices to draw attention to the existential embedding of Lewis’s prioritizing of the image over the abstract, and to see how this works itself out with regard to his understanding of theological language.

Barfield differentiates between two kinds of Lewis. On the one hand, there was Lewis “the bonny fighter”, “combatively logical Lewis”. On the other hand, there was “mythopoeic Lewis”, “gently imaginative Lewis” (Barfield 87, 96; in another paper he classifies five different Lewises, but they need not concern

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¹ No date given; in *Collected Letters III* it is listed between letters to Chad Walsh and Vera Gebbert, 25 Oct and 26 Oct 1954, respectively; in *Letters of C. S. Lewis. Revised and Enlarged Edition*, it is to be found on pages 443-4.

us here). Although I am not so sure about the precise lines of demarcation Barfield draws in his 1977 essay, “Lewis, Truth, and Imagination”, he is—particularly in the light of Lewis’s self-portrait just outlined—nonetheless right in making such a distinction between logical and imaginative Lewis, that is, between his focus on truth and on meaning. At the end of his seminal essay, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare” (Selected Literary Essays 251-65), Lewis himself differentiates between reason, which is the natural organ of truth, and imagination, which is the natural organ of meaning. As against constructivist and antirealist views, imagination “is not the cause of truth, but its condition.” When Lewis prefers imagination over intellect, he is not devaluing reason since, as he puts it in the final paragraph of “Bluspels”, the former “indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness”. Rather, as “imaginative man” and “romantic theologian” (cf. Barfield 48-9), Lewis is intuitively and existentially drawn to the imagination as the best means to embody and communicate the meaningfulness of the Christian worldview to which Lewis himself was inevitably drawn. As will be shown shortly, myth—as Lewis understands it—builds on and transcends facticity and thought, it does not go against it (cf. “Myth Became Fact” in Essay Collection [hereafter EC] 141).

Lewis’s favouring the poetic over the abstract shines through in many of his writings. I will confine myself to a few examples. The obvious place to start is his essay “The Language of Religion”, where he distinguishes between religious language as either concrete/poetical or abstract/theological. The latter “is not the language religion naturally speaks. We are applying precise, and therefore abstract, terms to what for us is the supreme example of the concrete” (CR 173). According to Lewis, the theological is “in a sense, alien to religion, crippling, omitting nearly all that really matters, yet, in spite of everything, sometimes successful” (CR 174). We shall return shortly to the advantages of the poetical over the theological, which, in a sense, are already implied in his criticism just given. The same emphasis comes to the fore at the end of his essay “Bluspels”. There he contrasts different vocations and professions as to their substance and effectiveness with regard to being true bearers of meaning as against mere vessels of inessential verbiage. Lewis’s verdict on some philosophers like Kant and Spinoza is—to put it mildly—unfavourable: “Those who have prided themselves on being literal, and who have endeavoured to speak plainly, with no mystical tomfoolery, about the highest abstractions, will be found to be among the least significant of writers . . . But open your Plato, and you will find yourself among the great creators of metaphor, and therefore among the masters of meaning”. The same holds true for theology where he commends Dante and Bunyan over thinkers of “the scale of Bishop Butler, and of better men than he” who “fly up and kick the beam”. Unsurprisingly, for Lewis it is the poets who “will take the highest place”. It is poetry that masters the conveyance of meaning, and it is those
philosophers and theologians who are concrete and poetical in their thinking that excel in this most existential of all tasks.

Turning to the poetry of Lewis himself, the same hierarchical ordering can be found in the fifth of his “Five Sonnets” in Poems. There he employs for his argument from desire the memorable image of “the bee that booms against the window-pane for hours”. All the bee wants is to reach the laden flowers, an impossible undertaking due to the invisible glassy border. The doctor or rather the abstract theologian would prefer to speak to her to explain why it is not possible to reach her desired object. But:

Might she not answer, buzzing at the pane,
“Let queens and mystics and religious bees
Talk of such inconceivables as glass;
The blunt lay worker flies at what she sees,
Look there—ahead, ahead—the flowers, the grass!”

The bee is not interested in abstract explanations or theories. In fact, they hinder her in reaching what she wants most. All she desires is to be unified with the object of her deepest longing: the flowers, or rather God. This longing for the concrete and transcendent is—according to Lewis—best expressed in the symbolic, the poetical, the mythical: “The footprints of the Divine are more visible in that rich soil than across [abstract] rocks or slag-heaps” (Letters to Malcolm 50). Myth and poetry go beyond abstract thinking in claiming one’s whole existence. Their potential and advantage as to the quenching of man’s experiential and existential thirst are further expressed in The Great Divorce. In one scene, the spirit, Dick, tries to convince a modern theologian and bishop of permanently joining him in the presence of God. The bishop’s alleged quest for truth shall finally be fulfilled as the spirit announces: “Hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom. Your thirst shall be quenched” (41). Alas, the bishop declines and returns to the grey town as he is scheduled to read a paper at a Theological Society next Friday. Finally, the clearest formulation of Lewis’s hierarchical modus operandi with regard to abstract truth and concrete meaning might be found in his essay “Myth Became Fact” in EC 141:

3 This holistic advantage has also been highlighted by Roger Scruton in Modern Culture: “The myth sets before us in allegorical form a truth about our condition . . . Through the myth we understand both the thing to which we aspire, and the forces which prevent us from attaining it. And we understand these things not theoretically, but by living through them in imagination and sympathy . . . The myth, through its reenactment, shapes our emotions, encouraging us to live for the higher state to which the god promises to raise us” (72-3).
When we translate [myth] we get abstraction—or rather, dozens of abstractions. What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level. Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley . . . Or, if you prefer, myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.

Lewis’s explicit statement is self-explanatory. I only draw the reader’s attention in this respect to another distinction Lewis makes in his essay “Meditation in a Tool Shed” (in God in the Dock). There he differentiates between enjoyment, that is, *looking along* a sunbeam, and contemplation, that is, *looking at* a sunbeam. The latter is expressed via abstract analysis, aiming at truth. The former is realized via concrete involvement, conveying meaning. Lewis owes this important distinction to Samuel Alexander, a philosopher whose work he encountered for the first time as a young student in 1924. His famous statement at the end of his sermon “The Weight of Glory”—“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else” (in The Weight of Glory 140 [hereafter WG])—must be understood within this bipolar context of truthful knowledge, of *looking at* the sun, and meaningful enjoyment, of *looking along* the sunbeams. These distinctions between enjoyment and contemplation, between concrete myth and abstract truth, played a crucial part in his conversion to the Christian Faith as he finally came to understand that Christianity offers the best of both.

2. **“AT THE MERCY OF THE METAPHOR”: THE PICTORIAL MODE OF HUMAN THINKING**

In a letter to his friend, Arthur Greeves, on 18 October 1931 (Collected Letters I), shortly after his conversion, Lewis states the following:

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing

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4 Cf. Surprised by Joy 169-72; the entry in his diary, *All My Road Before Me*, under March 8, 1924; and Ward, *Planet Narnia* 16-7.
Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call “real things”.

Lewis continues this letter in a way that is important for our analysis of his understanding of theological language. He writes:

Therefore it is true, not in the sense of being a ‘description’ of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The ‘doctrines’ we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into our concepts and ideas of that wh. God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

This passage contains several statements indicative of how God reveals himself to the human mind according to Lewis. For one, we find here the so-called principle of accommodation, what Lewis in a later essay will call “transposition”, that is, the “adaptation from a richer to a poorer medium” (“Transposition” in WG 99). God, per definitionem, is too great for the limited capacities of the human mind: “What God is in Himself, how He is to be conceived by philosophers, retreats continually from our knowledge” (“Dogma and the Universe” in EC 125). God, if he exists, must thus condescend his ways of revelation to such levels that can be grasped by the creaturely other. This philosophical recognition has obvious effects on any linguistic conception of the divine. Its effects are aptly formulated by a thinker whose philosophy significantly helped Lewis in his turn towards Christianity, namely, George Berkeley:

God is a being of transcendent and unlimited perfections: his nature therefore is incomprehensible to finite spirits. It is not therefore to be expected, that any man, whether materialist or immaterialist, should have exactly just notions of the Deity, his attributes, and ways of operation (Berkeley 199).

In addition to humanity’s obvious metaphysical inability to grasp the divine being in full, Lewis shares at least one other important epistemological concern with Berkeley. Like his fellow-countryman (Berkeley 131-2), he thinks that it is impossible for the human mind to form purely abstract ideas. This is also the reason why Lewis finds the Ontological Argument in the last analysis not successful since he does not “think we can initially argue from the concept of Perfect Being to its existence” [emphasis his] (CR 180). Lewis is adamant in his view that we are always thinking in mental pictures or images, that all language has a figurative origin, that we always start from something positive or given. This is one of several important insights he owes to his friend, Owen Barfield, and one that he especially unfolds in “Bluspels and Flalansferes”. In his allegory and first
work after his embracing Christianity, *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933), he suggests towards the end that John’s inability to think outside mental pictures and the recourse to pictorial myth is an intentional act of divine creation in order to safeguard man’s corporeal *imago Dei* existence. It “is the veil under which I [God] have chosen to appear even from the first until now. For this end I made your senses and for this end your imagination, that you might see My face and live” (217). In the same vein he reports in his last book, *Letters to Malcolm*, that “our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies: a continual modelling of spiritual reality in legal or chemical or mechanical terms” (50). Metaphorical language is thus not only necessary when we talk about God, but we also depend on it in describing any entities other than physical: “all speech about supersensibles is, and must be, metaphorical in the highest degree”.5

Especially in fields where we ourselves are unversed and ignorant newcomers—for his own context Lewis uses the field of mathematics, in which he was rather helpless (cf. Jacobs 66)—new doctrines may appear to us at first as completely meaningless. In “Bluspels and Flalansferes” he asks us to imagine Flatlanders who are only aware of two dimensions, and who therefore are not able to picture an edge since they are ignorant of any below and above dimension. Just as these Flatlanders appear to us, so we might appear to someone living in four dimensions to which we ourselves do not have any access. We are ignorant of what it means to intuit four dimensional space. But the Flatlander-metaphor helps us faintly to grasp something “which before was sheerly meaningless”. By contrast, in all fields where we do have expertise knowledge, the relation between thought and metaphor is the other way round in that it is now us “who understand and then invent the metaphors to help others”. In any case, expert and layperson are “entirely at the mercy of the metaphor”.

This dependency on metaphor applies to human thinking in general. It consequently also applies both to the natural sciences, as most theoretical claims in scientific theories such as magnetic fields or the interior of a black hole are empirically unobservable, and to theological science with regard to God and the spiritual realm. In both cases “supersensibles” are being made meaningful by metaphorical language. For Lewis, theological language shares with scientific language the attribute of being poetical insofar as both speak about a reality which is outside our experience: “This is the most remarkable of the powers of Poetic language: to convey to us the quality of experiences which we have not had, or perhaps can never have, to use factors within our experience so that they become

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pointers to something outside our experience—as two or more roads on a map show us where a town that is off the map must lie”. The proper distinction is therefore not between scientific, that is, experimentally verified, and other kinds of thought, but between logical and non-logical thought (CR 79). As he puts it in “Bluspels and Flalansferes”, even the mathematician seldom forgets that his symbols are symbolic. And with regard to religious language and imagery, Lewis is clear that both contain “nothing that has not been borrowed from Nature” (“Transposition” in WG 95). This is an important recognition that he expresses in other places such as Miracles (257-60), where he underlines the importance of imaginative language to describe heaven, and Mere Christianity, where he refers to metaphorical language as a symbolical attempt to describe the indescribable, to express the inexpressible (137). In the words of Janet Martin Soskice, metaphor is key because it can “support the Christian in his seemingly paradoxical conviction that, despite his utter inability to comprehend God, he is justified in speaking of God and that metaphor is the principal means by which he does so” (Soskice x).

Lewis therefore energetically defends the use of anthropomorphic images in theology, especially in Miracles (cf. chapters 10 and 11) and Letters to Malcolm (cf. the beginning of chapter 10, where he presents two rules for the use of imagery). In the latter he exhorts his readers that it is impossible to get behind analogy “to a purely literal truth. All we can really substitute for the analogical expression is some theological abstraction. And the abstraction’s value is almost entirely negative” (49). We must add that theological abstraction in itself depends on metaphors (cf. his essay “Bluspels and Flalansferes”, where he states at the end that “all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor”). Thus, if some people ask whether it would not be better to drop all anthropomorphic pictures of God, Lewis retorts that “this is impossible. The people who recommend it have not noticed that when they try to get rid of man-like . . . images they merely succeed in substituting images of some other kind” (Miracles 117; cf. Letters to Malcolm 92-3). In “Is Theology Poetry?” Lewis sums up his Berkeleyan conviction in the following words: “We are invited to restate our belief in a form free from metaphor and symbol. The reason why we don’t is that we can’t. . . . We can make our language duller; we cannot make it less metaphorical. We can make the pictures more prosaic; we cannot be less pictorial” (WG 133). This dependency of man on nature to describe supernature also resurfaces in his theological fiction, for example, in Perelandra, where he has Malacandra give the following advice to Ransom: “You will think of this best if you think of it in the likeness of certain

6 “The Language of Religion” in CR 170; cf. ibid. 174-5. That poetry is a mode of knowledge is one of several central insights Lewis owes to his friend Barfield; cf. Barfield 69-70; and “The Language of Religion” in CR 171.
things from your own world” (168). Such reliance of thought on matter, and of the supernatural on the natural, is open to criticism. Lewis is aware of this and accordingly engages with the most famous critic in this regard, Ludwig Feuerbach.

3. CONTRA FEUERBACH (I): LEWIS AND THE THOMISTIC METHOD OF ANALOGICAL PREDICATION

The fact that in what claims to be our spiritual life all the elements of our natural life seem to recur as symbols might at first be regarded as a problem (“Transposition” in WG 104). But this is only so if we understand the predications of God derived from nature in a purely univocal sense. If this is the case then, indeed, we are helplessly caught up in crude anthropomorphisms which may rightly fall under Feuerbach’s materialistic verdict of projection and wish fulfillment. Yet, Christian theology has been aware of this danger since its beginnings (cf. “Must Our Image of God Go?” in EC 66; and “Horrid Red Things” in EC 128). Moreover, Lewis, although he considers himself to be a “poor Thomist” (“Christianity and Culture” in EC 75), stands himself in the Thomistic tradition of analogical predication. Like Christian Orthodoxy in general, and Thomas Aquinas in particular, Lewis thinks that God is the uncaused cause of everything there is, nature included, evil excluded. It follows that there are some real affinities between God as the necessary cause and nature as the contingent effect of God’s creative work. Because of these affinities we are not limited to the via negativa, but are enabled to make positive claims about God’s being (for a critical engagement of Lewis with the via negativa cf. Miracles 139-40, 143-4; cf. also “Transposition” in WG 108-9). Hence, in Aquinas’s view, the divine attributes signify the divine substance and are predicated of God substantially, but they fall short in their representation of him . . . Therefore, when one says “God is good”, the sense is not “God is the cause of goodness” or “God is not evil”. But this is the sense: “what we call goodness in creatures pre-exists in God and in a higher mode”. And so it does not follow from this that being good belongs to God insofar as he causes goodness. Rather the converse is the case: because he is good, he

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7 Cf. Feuerbach’s main work, Das Wesen des Christentums [The Essence of Christianity].
8 As privatio boni, i.e. a lack of perfection, evil does not have any positive substance in itself, and God, being perfect, is therefore unable to create evil which always only arises out of a relation to a prior good. For Lewis’s affirmation of the metaphysical definition of evil as privatio boni cf. Mere Christianity 43-5.
This is precisely Lewis’s position. His clear exposition in *Mere Christianity* is as good as any: “Everything God has made has some likeness to Himself” (158). Not only that, but like Aquinas he assumes a hierarchy of analogy amongst the different entities of creation. Space, matter, vegetable world, insects, and higher mammals are all shadows or symbols of the life that is in God. In man as the highest of the animals, finally, “we get the completest resemblance to God which we know of” (158), a conviction repeated elsewhere (cf., for example, *A Grief Observed* 73). In line with the Thomistic *via eminentiae*, creation is just a mere shadow, and God alone is the real thing (*Miracles* 146; “Transposition” in *WG* 111). But even a shadow has revelatory potential. Lewis’s clearest exposition of this point might be found in his essay “Transposition” (in *WG* 115):

> I said before that in your drawing you had only plain white paper for sun and cloud, snow, water, and human flesh. In one sense, how miserably inadequate! Yet in another, how perfect. If the shadows are properly done, that patch of white paper will, in some curious way, be very like blazing sunshine; we shall almost feel cold while we look at the paper snow and almost warm our hands at the paper fire. May we not, by a reasonable analogy, suppose likewise that there is no experience of the spirit so transcendent and supernatural, no vision of Deity Himself so close and so far beyond all images and emotions, that to it also there cannot be an appropriate correspondence on the sensory level?

Lewis leaves no doubt in this regard. Yes, we do get a faint but nonetheless positive idea of the divine being by contemplating creation. And we do get an even better albeit still faint idea by contemplating man’s soul, made in the imago Dei. This approach is not only prefigured in Aquinas, but also to be found in the likes of empiricists Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, 23, §34-5) and Berkeley (174).

But does not this focus on man make God-Talk vulnerable to the very challenges raised by Feuerbach, according to whom theology is nothing but anthropology? Is theology nothing more than a projection of human attributes onto some superhuman level; an undertaking which says more about man’s psychological needs than a hypothetical metaphysical reality? Lewis effectively engages with the Feuerbachian challenge at different places, both in his fiction and non-fiction. Here we must bear in mind that Feuerbach’s criticisms were provoked by and directed against a very specific exponent of theology, namely, the father of modern theology who lived a generation before him,
Friedrich Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher, “[a]ll attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him” (*The Christian Faith* 194, §50). In Schleiermacher’s system, God-talk decisively turns away from its object, God, to its subject, man. Without being able to unfold this here in detail, it must suffice to state that Feuerbach’s attacks indeed prove to be successful against any kind of antirealist theology as represented by Schleiermacher. If theology gives up its claims upon reality, concentrating instead on the subjective inner self of the believing individual, its withdrawal into some form of private religion is inevitable. External reality and—along with it—responsible public discourse have then been ceded to worldviews with stronger links to transsubjective argumentation, a (post)modern dilemma criticized and sought to overcome by theological thinkers such as Wolfhart Pannenberg or movements like Radical Orthodoxy.

In contrast, the meaningfulness of God-talk increases proportionally with the probability of God’s existence, that is, with a high probability of there being a supernatural other who is the epistemically accessible ground of reality. To implement a thought of Heidegger’s, something gains presence and credence by giving independent reasons for its existence (cf. Haeffner, “Heidegger”, in Weger 150). The better we succeed in establishing divine reality as something other and independent of our own cognitive faculties, the better we succeed in establishing the meaningfulness of religious language. Thus, it seems that the success of Feuerbach’s critique depends upon the theological system against which it is directed. Against many strands of modern theology which depend on metaphysical antirealism, Feuerbach appears to have a point. Against forms of theological realism or Berkeleyan Idealism, however, his criticisms misfire. That is why the approaches of Locke, Berkeley, or Lewis are not affected by this specific charge, whereas Schleiermacher’s well is. For the former three operate within an intellectual context that depends on and is relative to something far greater, i.e. an external, divine reality, whereas the latter takes as his starting point the believing subject which in the process is made absolute. We could therefore say that Feuerbach succeeds in dismantling a modern straw man, rather than striking the real thing. Having thus noted the different metaphysical points of origin from which modern theology—broadly conceived as represented by Schleiermacher—and classical orthodoxy, again broadly conceived, depart, we shall now turn to a necessarily brief and selective evaluation of Lewis’s more specific defense of theological language and the reality to which it claims to refer.

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9 For Schleiermacher being the primary addressee of Feuerbach’s criticism cf. the two works of Bockmühl, *Herausforderungen des Marxismus* 42-3; and *Leiblichkeit und Gesellschaft* 104-5.
4. CONTRA FEUERBACH (II): LEWIS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF UNIVOCAL PREDICATION

Towards the end of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, John, the main character in search of the longed for island, is troubled by Wisdom’s (alias philosophical idealism’s) words “that all his adventures were but figurative”, that his discovery is merely mythology. John thereupon senses the voice of the Landlord (God) in a mystic way, declaring (217):

> Child, if you will, it *is* mythology. It is but truth, not fact: an image, not the very real. But then it is *My* mythology. The words of Wisdom are also myth and metaphor: but since they do not know themselves for what they are, in them the hidden myth is master, where it should be servant: and it is but of man’s inventing. But this is My inventing, this is the veil under which I have chosen to appear even from the first until now. For this end I made your senses and for this end your imagination, that you might see My face and live.

The critical difference between man’s myth and God’s myth is that the latter is *not just* figurative, but significantly *more than* that. The catch phrases “nothing but” or “merely” are signals for reductionist worldviews like metaphysical naturalism or anthropological materialism as represented by Feuerbach (cf. Fries, “Feuerbach”, in Weger 92). According to Lewis, the reductionist’s error lies in approaching the transposition from the lower medium only: “The strength of such a critic lies in the words ‘merely’ or ‘nothing’” (“Transposition” in *WG* 113). Like a sentient but nonrational animal, e.g., a dog, the reductionist “sees all the facts but not the meaning” (113-4). By necessity of his or her materialist worldview, everything must be reduced to the lower medium. And as long as there is no willingness to entertain and understand the possibility and potential of any higher meaning in the lower medium, the reductionist will continue to find ample “evidence” that God’s myth is “nothing more than” man’s myth (114-5) due to his or her exclusive focus on the immanent. Wisdom’s/Man’s mythology and the Landlord’s/God’s mythology are both based on myth and metaphor. But in the former, myth turns into a circular end in itself, i.e. into an ideology, whereas in the latter, myth becomes a linear means to an end, i.e. to reality.

In contrast to Feuerbachian reductionism and the “nothing-but-formula”, Lewis the Thomist posits a “more-than-thesis”. Both stances, the materialistic “nothing-but” and the theistic “more-than”, are reflected in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Feuerbach’s theory of projection is forcefully but unsuccessfully employed by the witch against Puddleglum, Eustace, and Jill in *The Silver Chair* (141-5). Lewis’s theory of transposition, on the other hand, comes to the fore in *The Horse and His Boy*. In one telling scene (156-8), Aravis confronts Bree with
his continued swearing “By the Lion” and “By the Lion’s Mane”, asking him what he means by the word “lion”. In reply, Bree, “in a rather shocked voice”, vehemently denies that Aslan is a real lion. Instead, Bree assures in condescending tone, “when they speak of him as a Lion they only mean he’s as strong as a lion or... as fierce as a lion ... Even a little girl like you, Aravis, must see that it would be quite absurd to suppose he is a real lion”. Thereupon Bree is disabused from his purely analogical misconception of Aslan by the latter’s appearance. In truth, Aslan turns out to be brighter, bigger, more beautiful and more alarming “than any lion they had ever seen”. In short, he is decisively more than what Bree has hitherto mentally made of him. Bree’s mental images are not worthless, but instead are taken up in reality of which his imagining was only a shadow.

In Mere Christianity, in the context of discussing divine personhood (160-5), he illustrates this by means of a cube: “[Y]ou do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways—in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels”. Bree thus comes to understand that there is indeed some degree of univocity in his use of the word “lion”, just as believers can assume a degree of univocity when they speak of a personal God. This is a crucial point Lewis likewise makes in his essay “The Language of Religion”. For all his emphasis on the need of analogies and metaphors, Lewis recognizes that “there is some death in it” (in CR 175). In at least a minimal sense we must be able to speak univocally about God unless we run the risk—in the words of eminent philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne—that theology “will convey virtually nothing by what it says” (The Coherence of Theism 74). According to Swinburne, “the ‘analogical sense’ card is a legitimate one... but it is like a ‘joker’ in a card game that can be played only once, or perhaps twice!” (As an interesting side note, Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism 79-85, thinks that Aquinas was equally committed to univocal predication without knowing it.)

In a shrewd and imaginative move, Lewis now turns the tables on Feuerbach. Using the example of the concept of divine fatherhood and sonship, Lewis claims that both are not a projection of a reality called “human fatherhood and sonship”. Instead, it is the human copy that is merely analogical in relation to the divine norm which it mirrors (“The Language of Religion” in CR 175). In Miracles he is most explicit about this:

Grammatically the things we say of Him [God] are “metaphorical”: but in a deeper sense it is our physical and psychic energies that are mere “metaphors” of

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10 Accordingly, God is “a person and more”, “super-personal”, something more than a person, also underlined in his response to J.A.T. Robinson in “Must Our Image of God Go?” in EC 66-7; and in Letters to Malcolm 19.
the real Life which is God. Divine Sonship is, so to speak, the solid of which biological sonship is merely a diagrammatic representation on the flat. (146)

Divine reality has ontic primacy over human reality. The former is not postulated ad hoc but is rather established by rational arguments, above all by the argument from reason (as chiefly outlined in Miracles, chapter 3, and frequently referred to elsewhere). Human reality depends on and is a mirroring of divine reality, not vice versa as Feuerbach wants to have it. Lewis drives this point home in The Pilgrim’s Regress, Book Four, Chapter 2—“Archetype and Ectype”, where he has John’s guide, Reason, make John reflect on the right ordering of copy and original. Speaking about the similarity between John’s (metaphysical) love for the island and his (physical) love for the brown girls, Reason muses that “perhaps one is a copy of the other. But which is the copy of which?” Lewis goes on to state that those who pretend that the metaphysical is nothing but a copy of the physical “merely assume that doctrine first and interpret their researches by it” (88-9; a datum equally emphasized in his essay “Bulverism”). This approach of turning the tables on Feuerbach is not unique to Lewis, but has also been employed by other modern thinkers such as Viktor Frankl, Helmut Thielicke, or Wolfhart Pannenberg. What is important for our present purpose is to note that the argument from reason provided Lewis with a philosophical basis to claim at least minimal justification for univocal predication of God. This comes to the fore in different places such as The Problem of Pain (28-9), and at the end of “Bluspels and Flalansferes” where he states that all our metaphors by which we have tried to convey the truth and meaning about reality must correspond to “a kind of psycho-physical parallelism (or more) in the universe”. If there is no such correspondence, “then all our thinking is nonsensical”, Lewis here implicitly referring once again to the argument from reason (cf. also “De Futilitate” in CR 77, 85, where he makes a similar point). Contra theologians like Karl Barth, divine reality certainly is different, but it is not wholly different. We are hence not confined to pure analogical predication but can rightly claim some form of univocal predication, too, although it is not always clear where the boundary line between the symbolic and the literal takes place.

Lewis further clarifies different kinds of linguistic devices with regard to lower mediums as to their capacities to be bearers of a higher meaning. Two such kinds are the use of allegory and symbolism. As to the former, Lewis writes in the Preface to the third edition of The Pilgrim’s Regress that “all good allegory exists not to hide but to reveal; to make the inner world more palpable by giving it an (imagined) concrete embodiment. . . For when allegory is at its best, it approaches myth, which must be grasped with the imagination, not with the intellect” (19). As he puts it in The Allegory of Love, the allegorist freely clothes the immaterial with a material presentation, as exemplified in The Pilgrim’s Regress. The
allegory is obviously fictional. In symbolism, however, “our material world in its turn is a copy of an invisible world”. It is “to see the archetype in the copy” (56). In contrast to allegory as a somewhat ad hoc “mode of expression” with its appeal to the imagination, symbols as “a mode of thought” are more congenial to the intellect (60). Moreover, in symbolism there is sometimes a real, intrinsic connection between symbol (picture) and symbolized (pictured) which is not the case in allegory. If this is the case, symbolism, that is, analogical predication, turns into sacramentalism, that is, univocal predication, a metamorphosis Lewis further elaborates on in his sermon “Transposition”:

Pictures are part of the visible world themselves and represent it only by being part of it. Their visibility has the same source. The suns and lamps in pictures seem to shine only because real suns or lamps shine on them; that is, they seem to shine a great deal because they really shine a little in reflecting their archetypes. The sunlight in a picture is therefore not related to real sunlight simply as written words are to spoken. It is a sign, but also something more than a sign, and only a sign because it is also more than a sign, because in it the thing signified is really in a certain mode present. If I had to name the relation I should call it not symbolical but sacramental. (WG 102) [Emphasis mine!]

At the end of the sermon, he reiterates this upward movement from allegory to symbol to sacrament: “Transposition is not always symbolism. In varying degrees the lower reality can actually be drawn into the higher and become part of it” (113). This metamorphosis and with it both the analogical as well as the univocal predication of God become possible within the context of ultimate reality which is spiritual, personal, and as such rational. Contra Feuerbach, the transcendent is not naturally prostrated. Rather, the natural is transcendentally infused, whereby the transcendent is apprehended via the symbolic: “I am saying that the Spiritual Reality, which existed before there were any creatures who ate, gives this natural act a new meaning, and more than a new meaning: makes it in a certain context to be a different thing. In a word, I think that real landscapes enter into pictures, not that pictures will one day sprout out into real trees and grass” (“Transposition” in WG 112). Thought is primary, matter secondary. If Feuerbach were right, that is, if matter were primary and thought secondary, Feuerbach could never show that he is right. Metaphysical naturalism is a self-refuting position. That is the kernel of the argument from reason as employed by Lewis.11 Upon it he builds his case

11 The argument from reason has been defended with great sophistication by philosopher Alvin Plantinga as “the evolutionary argument against naturalism” in Warrant and Proper Function, chapters 11 and 12; and Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism, chapter 10. The argument itself did not originate with Lewis. For its historico-intellectual context as well as the role the criticisms of Elizabeth Anscombe played in
for the correspondence theory of truth and the principal reliability of theological language in their analogical and univocal senses. Contra naturalism, human thought is a projection of super-cosmic reason. Yet, contra pantheism, human thought is different from super-cosmic reason: “We must hold that in thinking we are not reading rationality into an irrational universe but responding to a rationality with which the universe has always been saturated” (“De Futilitate” in CR 82).

Lewis implements this abstract insight in his favoured mythical form especially in the first two volumes of his Space Trilogy, Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra. The universe in those stories is saturated, brimming with life, transcendentally infused, but not in the same way as the emergent force that Weston sees operating in the universe.12 For Weston, the rational phenomena are mere epiphenomena of “blind, inarticulate purposiveness”, a “nothing but”. For Ransom, they are more than that. They are symbols of ultimate reality. For Weston the absolute idealist, they are by-products of an impersonal force. For Ransom the Christian theist, they are expressions of and thus pointers to a personal spirit (cf. esp. Perelandra 78-82). Because this spirit, that is, God, permeates his creation without becoming one with it, he cannot be avoided, though he may well be ignored: “The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito” (Letters to Malcolm 72).

5. “THE GREAT ICONOCLAST”: ON FALLING EPISTEMOLOGICALLY SHORT (AND WHY THIS IS NOT DECISIVE)

Lewis is convinced that there is a divine reality outside his own subjective awareness, a transcendent, personal other which is the origin and guarantee of his own individual personhood.13 For his conviction he provides a triad of arguments, namely, the argument from desire, the argument from reason, and the moral argument. As we have seen, it is the argument from reason that takes on special importance in the grounding of meaning and truth. Divine reality, significantly, is not against reason but rather is reason itself (CR 54; Surprised by Joy 228). The beginnings of Lewis’s appreciation of this line of thought are rooted in the so-called “Great War” with his close friend, Owen Barfield, in the early twenties,14


12 I am indebted to Scott McLeod for drawing my attention to this fact.
13 Amongst his close friends Lewis had a reputation for emphasizing divine transcendence at the cost of immanence and its associated danger of pantheism (cf. Barfield 61, 77, 117, 138), a fact he himself acknowledged in his “Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger” in God in the Dock.
14 Cf. Adey, C. S. Lewis’s “Great War” with Owen Barfield.
but probably already go back to his reading of Berkeley as a young student.\textsuperscript{15} Berkeley might have helped and Barfield certainly did help him to see that human thought must be immersed in some transcendent, divine mind if we are not to get bogged down in materialistic self-contradictions as to the illusory nature of our own reasoning. Moreover, thanks to Barfield he recognized that reason and imagination are essential pathways to divine reality, a recognition which helped Lewis to leave behind his early materialist phase and move on to different forms of philosophical idealism. Lewis finally also realized that the argument from reason functions as a philosophical basis upon which the imaginative appeal of myth and fantasy works. God’s myth as expressed in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection is true because it corresponds to divine reality. Men’s myths as expressed via Osiris or Balder are true insofar as they correspond to or mirror that reality. They serve as symbolic pointers to the one real myth that turned into historical fact. As such, the myths of Osiris and Balder are primarily bearers of meaning, not of truth. In Christ, however, truth and meaning converge in a philosophically relevant and existentially powerful way.

This differentiation between meaning and truth also plays an important part in Puddleglum’s response to the witch in the sixth Narniad, \textit{The Silver Chair}. In his rhetorical battle with the witch—or rather the believer’s battle with Feuerbach—Puddleglum makes an intellectual move essential for his and the children’s survival. Being cornered by the witch by means of Feuerbachian reasoning, Puddleglum grants all her premises. But even if the witch is right and Narnia, Aslan, and all the rest are only wishful projections, the reality the witch offers in their stead is “a pretty poor one”. If the witch is really right, then “the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones” (145). Hence, Puddleglum concludes: “I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia” (145).

As we have seen earlier, there are no good reasons why Feuerbach’s thesis of projective wish fulfillment should be true. At best it is a double-edged sword cutting against any worldview, Feuerbach’s included. At worst it is a dire misrepresentation of reality, confusing the human copy with the divine original. But let us assume with Puddleglum for a moment that the witch (alias Feuerbach) is right and that there is no \textit{truth} in the myth of Aslan (alias Christ). Even if this is the case, for Puddleglum (alias Lewis) the untrue but exciting Christian story would still by far outdo the true yet bleak reality of naturalism. Even if the Christian worldview would not be the philosophical bearer of truth, it could still be the existential bearer of meaning. And we have seen that for Lewis as “imaginative man”, when push comes to shove, meaning takes precedence over

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. his letters to his father on July 18, 1917, and to Arthur Greeves on July 24, 1917, in \textit{Collected Letters I}. 

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truth, the imaginative trumps the abstract. The human mind can endure a lie as long as it gives meaning, but the human mind could not endure absurdity even if it is the truth. 

Although for Lewis this really only poses a false dichotomy since it is not a question of either meaning or truth, but rather a matter of both/and, his “Puddleglum-Argument” nonetheless provides the theist with a last pragmatic resource when worse comes to worse. Irrespective of its truth value, in the eyes of Puddleglum the Narnian story is the better one as it “licks” the witch’s real world hollow. For Narnia is infused with meaning. The witch’s underworld, however, is reigned by absurdity.

But Lewis does adhere to the classical correspondence theory of truth, in contrast to postmodern theologies which—within the context of an antirealist metaphysic—employ coherence or pragmatist theories of truth. As against postmodern approaches that content themselves with mere meaning as found within their own particular narratives, Lewis claims the overarching truth of the Christian metanarrative. For him, there is a metaphysical reality to which our thinking, language, myths, and images must correspond epistemologically in order to count as true.

To appreciate Lewis’s stance clearly, we have to return to the quote by Thomas Aquinas under section three. For Aquinas, we recall, the divine attributes “signify the divine substance and are predicated of God substantially, but they fall short in their representation of him” (Stump, Aquinas 95). Lewis is equally clear that metaphysics should never be reduced to epistemology. The incorporeal reality of God is not the same as our corporeal image of Him, no matter if this image is constructed along anthropomorphic or abstract lines. Divine reality (metaphysics) and our conceptualizing of the same (epistemology) are two different things. In his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, Lewis talks of God as being sheerly objective and independent of our metaphorically operating minds, “not . . . clothed in our senses; the naked Other, imageless (though our imagination salutes it with a hundred images), unknown, undefined, desired” (221). As we have seen earlier, epistemologically we have no other way but to create mental images in order to grasp cognitively that which is essentially pictureless. We really are “at the mercy of the metaphor”. But from this it does not follow that our epistemological imagery affects the miraculousness of metaphysical reality (cf. “Dogma and the

16 A fact also recognized by Roger Scruton in Modern Culture: “Our [modern] world has been disenchanted and our illusions destroyed. At the same time we cannot live as though that were the whole truth of our condition” (73).

17 For example, see his statement in “Myth Became Fact” in EC 141: “[T]ruth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is”; and in Mere Christianity he states: “Remember that religion involves a series of statements about facts, which must be either true or false” (74).
Universe” in *EC* 124). That would amount to constructivism. Nor does it follow that the metaphor or the mental picture is to be identified with the pictured, the thing itself, which would be naïve anthropomorphism or pure univocity. Lewis expounds this in *Miracles* (117) as well as in *Mere Christianity*. In the latter he once again uses a comparison with scientific language to bring his point across:

> What they [the scientists] do when they want to explain the atom, or something of that sort, is to give you a description out of which you can make a mental picture. But then they warn you that this picture is not what the scientists actually believe. What the scientists believe is a mathematical formula. The pictures are there only to help you to understand the formula. They are not really true in the way the formula is; they do not give you the real thing but only something more or less like it. They are only meant to help, and if they do not help you can drop them. The thing itself cannot be pictured, it can only be expressed mathematically. We are in the same boat here. (55)

God as that beyond which nothing greater can be conceived (Anselm of Canterbury) necessarily and by definition goes beyond anything the human mind can conjecture. That is why no description ever exhausts his being, although certain metaphors and analogies are more approximate to the divine reality than others, a matter of fact Lewis makes particularly clear in *Letters to Malcolm* (92-3). The limitations of our conceptualizations are grounded in our own metaphysical finitude. Out of this flows the limitation of our language as the principal mode we communicate as rational beings. Interpreted along Christian lines, this linguistic restraint is for one thing creaturely caused, and for another thing further conditioned by man’s sinfulness (cf., for example, “Screwtape Proposes a Toast” in *The Screwtape Letters* 197).18 Interestingly, in a letter to Father Milward on February 2, 1955 (in *Collected Letters III*), Lewis speculates that “the loss of our original unambiguity of speech may have been one cause that drove us into poetry”, thus implicitly confirming his favouring of the image over the abstract (calling it in the same context a “blessing”) as outlined at the beginning of this paper.

> Yes, language is a dynamic, living, changing thing.19 Yes, there is a certain linguistic inadequacy of describing the essence of life.20 Yes, sometimes it

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18 The Christian view of a corruption of language is also aptly expressed by Helmut Thielicke, who sees the ambiguity of language as rooted in the fact that it is “the verbal medium of sinners” (*The Evangelical Faith* III 414), “involv[ing] brokenness and indirectness for anything transcendent it seeks to express” (*The Evangelical Faith* I 78).
19 Cf. esp. the ninth chapter, “At the Fringe of Language”, in his *Studies in Words*; cf. also *Letters to Malcolm* 3-4.
is impossible to know how much in Scripture is symbolical and how much literal as, for instance, with the imagery of the ascension. 21 And certainly yes, language is too vague to describe God who is unspeakable by being too definite. 22 Yet, in spite of the fragility of language, Lewis does not concur with postmodern thinkers who propose that language cannot correspond to an extra-linguistic reality, that we are trapped in language games. In The Four Loves, he freely admits that language is not infallible. But—and this is a pivotal “but”—despite our linguistic fallibility, language is still reliable: “Of course language is not an infallible guide, but it contains, with all its defects, a good deal of stored insight and experience” (2). It is his belief in God, more precisely, the argument from reason, that provides Lewis with a vital protection against scepticism and intellectual despair (cf. esp. “De Futilitate” in CR 77). Our reasoning as finite minds is anchored in the infinite mind which is reason itself. Infinite reason, in turn, is of a personal nature and all human thinking is participant knowledge as it shares in or taps into supernatural reason. As he puts it in “Is Theology Poetry?”, “[t]he Divine light . . . ‘lighteneth every man’” (in WG 128). Thus, although we are finite, fallible, and sinful creatures, we are still God’s creatures. Even if language is a fragile vehicle easily broken, it nonetheless remains a fragile vehicle corresponding reliably to something or someone outside us: “However small the class, some class of thoughts must be regarded . . . as true insights, as the reflection of reality in human consciousness” (“De Futilitate” in CR 77). Accordingly, at the end of Till We Have Faces, the Fox reminds us of the beauty and function of language. There is “a whole art and joy of words”. That this can be is ensured by a rationally saturated universe which, in turn, is the product of a personal, rational mind, also known as “God”.

Nevertheless, our reasoning and along with it our linguistic attempts to grasp and convey divine reality time and again fall short of the task—by metaphysical necessity. Our cognitive powers grapple with the sheer immensity of the burden to describe the indescribable, and all too often we fall prey to the erroneous assumption that our mental pictures amount to an identical representation of the pictured. Consequently, as he illustrates in The Pilgrim’s Regress, “[t]he objects which [our] desire imagines are always inadequate” (203). That is why God himself acts, in fact, must act in an iconoclastic way: “Every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter” (Letters to Malcolm 79). Lewis presents this important Kantian distinction between the thing itself and the thing as it appears to us in different places such as in Miracles (116), The Screwtape Letters (17-9), The Problem of Pain (126), “Horrid Red Things” (in EC 128-9), “Christianity and Culture” (in CR 6), and A Grief Observed: “Images of the Holy

22 Cf. Miracles 145-6; Perelandra 30.
easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great Iconoclast” (76; cf. the whole context in 74-8, and 81-3). This does not leave our images valueless, as long as we remember their relative, instrumental, fleeting, adjectival character. Granted, our mental images in prayer give rise to problems (The Screwtape Letters 17-9), and sometimes naïve images hold unbelievers back from conversion (Letters to Malcolm 19), but they are still significant: “In their total effect, they do mediate . . . something very important. It is always something qualitative . . . That . . . gives it the impact of reality” (Letters to Malcolm 83). And here he decisively differs from Kant.

This is Lewis both speaking as an Augustinian and as a Thomist. Augustine’s si comprehendis, non est Deus assures us, just like Berkeley and Anselm, as noted above, and all eminent thinkers do throughout church history, that God’s being can never be fully comprehended, for if we do it is not God. But from this it does not follow that God is unknowable. Rather, he is infinitely knowable. We can always know more, go deeper, get closer. The cry of Roonwit in the final Narniad, The Last Battle, should be our epistemological motto: “Further in and higher up” (146). Thus, for Aquinas and Lewis, it is a sic et non. Yes, with our concepts, symbols, and mental pictures we are really onto something. Our God-Talk can signify something sure and substantial of God if we find the right metaphors and analogies (an important condition spelled out, amongst other places, in “Bluspels and Flalansferes”). But no, in this aeon all our images in the final resort “fall short in their representation of him” (Aquinas cited in Stump, Aquinas 95). We can have objective, reliable knowledge, yet at the same time “we must emphasise the dimness of our knowledge . . . we know, in some dim and confused way” (“Transposition” in WG 106). But we do know! Epistemologically we can speak sure words, though we can never speak final ones. For the final ones we all need the virtues of hope and patience. Both are rationally well-founded.

CONCLUSIONS

Truth and meaning—as reached via reason and imagination—are two central pillars in the thought and writings of C. S. Lewis. Overall, he was drawn more to poetry than to philosophy or theology. His existential context, which made him favour the image over the abstract, colours his intellectual approach to the problem of how to talk about God (section one). Language in general, and theological

23 Cf. the Pauline verdict in 1.Cor. 13:12, and Lewis’s telling reference to it at the end of “Fern-Seed and Elephants” in CR 211.
language in particular, depend in an essential way on metaphor. We cannot think, let alone think about God, without it (section two). Feuerbach’s criticism of the theological task misfires for several reasons. For one, he attacks a particular metaphysical position not held either by Lewis nor by most of the other intellectual exponents of Christian orthodoxy (section three). For another, his projectionist theory is a double-edged sword cutting against any worldview, including his own. Most importantly, however, Lewis turns the tables on Feuerbach by rationally establishing the belief in divine reality, primarily via the argument from reason. At the same time, this provides him with a philosophical basis to rely not only on analogical, but also—in some degree—on univocal predication of God (section four). Finally (section five), language is indeed a fragile vehicle for meaning and truth. Nevertheless, it is a reliable vehicle due to certain tenets the Christian worldview provides Lewis with. Although we are not (yet) able to speak a final word, we can already speak sure words about God. According to Lewis, knowledge of God is possible, but can only be derived from personal acquaintance and by analogies and metaphors, respectively (The Four Loves 126). It is poetical language that provides man with all the information cognitively required to meet God half-way (“The Language of Religion” in CR 172). For the other half, personal trust is needed.24

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24 I thank Bruce A. Little and Scott McLeod for various helpful remarks on this paper.


---. *The Four Loves*. Harcourt, no year given.


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