

“MYTH BECAME FACT” – C. S. Lewis, from *God in the Dock*

My friend Corineus has advanced the charge that none of us are in fact Christians at all. According to him historic Christianity is something so barbarous that no modern man can really believe it: the moderns who claim to do so are in fact believing a modern system of thought which retains the vocabulary of Christianity and exploits the emotions inherited from it while quietly dropping its essential doctrines. Corineus compared modern Christianity with the modern English monarchy: the forms of kingship have been retained, but the reality has been abandoned.

All this I believe to be false, except of a few "modernist" theologians who, by God's grace, become fewer every day. But for the moment let us assume that Corineus is right. Let us pretend, for purposes of argument, that *all* who now call themselves Christians have abandoned the historic doctrines. Let us suppose that modern "Christianity" reveals a system of names, ritual, formulae, and metaphors which persists although the thoughts behind it have changed. Corineus ought to be able to *explain* the persistence.

Why, on his view, do all these educated and enlightened pseudo-Christians insist on expressing their deepest thoughts in terms of an archaic mythology which must hamper and embarrass them at every turn? Why do they refuse to cut the umbilical cord which binds the living and flourishing child to its moribund mother? For, if Corineus is right, it should be a great relief to them to do so. Yet the odd thing is that even those who seem most embarrassed by the sediment of "barbaric" Christianity in their thought become suddenly obstinate when you ask them to get rid of it altogether. They will strain the cord almost to breaking point, but they refuse to cut it. Sometimes they will take every step except the last one.

If all who professed Christianity were clergymen, it would be easy (though uncharitable) to reply that their livelihood depends on *not* taking that last step. Yet even if this were the true cause of their behavior, even if all clergymen are intellectual prostitutes who preach for pay—and usually starvation pay—what they secretly believe to be false, surely so widespread a darkening of conscience among thousands of men not otherwise known to be criminal, itself demands explanation? And of course the profession of Christianity is not confined to the clergy. It is professed by millions of women and laymen who earn thereby contempt, unpopularity, suspicion, and the hostility of their own families. How does this come to happen?

Obstinacies of this sort are interesting. "Why not cut the cord?" asks Corineus. "Everything would be much easier if you would free your thought from this vestigial mythology." To be sure: far easier. Life would be far easier for the mother of an invalid child if she put it into an institution and adopted someone else's healthy baby instead. Life would be far easier to many a man if he abandoned the woman he has actually fallen in love with and married someone else because she is more suitable. The only defect of the healthy baby and the suitable woman is that they leave out the patient's only reason for bothering about a child or wife at all. "Would not conversation be much more rational than dancing?" said Jane Austen's Miss Bingley. "Much more rational," replied Mr. Bingley, "but much less like a ball."¹ In the same way, it would be much more rational to abolish the English monarchy. But how if, by doing so, you leave out the one element in our state which matters most? How if the monarchy is the channel through which all the vital elements of citizenship—loyalty, the consecration of secular life, the hierarchical principle, splendor, ceremony, continuity—still trickle down to irrigate the dust bowl of modern economic Statecraft?

The real answer of even the most "modernist" Christianity to Corineus is the same. Even assuming (which I most constantly deny) that the doctrines of historic Christianity are merely mythical, it is the myth which is the vital and nourishing element in the whole concern. Corineus wants us to move with the times. Now, we know where times move. They move away. But in religion we find something that does not move away. It is what Corineus calls the myth, that abides; it is what he calls the modern and living thought that moves away. Not only the thought of theologians, but the thought of anti-theologians. Where are the predecessors of Corineus? Where is the Epicureanism of Lucretius², the pagan revival of Julian the Apostate³? Where are the Gnostics, where is the monism of Averroës⁴, the deism of Voltaire, the dogmatic materialism of the great Victorians? They have moved with the times. But the thing they were all attacking remains: Corineus finds it still there to attack. The myth (to speak his language) has outlived the thoughts of all its defenders and of all its adversaries. It is the myth that gives life. Those elements even in modernist Christianity which Corineus regards as vestigial, are the substance: what he takes for the "real modern belief" is the shadow.

¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, ch. xi.

² Titus Lucretius Carus (c. 99-55 B.C.), the Roman poet.

³ Roman emperor, A.D. 361-3.

⁴ Averroës (1126-98), of Cordova, believed that only one intellect exists for the whole human race in which every individual participates, to the exclusion of personal immortality.

To explain this we must look a little closer at myth in general, and at this myth in particular. Human intellect is incurably abstract. Pure mathematics is the type of successful thought. Yet the only realities we experience are concrete—this pain, this pleasure, this dog, this man. While we are loving the man, bearing the pain, enjoying the pleasure, we are not intellectually apprehending Pleasure, Pain or Personality. When we begin to do so, on the other hand, the concrete realities sink to the level of mere instances or examples: we are no longer dealing with them, but with that which they exemplify. This is our dilemma—either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste—or, more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it. As thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand. The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think. You cannot *study* pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyze the nature of humor while roaring with laughter. But when else can you really know these things? "If only my toothache would stop, I could write another chapter about pain." But once it stops, what do I know about pain?

Of this tragic dilemma myth is the partial solution. In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. At this moment, for example, I am trying to understand something very abstract indeed—the fading, vanishing of tasted reality as we try to grasp it with the discursive reason. Probably I have made heavy weather of it. But if I remind you, instead, of Orpheus and Eurydice⁵, how he was suffered to lead her by the hand but, when he turned round to look at her, she disappeared, what was merely a principle becomes imaginable. You may reply that you never till this moment attached that "meaning" to that myth. Of course not. You are not looking for an abstract "meaning" at all. If that was what you were doing, the myth would be for you no true myth but a mere allegory. You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we state this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely.

When we translate 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.

⁵ The ancient legend of Orpheus and Eurydice concerns the fateful love of Orpheus of Thrace, son of Apollo and the muse Calliope, for the beautiful Eurydice (from *Eurudike*, "she whose justice extends widely").

Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; *in hac valle abstractionis*⁶. 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.

Now as myth transcends thought, incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder⁷ or an Osiris⁸, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed. To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other.

A man who disbelieved the Christian story as fact but continually fed on it as myth would, perhaps, be more spiritually alive than one who assented and did not think much about it. The modernist—the extreme modernist, infidel in all but name—need not be called a fool or hypocrite because he obstinately retains, even in the midst of his intellectual atheism, the language, rites, sacraments, and story of the Christians. The poor man may be clinging (with a wisdom he himself by no means understands) to that which is his life. It would have been better that Loisy⁹ should have remained a Christian: it would not necessarily have been better that he should have purged his thought of vestigial Christianity.

Those who do not know that this great myth became fact when the Virgin conceived are, indeed, to be pitied. But Christians also need to be reminded—we may thank Corineus for reminding us—that what became fact was a myth, that it carries with it into the world of fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less. We must not be ashamed of

⁶ “in this valley of separation.”

⁷ A god in Norse mythology who was so handsome, generous, and good that he gave off light simply by the purity of his character, and who dies but is to be reborn in a new world.

⁸ In Egyptian mythology, the first-born son of the gods who created the world who is killed by his brother but is brought back to life by sister-wife Isis.

⁹ Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), a French theologian and founder of the Modernist Movement.

the mythical radiance resting on our theology. We must not be nervous about "parallels" and "pagan Christs": they *ought* to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren't. We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome. If God chooses to be *mythopoeic*¹⁰—and is not the sky itself a myth—shall we refuse to be *mythopathic*¹¹? For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: perfect myth and perfect fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child, and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher.

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¹⁰ "*Mythopoeic*" means "of or relating to the making of myths." Tolkien wrote a poem entitled *Mythopoeia*, or "The Making of Myths," about the conversation he and Dyson had with Lewis on September 19, 1931 about the fact that Christianity was a true myth.

¹¹ "*Mythopathic*" means something like "being sensitive to myths." Although the Latin and Greek word "*pathos*" is sometimes translated "suffering," Lewis is using the suffix here with a connotation similar to that of the English word "*pathos*" meaning "a feeling such as sympathy, tenderness, or sorrow." So "*mythopathic*" denotes the inclination of one to be receptive to myth or to be moved by myth, and, more generally, being disposed to receive nourishment and understanding from stories.