

## From Spiritual to Renewed Imagination: C. S. Lewis' Quest for Joy, Imagination, and God

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### ABSTRACT

The conversion of C. S. Lewis to Christian theism weaves together his quest for joy and his evolving view on the power of imagination. Lewis' acceptance of Christianity raises questions about the nature of the relationship between these two fundamental elements of his philosophical evolution: joy and imagination. In this article, we aim to clarify this aspect of Lewis' intellectual and spiritual life by considering his philosophical development. The essential relationship between joy and imagination becomes clear only if we consider Lewis' intellectual journey from Atheism to Idealism, and then to Christian theism. In this article, we consider in particular Lewis' intellectual development from the moment he adopted his own version of Subjective Idealism.

**Keywords:** C. S. Lewis, imagination, joy, idealism, theism.



## Introduction

C. S. Lewis is, without contest, one of the most influential Protestant apologists of the twentieth century. In Lewis, one finds many apologetic considerations relevant for today's Christian witness, including his reliance on the imagination. This is an important part of the current apologetic discussion. In recent years, a more narrative and imaginative apologetics has been at the forefront of apologetic considerations.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Lewis can be instructive, as he has championed, both in theory and in practice, the role of imagination in the Christian life.<sup>2</sup>

Also common is the reference to the evening talk between Lewis, Tolkien, and Dyson, which will lead Lewis to accept the full claims of Christian theism, including the Incarnation, a week later. This "Addison's Walk" evening was rendered famous not only through Lewis' own reference to it in his letters but also by Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia" dedicated to Lewis, "one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, though 'breathed through silver.'"<sup>3</sup> Though this conversation was only one moment in Lewis' slow and reluctant coming to the Christian faith, it has become a popular defining point of Lewis' conversion.

Lewis' conversion to Christian theism is described by our author himself as a quest for joy. That elusive desire, the longing for past delight, is the haunting experience Lewis tried to make sense of until he accepted Christian theism. Sudden glimpses of joy intruded in his life from the first time he remembered it happening, at around six or seven.<sup>4</sup> Joy, or "It," as he also calls it, became an integral part of his life and was at times accompanied by intense experiences of poetic imagination. That quest for joy is common to all accounts of Lewis' conversion.

Joy and imagination appear to be the two crucial threads one can follow from Lewis' early years to his final coming to Christian theism. This seems simple enough, though when one tries to piece everything together, it becomes difficult to see with clarity the link between Lewis' quest for joy and the "Addison's Walk" conversation about mythology—"myth made fact," as Lewis will later write.<sup>5</sup> To make explicit the intimate link between the longing for joy and the true myth of the incarnation and how they led Lewis to Christian theism, we must pay attention to Lewis' intellectual development, which is a complex and fascinating task. A complete picture, however, cannot be presented here, and we must choose a starting point.

In this article, we will concentrate on Lewis' latter philosophical stage, his subjective idealism, which coincides (more or less) with his debate with his friend Owen Barfield,

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1 See, for example, Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017); Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics. Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2019); Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic. Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012); and, to some extent, Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics. Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2013).

2 In fact, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are as much part of Lewis' subsequent influence as are his *Mere Christianity* or *Miracles*.

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, "Mythopoeia," in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2001): 85.

4 Andrew Lazo, "Early Prose Joy": C.S. Lewis's Early Draft of an Autobiographical Manuscript," *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 30 (2013): 14.

5 C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970): 63–67.

author of the noted *Poetic Diction*.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the late 1920s, the two friends entertained a lively debate through correspondence and private conversations. This became known as their “Great War,” a term only used once by Lewis in 1949, which formally lasted until Lewis’ conversion to Christian theism in 1930.<sup>7</sup>

## Imagination, Truth, and A Personal God

We must begin with a brief picture of Lewis’ philosophical journey from atheism to subjective idealism. Until early 1931, Lewis wrestled with imagination, joy, and the nature of reality until he surrendered his will to the God of Christian theism.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1920s, Lewis’ view of reality 1926 had shifted from strict materialism to a form of absolute idealism, which he abandoned in mid-1926.<sup>9</sup> Lewis had changed his understanding of reality and the self. Souls did not emerge from matter, but from the absolute, for if scientific language was to be directed at truth, Lewis had to “admit that mind was no late-come epiphenomenon; that the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic Logos.”<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to what could be expected, Lewis’ view of joy (and of the imagination) did not immediately change. As an atheist, Lewis’ view of the imagination had been merely pragmatic. Since what really mattered was the material, world, meaning, and truth only related to that which was of the realm of the real and the material. Lewis thus decided for himself “to care for almost nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot, and the Grail, and to believe in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service.”<sup>11</sup> At that time, between 1908 and 1910, when Lewis was then registered at Wynyard School, Watford, in Hertfordshire, joy became forgotten as his imaginative life faded—highlighting the strong relationship between them.<sup>12</sup> This low view of the imagination lingered into his period of absolute idealism.

Though he now denied all was, first and always, matter, Lewis’ absolute remained a wholly abstract principle. This explains how the elaboration of his “New Look,” as Lewis calls his personal philosophy of the time, could correspond to dimensions of both his naturalist and early idealist periods. It was the ground for all that was, but it was not much more. As far as Lewis’ “spiritual” taste was concerned, that was all he needed. In fact,

6 Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 1973).

7 Even though as late as 1949 Lewis could write in a letter dated June 23 1949: “No, of course it [Barfield’s baptism, 25 June 1949] won’t mean the end of the Great War.” C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004): 945.

8 This project is made all the more complicated by several factors, which lead scholars to disagree even on some essential aspects of Lewis’ conversion. For a broad understanding of the challenges, see Andrew Lazo, “Correcting the Chronology: Some Implications of ‘Early Prose Joy,’” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 29 (2012): 51–62; Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis. A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013); Joel D. Heck, *From Atheism to Theism. The Story of C. S. Lewis* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017); Norbert Feinendegen, “The Philosopher’s Progress: C.S. Lewis’ Intellectual Journey from Atheism to Theism,” *Journal of Inklings Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2018): 103–143; William H. Johnston, “The Conversions of C.S. Lewis: Notes on Rethinking Their Chronology and Character,” *Journal of Inklings Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2023): 1–27.

9 Lewis had first become an atheist, not only for intellectual or scientific reasons but also because he then found himself free “from the troublesome responsibilities, the transcendental interferences.” Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 29. As an atheist, he existed by his own will, with no need to rely on an outside power.

10 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy. The Shape of My Early Life* (London: William Collins, 2012), 243.

11 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 201.

12 *Ibid.*, 36–37.

he certainly did not want more. An abstract principle that left him free from any outside interference, especially a transcendent one, satisfied him.<sup>13</sup>

There was, however, a shadow over this philosophical horizon. Yes, there was a “splendor” behind the curtain of sensual appearances, giving the world a heightened glory that satisfied Lewis both intellectually and emotionally. Precisely because the “Absolute” remained completely undefined, subjective aesthetic experience could be said to relate to that same absolute. All experience had significance, though it was quite impossible to properly explain *what* it was. The “Absolute” was also the undefined principle of his pursuit or longing for joy. If the “Absolute” was a mere abstract principle of and about which nothing really significant could be said, would that, by implication, compromise the significance of joy itself? Though Lewis never questioned the reality of the intrusion of joy, he could not easily disregard the problematic implications of his absolute idealism.

Two factors will lead Lewis to think about the nature of the “Absolute” while always trying to account for joy: the distinction between enjoyment and contemplation and a new appreciation for metaphorical language. This will precipitate a new understanding of the imagination, which, in turn, will facilitate Lewis’ abandonment of one essential element of his idealist philosophy, thus taking him closer to the personal God of Christian theism.

## The Enjoyment/Contemplation Distinction

On 8 March 1924, while Lewis was still formulating his own version of absolute idealism, he discovered a distinction presented by British philosopher Samuel Alexander in his book *Space, Time, and Deity* (originally published in 1920).<sup>14</sup> The distinction proposed by Alexander had one objective: to become conscious that our everyday experience was made of two types of awareness: the object of which we are aware (e.g., ourselves or a table) and the act of awareness itself (the seeing of the table, in Lewis’ example). Alexander used “contemplation” for the first kind of awareness and “enjoyment” for the second. Lewis found great inspiration in this distinction, though he interpreted it in a way that suited his own philosophical understanding—and, to some respect, diverged from the meaning intended by Alexander himself.<sup>15</sup>

The main implication, for Lewis, was that the mind could not simultaneously contemplate and enjoy an object. There is the experience, the enjoyment, of an object. For example, a sunset and the contemplation of it is a more self-conscious relationship between mind and object. When the mind moves to contemplate the object, it becomes removed from the subjective experience itself. Enjoyment and contemplation could not be simultaneous. Lewis writes: “The surest way of spoiling a pleasure was to start examining your

13 Lewis expresses himself in strong terms in *Surprised by Joy*, writing: “No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word *Interference*.” *Surprised by Joy*, 199. Lewis later discovered in Christian theism many reasons for the necessity of God’s interference. See for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Fontana, 1966), 58-59. Lewis would also establish a strong contrast between a supernaturalism that allowed divine interference, and one that did not. Only the former was in full accord with Christian theism. See C. S. Lewis, *Miracles. A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001): 107-108.

14 Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity: The Gifford Lectures at Glasgow 1916-1918*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1920).

15 Lewis discusses this distinction in chapter 14 of *Surprised by Joy*, 253-256. Lewis was later highly critical of Alexander’s work, calling it “all nonsense” apart from the parts dedicated to this distinction. See Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 2, 754.

satisfaction.”<sup>16</sup> There was a real incompatibility between these two types of awareness.<sup>17</sup>

The most important consequence was that one could not contemplate the “enjoyed”. It was an either/or: one contemplated the object or enjoyed it, even if it was himself. This was an important observation for Lewis, an intensely biographical thinker and writer.<sup>18</sup> How, in the face of the “Absolute—which in his subjective idealism period he would call “Spirit”—could he think of (contemplate) himself as “I” and enjoy being “I”? Lewis writes: “In so far as I could say ‘who he was’ I had to determine him like an object—by his time and place and history, relating him to my whole system of objects. In so far as he was really ‘I’, really enjoyed, I could not hazard a guess ‘who I was’.”<sup>19</sup> Enjoyment of the “I” was possible, since enjoyment of Spirit was possible, though not its contemplation—only Spirit could contemplate the individual soul.<sup>20</sup> This still allowed Lewis to discover himself through his own writing, while at the same time affirming that he, as soul and mind, was one with Spirit—since all was one with Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

The act of introspection could be discussed or could be contemplated, but the enjoyed escaped direct description. This was a direct consequence of Lewis’ Idealist conviction that the soul, emerging from the Spirit, could be contemplated and described. Still, the enjoyed soul remained a subject, not an object described logically. Lewis explains it this way: “I saw clearly that it must be there: for it was certain that I thought: but if I tried to make thought the object of my consciousness, I should find nothing but irrelevant images.”<sup>22</sup> The radical contrast between the “contemplated” and the “enjoyed” applied to what Lewis called the “self.”

The discovery of this tension is also crucial to Lewis’ intellectual development, as it is one of the first stepping stones leading him away from absolute idealism—even though Lewis became aware of Alexander’s categories in early March 1924, two years before his final break with absolute idealism. Though Lewis wrestled with the implications of this distinction during his final absolute idealist years, the relationship between “enjoyment/contemplation” remained crucial to his subjective idealism. It might even have been the unsuspected first intrusion of this new brand of idealism into his whole outlook.

The move away from absolute idealism is in itself fascinating. There is something profoundly biographical in this evolution because the change was motivated by mundane daily events. Lewis found, for example, that it was more and more difficult to explain absolute idealism to his students. Being a philosophy tutor, Lewis became increasingly

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 254.

<sup>17</sup> This is one of the possible divergences between Lewis’ interpretation and Alexander’s formulation of the distinction.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Lazo has convincingly argued that much of Lewis’ works contain a biographical dimension. This is the case not merely for the obvious books such as *Surprised by Joy* or *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, but also *Miracles*, and in different forms, *The Screwtape Letters* or *Perelandra*. Lazo also makes the case for “love” and not “Joy” as being at the heart of Lewis’ lifelong quest. See Andrew Lazo, “Sehnsucht as Signpost: The Autobiographical Impulse of C. S. Lewis,” *Perichoresis*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2022): 33–53.

<sup>19</sup> Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 32.

<sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Clivi Hamiltonis Summae Metaphysices Contra Anthroposophos Libri II.” In *The “Great War” of Owen Barfield and C. S. Lewis. Philosophical Writings 1927–1930*. Edited by Norbert Feinendegen and Arend Smilde, *Inklings Studies Supplement*, vol. 1 (2015): 66–67. Henceforth “Summa.”

<sup>21</sup> This is important to take into account, especially as it reinforces McGrath’s observation that for Lewis, “writing an autobiography was about self-discovery.” See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014): 15. The statement can be extended to most of Lewis’ writing.

<sup>22</sup> Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 32.

conscious that his tutoring required him to explain how a soul could be in contact with another soul when both were one with the “Absolute”. In mundane terms, how could he explain philosophical principles to his students with no philosophical basis for that task? Lewis remarks that he “needed a position of my own as a basis from which to criticize my pupil’s essays.”<sup>23</sup> If the “Absolute” existed, he had to be, if not entirely explained, at least communicated, but “the Absolute cannot be made clear.”<sup>24</sup> This was impossible if the “Absolute” was only an abstract principle.

Lewis’ solution was a revelation: the main issue was not epistemological but metaphysical since it was all a question of existence, after all. Knowledge came after existence. To know was to know something and to be known by something. Not denying his idealism, Lewis came to stress the unity of all souls into the “Whole”: souls emerged from the “Spirit,” making each self somehow a part of a higher or whole self. Lewis’ conviction was now that the “Absolute” had to be a “pure subject” for himself, Lewis, to be a subject and be able to relate to other subjects (e.g., his students).<sup>25</sup> The “Absolute” now became “Spirit”.

Moreover, to account for joy and the relationship of the soul with other souls, Lewis had to present an understanding of the “Absolute” that had to become something more than an abstract object. It had to become, if not personal (that would come too close, for the still reluctant Lewis, to the God of Christian theism), at least a subject. Already, his absolute idealism had led him to conclude that, in the words of Norbert Feinendegen, “Joy was also no mere subjective state of mind. His desire must have a real object, but this object could neither be found among the objects of the empirical world nor be a part of his own consciousness: it had to be something that lies beyond the world of appearances.”<sup>26</sup> This became all the more important now that he moved away from a purely abstract, principle-only understanding of the “Absolute”. A “Spirit” that was subject was essential for joy to have a reference point outside the phenomenal world, and outside of himself.

This, coupled with the enjoyment/contemplation distinction, has a major implication, strengthening his idealism for a while. It was now possible for Lewis to make a case for the soul’s enjoyment of the “Spirit” but not its contemplation. This is very clear in Lewis’ *Summa*, his ambitious philosophical answer to Barfield’s anthroposophy, and an important document of the “Great War,” in which he writes, “The Spirit is pure subject and can only be enjoyed, never contemplated.”<sup>27</sup>

The discovery of the enjoyment/contemplation distinction was crucial to Lewis, who considered it an “essential tool of thought.”<sup>28</sup> If Lewis had not seen the implications of this distinction, his philosophical evolution would have been dramatically different.<sup>29</sup> It

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23 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 259.

24 Ibid.

25 *Summa*, I.4, 64.

26 Feinendegen, “The Philosopher’s Progress,” 122.

27 *Summa*, I.4, 64.

28 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 254.

29 Though there is discussion about whether Lewis really understood Alexander’s distinction. See the unpublished paper by Gregory Bassham, “C. S. Lewis on the Enjoyment-Contemplation Distinction,” no date, *Academia*, [https://www.academia.edu/5815829/C\\_S\\_Lewis\\_on\\_the\\_Enjoyment-Contemplation\\_Distinction](https://www.academia.edu/5815829/C_S_Lewis_on_the_Enjoyment-Contemplation_Distinction), accessed 28 February 2024.

seems that, initially, Lewis considered the distinction only as a “tool of thought,” and only a second time were the implications revealed to his mind. This might explain why this new category of thought did not immediately drive him to abandon absolute idealism.

### A New Appreciation for Metaphorical Language

Another factor that pushed Lewis further away from absolute idealism was a renewed appreciation of the nature and importance of metaphorical language. This is especially striking in the manner in which Lewis tangentially described his break with his new look to his father. By the time of this letter, dated August 14, 1925, Lewis had decided to abandon the study of philosophy for that of English language and literature. Explaining this somewhat dramatic change to his father, he writes: “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. It will be a comfort to me all my life to know that the scientist and the materialist have not the last word.”<sup>30</sup> Scientific language, entirely empirical and logical, had not the last word, and because of that newfound limitation, Lewis could now begin to ascribe meaning to other dimensions of human language.

The legitimacy, indeed the validity, of metaphorical language was heightened as Lewis developed his own understanding of subjective idealism. Lewis pushed his idealism further when he recognized that since the “Absolute” was the source of all empirical things and events, for them to exist was to be perceived by this all-encompassing “Mind”.<sup>31</sup> To exist was to be seen by a “Mind,” by the “Absolute” that, by definition, could not remain a mere principle. It had to acquire some traits of a subject.

One question remained: how was it possible to talk about his “Absolute” subject? How could a human mind talk about the “Spirit” itself? The use of logical and scientific language was not possible, for such language (itself truth-oriented), was only of the domain of the phenomenal world. “Spirit”, to remain the Whole, necessarily remained outside logical and scientific language. At the same time, language was necessary to express certain experiences, notably the enjoyment of “Spirit”. If it was not possible for individual souls to directly contemplate the “Spirit”, it was still possible to express the enjoyment of the “Spirit” after the fact. It was not a direct contemplation or description of “Spirit”, but, in a manner of speaking, an analogical one. The enjoyment of “Spirit” could be brought back to consciousness through images and impressions.

If “Spirit” could not be directly contemplated, this meant that all language, including the philosophical language of Berkeley or Bradley, was in a way metaphorical. This observation led Lewis to revise his strong criticism of religion, particularly Christianity, for being metaphorical in its description of God. Not only did Lewis concede that this use of language did not invalidate the Christian account of God, but he also *had* to use

<sup>30</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 3 Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2007): 649.

<sup>31</sup> See Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 170.

metaphors. In his unpublished description of his journey to “Joy,” Lewis confesses that if “He [Spirit] was really the ground of souls, I should be using a mythology.”<sup>32</sup> Metaphors, an essential dimension of mythological language, were absolutely necessary to the soul’s participation in the “Spirit”. Further, metaphorical, or poetic, language was now the only possible language for talking meaningfully about “Spirit”. Imagination carried meaning.

Because the world existed as a monistic reality, within Spirit’s own enjoyment and contemplation, it was, in a way, entirely subjective. Moreover, since soul emerged from the “Spirit”, each individual soul could be said to be an “imagination” (or projection) of the “Spirit”. Each soul was not an individual substance but a specific appearance of “Spirit”. This also legitimized the use of poetic and imaginative language, since imagination was of “Spirit” who had created/imagined a world of countless souls.<sup>33</sup> Through his new awareness of the necessity of metaphorical language, Lewis also discovered that the key to the appreciation of metaphorical language was to not mistake it for the literal truth. By doing so, Lewis could give the imagination of new importance: it could not be a real spiritual awareness, the highest form of the spiritual life.<sup>34</sup>

To Lewis, “the question is whether poetic imagination is one of the things to which truth and falsehood can be attributed.”<sup>35</sup> Lewis insisted that images were not true or false. They were more or less accurate, thus leading us to form opinions. They could then be evaluated as true or false. We should thus not expect poetic imagination to be true or false because it does not belong to the category “Is this true or false?” The only question we can ask about imagined things is whether they are meaningful. Lewis thus asks: “And when I had thought this much, a terrible suspicion crossed my mind. If, in any case, we had to be content with metaphors, was the Christian story not as good a metaphor as any? It might not be the literal truth, and so far, the Christians were wrong. But supposing there was no literal truth? Would not Christianity then be as true as Bradley, or as my own version of Solipsism?”<sup>36</sup> His proposed answer affirmed two complementary things: positively, that metaphorical language was absolutely necessary and valid; negatively, that metaphorical language was not directed at truth, and thus he could avoid for now the conclusion that Christianity could be true. He did concede that through its use of metaphors to talk about the Spirit, Christianity had meaning. That was a major step in the direction of Christian theism.

This epistemological conclusion stemmed from a metaphysical conviction: we are of “Spirit,” though we cannot know that immediately. Our knowledge of this is mediated through the “Imagination” and, in our ordinary experience, through metaphorical or poetic language. Through the “Imagination”, “we are indeed coming to recognize that we are

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32 Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 39.

33 *Summa*, I.5, 65–67.

34 Though Imagination could not create new or higher understandings, which Barfield affirmed. Lewis will never agree with this specific Anthroposophical conviction of Barfield’s, that through Imagination, one can increase “truth,” in particular consciousness of Spirit.

35 Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 3, 1600.

36 Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 35.

Spirit and are everywhere in our own country and our own house."<sup>37</sup> Lewis could thus also conclude that poets never lied because they do not say anything that pretends to be "true."<sup>38</sup> "Imagination" was thus crucial for a soul to recognize its oneness with "Spirit" but also to learn cooperation with "Spirit" (to see as Spirit sees). We could know through "Imagination" that we are of "Spirit", though that experience could not be expressed in a truth-oriented language.

Thus, Lewis writes that "only imagination can tell you what it would 'mean' if there were a god: but that doesn't say that it tells you whether there is."<sup>39</sup> By extension, for the Lewis of that time, we could only know that there was truth in the statement "Christ rose from the dead" if the statement had meaning. This was possible through a movement of the "Imagination" through which we could *meaningfully* hypothesize "Christ rose from the dead." "Imagination" thus helps us *see* meaning. This was not enough to bring Lewis to recognize the truth of Christian theism since a *meaningful* statement had to be converted into belief—that is, rendered in truth-oriented statements.

Lewis thus gave the imagination renewed importance, and Owen Barfield rejoiced in that change, though it was not going far enough. Barfield affirmed Lewis' idealism but disagreed with one major conclusion: since all was Spirit, nothing true could be known about this Whole. Lewis did not deny that meaningful things could be said, especially through the "Imagination", which was spiritual awareness, but he did not think that the language used to talk about "Spirit" could be called true or false.<sup>40</sup> Metaphorical language was, by essence, not directed at factual statements, it was thus nonsensical to ask whether this poetic language could yield truth.<sup>41</sup> This human language, and knowledge, were directed at meaning and meaning only.

## Imagination, Truth, and Christian Theism

The renewed positive appreciation of metaphorical language led Lewis to question his earlier complete rejection of Christianity as of no value. In his words: "If Christianity was not a sheer error or literal fact, then it must be the best metaphor available, and so (though not absolute truth) the truest knowable by me: far truer, for example, than the physical sciences or the convictions of common-sense: in fine, for every purpose of action, emotion, and ordinary belief, *simply* true."<sup>42</sup> Of course, if Christianity was the best metaphorical language for who the "Spirit" really was, Lewis was confronted with a real and pressing issue: his view of the "Spirit" was quite different from the one presented by Christianity.

Lewis, for example, realized that to be "Soul," he had to be other than "Spirit." To

37 Norbert Feinendegen, "Introduction," in Norbert Feinendegen and Arend Smilde, eds., *The "Great War" of Owen Barfield and C. S. Lewis. Philosophical Writings 1927–1930*, Inklings Studies Supplement, vol. 1 (2015): 27.

38 Stephen Thorson, *Joy and Poetic Imagination. Understanding C.S. Lewis's 'Great War' with Owen Barfield and its Significance for Lewis's Conversion and Writings* (Hamden: Winged Lion Press, 2015): 137.

39 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 1622.

40 As argued by Stephen Thorson, "Lewis and Barfield on Imagination," *Mythlore*: 17/2 (1990): 12–32. There was considerable debate between Barfield and Lewis regarding the possibility for Imagination to increase spiritual awareness. See for example the strong objection to Lewis' limitation of the power of the Imagination in Barfield's development of the "inspiration-imagination consciousness." Feinendegen and Smilde, *The "Great War,"* 47.

41 See Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 1600.

42 Lazo, "Early Prose Joy," 35.

be one with “Spirit” was to face the impossible task of explaining something that was the source of all living without being able to do so. In other words, “Idealism can be talked, and even felt; it cannot be lived.” His idealist assumption of the “Soul” being one with the “Spirit” had to be abandoned. A passage of *The Pilgrim’s Regress* puts it well: “‘It is only myself,’ he said. ‘It is I myself, eternal Spirit, who drives this Me, the slave, along that ledge. I ought not to care whether he falls and breaks his neck or not. It is not he that is real; it is I – I – I. Can I remember that?’ But then he felt so different from the eternal Spirit that he could call it ‘I’ no longer.”<sup>43</sup> Idealism’s monist view of the universe was beginning to come apart: if Spirit was true, he, Lewis, could not exist. The absolute Subject had to be a clearly *distinct* absolute subject while remaining the ground of all that existed.

On 3 February 1930, Lewis wrote to Barfield this essential description of his slow coming to the God of Christian theism: “Terrible things are happening to me. The “Spirit” or “Real I” is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God.”<sup>44</sup> Spirit quickly morphed into something closer to the God of Christian theism, and Lewis reflected in a dialogical way: “I make your thinking and I make your imagining, do I not know how to use them?”<sup>45</sup> When Lewis acknowledged this value of metaphorical language, he did not consciously know it yet, but he had moved closer to the God of Christian theism. He indeed began to talk to Spirit as if it was a “Thou.”<sup>46</sup> The same month, he wrote in the “Early Prose Joy,” that he discovered the true meaning of surrender by learning to dive and accepting the existence of a personal God, some short time after arriving at Barfield’s home on 30 June 1930.<sup>47</sup> This was a major step, of which Lewis movingly writes that he “admitted that God was God” thus becoming “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”<sup>48</sup>

This convert still did not accept a God that had become flesh, and God was still “sheerly non-human.”<sup>49</sup> It did not take long for the young convert to see he could not take a half-step. In fact, both the metaphorical and “for every purpose of belief,” true language of Christianity, and the personal nature of this new God demanded that he accept the full account of Christian theism.<sup>50</sup> A very definite step was taken during Lewis’ discussion with Tolkien and Dyson, the famous “Addison’s Walk” discussion, about which Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves on 22 September 1931: “It was really a memorable talk. We began [...] on metaphor and myth [...] we continued (in my room) on Christianity.”<sup>51</sup> That talk

43 C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (New York, London: Bantam Books, 1986): 144-145.

44 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 1 Family Letters 1905–1931, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004): 882.

45 Lazo, “Early Prose Joy,” 39.

46 Lewis will explain later in *Letters to Malcolm* that being able to say “Thou” is crucial to the relationship between “each creature,” but is also essential to the God-human relationship. C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Fontana, 1981): 74–78.

47 Lewis writes about this dual lesson in diving in the *Pilgrim’s Regress*: “‘The art of diving is not to do anything new but simply to cease doing something. You have only to let yourself go.’ ‘It is only necessary,’ said Vertue, with a smile, to abandon all efforts at self-preservation.” Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 174.

48 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 266. One should note that Lewis’ recollection of dates needs to be taken with caution as he is notoriously unreliable, even for dates so important to his conversion. In the passage quoted, for example, he gives the date as Trinity Term 1929, while Feinendegen makes the convincing case for the date being a year later, Trinity Term 1930. Feinendegen, “The Philosopher’s Progress,” 139–142.

49 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 267.

50 This last stage of Lewis’ journey, from theism to *Christian* theism, is the least clearly stated or explainable, even to Lewis himself, who writes: “[T]he transition from mere Theism to Christianity, is the one on which I am now least informed.” Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 270.

51 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, 970.

certainly allowed Lewis to move from acceptance of Christianity's metaphorical language to that of the incarnation and resurrection of God-made-man, or in Tolkien's words, the Eucatastrophe (the sudden resolution) of history.<sup>52</sup>

The ultimate conclusion of that talk, and of Lewis' entire intellectual journey, is put very simply in the last chapter of *Surprised by Joy*: "Every step I had taken, from the Absolute to 'Spirit' and from 'Spirit' to 'God', had been a step towards the more concrete, the more imminent, the more compulsive."<sup>53</sup> Lewis finally accepted the claims of Christian theism, bringing together all the threads formed by his quest for Joy and his earliest imaginative longings.

It would be easy to think that Lewis, after his conversion to Christian theism, changed his mind about most of what he had until then believed. There is no denying that there is a before and an after his acceptance of Christian theism. One need only read his book *Miracles* to realize how far-reaching the change was, especially as the book tells much about the Materialist Lewis.<sup>54</sup> It would be, however, a mistake to think that the encounter with Joy, divine and personal, the God of Scriptures, changed everything he had believed. The relationship between the "Imagination" and truth is a good test case for the differentiated attitude he held after his conversion.

## A New View of Spirit

The most radical difference Lewis had to introduce in his philosophical outlook concerning the nature of reality. After converting to Christian theism, Lewis quickly realized that his many inconsistencies could only be resolved by a new relation of the soul to the "Spirit."<sup>55</sup> Barfield would have approved if only Lewis had not also adopted a new metaphysics, that of the traditional, orthodox, doctrine of God. Barfield discerned in the Christian Lewis, with some consternation, what he called an occasional "Talmudic emphasis on the divine transcendence."<sup>56</sup> Lewis had come to the conviction that a radical metaphysical move was needed. His whole approach should no longer be based on an identity of the soul with "Spirit", as he maintained in his idealist period—which Barfield himself had contested—but on a complete otherness of the soul regarding Spirit—which Barfield also contested.<sup>57</sup>

This radical change of perspective can be equated with a radical distinction between

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52 Tolkien writes: "The Birth of; Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation." J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2008): 78.

53 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 275.

54 One must only read the third chapter of the book, "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism," to become aware of the degree of change between the Materialist and the Christian theist Lewis. See Lewis, *Miracles*, 17–37.

55 This was already introduced in his spiritual progression during his broadly "theist" period between 1929 and 1931, though we could wonder whether we should see this as a distinct "period" of philosophical conviction or if it is merely a stage in the slow abandonment of Idealism for Christian theism. We tend to see one's spiritual and philosophical evolution in terms of clear and distinct "periods," but we must wonder if that is the best manner in which to consider C. S. Lewis' coming to the Christian faith.

56 Quoted in G. B. Tennyson, ed. Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 65.

57 This appears paradoxical on Barfield's part, but is a complaint Barfield will retain, even after the close of their "Great War." He, in fact, blamed Lewis for holding that God is both immanent and transcendent but always ending up on the side of transcendence. See Tennyson, *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, 78. Barfield later adds: "He (Lewis) stressed very much the transcendent nature of God, the great gulf between the Creator and his creature, in contrast to the other pole, the immanence of God. But he does say in one of the essays you find in *God in the Dock* that he had done that because in his time there was a greater need to stress the transcendence than the immanence. He did not disbelieve in the holy Spirit or immanence, but he stressed transcendence so strongly it makes me uneasy." *Ibid.*, 133.

God and man: either God or man, both having different “beings.”<sup>58</sup> This newfound distinction can be seen in many of Lewis’ writings. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis comes to affirm that the God-creature relationship is like no other and that God created beings distinctly others.<sup>59</sup> In *Miracles*, God is the God of nature, not a Nature god as he would have been during his realist or even idealist period.<sup>60</sup> One finds the same conviction in *Christian Reflections*, which approves of the orthodox doctrine of creation, as well as in the article “Christianity and Culture” (dated March 1939), in which Lewis affirms a distinction between nature (the psychological) and supernature (the spiritual).<sup>61</sup>

Thus, when Barfield noted the lack of immanence in Lewis, he was only partially correct. Lewis was not by principle opposed to immanence, though in his “Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger,” Lewis recognized that he had indeed stressed transcendence. He had done so, however, not out of doctrinal denial of immanence, but because, as an apologist, he thought the distinction between God/creatures (God’s transcendence) was “the chief obstacle to conversion,” and needed to be strongly reasserted.<sup>62</sup>

One corollary of this transcendence was creation *ex nihilo*, explained as an act of a transcendent God who created something other than himself, thus grounding the possibility for lasting joy. By stressing the gulf between God and man, Lewis’ understanding of Christian theism could endanger the possibility of knowing the “Spirit” (now the personal God of Scriptures) and, by implication, of joy. Lewis found the answer to this possible difficulty, not only in the *ex-nihilo* creation of reality by a transcendent God creating something other than himself but also in the self-revealing nature of this personal God. Only if a personal creating God existed could all his desires be ultimately and lastingly satisfied.

Lewis discerned this cruciality of the revelatory nature of God in two respects. The first was the centrality of the incarnation, and that would prove essential to Lewis’ coming to Christian theism. Barfield had already suggested in *Autem* what Dyson and Tolkien would show Lewis again: fact and imagination were one in Christ—history and myth have fused. For Barfield, in the incarnation, “the truth of fact and the truth of imagination would for once coincide.”<sup>63</sup> That would be the key to Lewis’ final move from theism to *Christian* theism. It was also the key to a new way of understanding the role of the imagination. From that moment, the imagination was not the spiritual instrument of participation in God but an anthropological gift from a God who had himself created through his divine imagination.<sup>64</sup>

The second dimension of God’s revelatory nature was his active revelation. Individual

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58 Here again one finds Barfield’s rejection of an “either/or” relationship which he will also apply to relation between God and man. The question of whether Barfield’s position can properly be termed “pantheism” or “panentheism” does not fall within the purview of this article and will thus not be discussed.

59 See for example his analogical description of the Creator-creature relationship as that of potter to creature Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 30. That, of course, is quite a biblical image Lewis uses, taken from Jeremiah 18.

60 “There is, then,” Lewis writes in *Miracles*, “a God who is not a part of Nature.” Lewis, *Miracles*, 47.

61 C. S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967): 13.

62 Lewis, C. S. “Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970): 181.

63 Owen Barfield, “Autem,” in *The “Great War” of Owen Barfield and C. S. Lewis. Philosophical Writings 1927–1930*, eds. Norbert Feinendegen and Arend Smilde, *Inklings Studies Supplement*, vol. 1 (2015): 119.

64 He had before thought the Imagination to be “the highest form of the spiritual life.” *Summa*, II.13, 92.

souls could know “Spirit” as well as the meaning of the world because the personal God presented in the Scripture was a revealed and revealing God who had done so by creation. This justified why, for the Christian Lewis, man could still know truly. Even after the entrance of sin into the world, the meaning was possible because man’s being had been created in the image of God—which is a form of revelation. Alongside the otherness between man and God came a revelatory relationship between them, guaranteed by God himself.<sup>65</sup> It was not the role of the Imagination to connect us to God. God himself did, through his personal activity.

## A New View of the Imagination

It is not only this new view of the “Spirit” of God that changed Lewis’ view of the “Imagination”, but also a new comprehension of the power of sin. Nothing helps us see the importance of the doctrine of sin for the role of the Imagination than Barfield’s reaction to *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. A problem Barfield certainly had with Lewis’ “Pilgrim John” (the character of his *Pilgrim’s Regress*) is that John finds “shame and sorrow and bewilderment” at what he finds in his own consciousness.<sup>66</sup> Barfield could only recoil at that negative presentation of man’s consciousness.

If, for Lewis, sin is synonymous with disobedience, it was not so for Barfield. To him, it was merely a break of trust, nothing else. The consciousness of sin was instead a positive force, not so much a separation from God than a “revealer” of the ever-increasing need for consciousness of participation.<sup>67</sup> This explains why “sin” was much less negative for Barfield than it was for Lewis and why it did not have radical consequences on the imagination. That sin had a strong ethical connotation for Lewis, to the difference of Barfield, also highlights the impact sin had on the beneficial power of the imagination. Lewis was convinced that sin affected our very being. The soul, and all its powers, was also affected. If that was the case, the imagination had now a diminished importance for Lewis, though it was not erased from Lewis’ anthropology—merely displaced.

Moreover, the imagination was no longer the highest form of spiritual life—a view Lewis had held before and with which Barfield had been in full agreement. Imagination now *reflected* spiritual values but was not spiritual in itself. This was clearly a lower view of the imagination. This devaluation was not demeaning. Lewis merely intended to give the imagination its proper place within his renewed metaphysics and anthropology.<sup>68</sup> The “Imagination”, and along with it, Joy, was a longing resulting from our creating in God’s image. Our desire for stories, for beauty, for joy were gifts from the Creator, but not in themselves the Spiritual.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> This, however, was not a necessary connection, but a consequence of a free decision of Spirit, the Absolute God.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 180.

<sup>67</sup> Tennyson, *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, 115. For Barfield sin heightened our awareness of the evolving relationship with God from one of subjection to one of cooperation and freedom.

<sup>68</sup> Thorson explains: “Lewis’s devaluation was based, of course, on his acceptance of a true creation of human beings as other than God, and on his distinction between the human soul and human spirit.” Thorson, *Joy and Poetic*, 144.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis writes: “I am not, of course, suggesting that these Immortal longings which we have from the Creator because we are men, should be confused with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to those who are in Christ. We must not fancy we are holy because we are human.” Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*,

As a consequence, that was also a major difference that Christian Lewis had with Barfield. Lewis now believed that human artists, through imagination and metaphors, did not create truth or reality. They merely imitate God's creation. "This lower life of the imagination is not a beginning of, nor a step, toward, the higher life of the spirit, merely an image."<sup>70</sup> The association of imagination and imitation is found throughout Lewis' work. Two early essays published in *Christian Reflections* rely on this understanding of the imagination.<sup>71</sup>

On a later date, on 20 February 1943, Lewis makes a strong case for a new relationship between imagination and meaning. Coming to the real question of the letter, he opens by noting that "creation" applied to human activity is an "entirely misleading term," a conviction already shared by his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, who preferred "subcreation."<sup>72</sup> Because we are image-bearers of the only true Creator, we do not and would never participate in the true creation of anything. In this sense, not even meaning could be created anew by the imagination. That was a radical step away from what he had believed previously and certainly regretted by Barfield. Lewis was convinced that we could not properly imagine something that was not anchored in the created reality. He writes: "Try to imagine a new primary color, a third sex, a fourth dimension, or even a monster who does not consist of bits of existing animals stuck together! Nothing happens."<sup>73</sup> Nothing happens because there is no *real* relationship between the active imagination and the given structures and contents of reality.

The same applies to meaning. Lewis continues: "And that surely is why our words (as you said) never mean to others quite what we intended: because we are re-combining elements made by Him and already containing *His* meanings."<sup>74</sup> The imagination, then, can only be meaning and truth-oriented if it becomes a listening habit of God revealed in the Scripture. The imagination can be consonant with the truth insofar as it reflects God's revelation. This does not negate the relationship between imagination and truth, though it gives it a very different place.<sup>75</sup> It values the imagination as a human calling and activity undertaken under God.<sup>76</sup>

This, however, is not the whole story. Based on a study of Lewis' fantasy writing, Peter Schakel has argued that Lewis had come to change his mind, and had come to agree with Barfield on the role of the imagination as truth-oriented.<sup>77</sup> We must also note that

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note, 135.

<sup>70</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 194.

<sup>71</sup> Those two lectures are "Christianity and Literature" (1939) and "Christianity and Culture" (1940).

<sup>72</sup> Tolkien made this very case both in the poem dedicated to Lewis, "Mythopoeia," and in the epilogue to his lecture "On Fairy-stories," in which he memorably wrote: "God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused." Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 78.

<sup>73</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 555.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> For a more specific study of Lewis' understanding of meaning, truth, and imagination, see Charlie Starr, "Meaning, Meanings, and Epistemology in C. S. Lewis," in *Mythlore* 25:3/4 (2007): 161–182.

<sup>76</sup> This is also argued by the theologian-artist Makoto Fujimura in *Art and Faith. A Théology of Making* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2020), 90–92. Fujimura provides a very convincing case for the anthropological importance of the imagination, though his case for the "exceptionalism" of art remains unconvincing.

<sup>77</sup> See Peter Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts in C.S. Lewis: Journeying to Narnia and other Worlds* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) and *Reason and Imagination in C. S. Lewis: A Study of Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

in the last paragraph of a lesser-known article, “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” Lewis finally admits to some truth or rightness in metaphors, which are products of the “Imagination”. “There is a truth or righteousness in the imagination itself,” he concludes.<sup>78</sup> With that final confession, we could conclude that Barfield had finally won their “Great War.”

There could be another explanation for Lewis’ conclusion. We should note that Lewis continued to reject Barfield’s conviction that there was no gulf between truth and reality and that truth was found *within* human consciousness. This helps us *see* that their main difference was not epistemological but metaphysical. At the end, their most fundamental difference was not on the role of the imagination—the epistemological debate of the “Great War”—but on the nature and person of “Spirit”—a metaphysical disagreement that became obvious only after Lewis’ conversion to Christian theism. Lewis had found a new metaphysics in which the imagination was now working. It was not the spiritual activity that related us to God, but God himself through the work of incarnation and the Holy Spirit.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

Lewis’ evolution from atheism, to realism, to idealism and finally to Christian theism weaves together many themes, among which are joy, imagination, and God. This journey includes other complex philosophical reflections, including the forming of a mature understanding of the relationship between imagination and truth. Before his conversion, the “Imagination” connected the soul/mind to “Spirit” and was in and of itself meaning-oriented, albeit not truth-oriented. After his conversion, the “Imagination” was no longer “Spiritual Awareness.” That was replaced by a new metaphysics (now understood as the otherness of God’s being), and a new anthropology (with the central doctrine of creation in the image of God). Under this new understanding of human nature, the “Imagination” was originally both meaning and truth-oriented, though the entrance of sin had affected that original role of the imagination.

Only taking into account the changes in Lewis’ account of the nature of God and the role of the imagination can one really relate the quest for joy and the importance of Christianity as a myth that became fact. At first, It can be difficult to link Lewis’ previous intellectual journey and the pivotal evening of the “Addison’s Walk” conversation. Only when one weaves together joy, imagination, and the coming of a personal God does Lewis’ journey present itself more clearly. It is the path of a reluctant convert moving from life in a materialistic universe to an “Absolute,” slowly acquiring the characteristics of the God of Christian theism: a personal God who imagined a world and communicated himself through poetic language and finally entered history.

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<sup>78</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 265.

<sup>79</sup> This might also explain why the “Great War” was unilaterally ended by Lewis after he came to Christian theism. Lewis rejected Anthroposophy as faithful to orthodox teaching.

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