



In Review: C. S. Lewis and John Polkinghorn

Notes on C. S. Lewis and *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1946).

THIS BOOK by the celebrated author C. S. Lewis records a fantasy one-day bus excursion from Hell to the borders of Heaven. In his entertaining account Lewis highlights some of the characteristics of the “Parousia (Second Coming) paradigm” or model. He emphasizes the profoundly concrete, “solid” nature of the future, where personhood is more real, not less real. “Hell is a state of mind. . . . But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly.”

By way of background, in Lewis’s story Hell is a place inhabited by transparent, Ghost-like beings who live in proud and determined isolation from each other. Quite surprisingly, the damned have the option of taking an excursion to the borders of Heaven. They are under no obligation to return to Hell but may remain in Heaven with the Solid People.

The Solid People dwell in an environment in which a leaf is heavier than a Ghost can lift and water is so solid that it will support a person.

In his first encounter upon arriving at the borders of Heaven, Lewis overhears a conversation between a murderer who has reached and remained in Heaven and his former employer, who has just arrived on the bus from Hell. The former murderer — now a Solid Person — says to his Ghost-like former boss, “I haven’t got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours either. You’ll get something far better. Never fear.” Again, with laughter in his voice, the Solid Person assures his disgruntled Ghost-like former employer, “It will be joy to the mountains [Heaven itself], but there will be plenty of work.”

Lewis then overhears an encounter between two former theological colleagues — one now a Solid Person in Heaven and the other a professionally religious Ghost on the

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excursion from Hell. The Solid Person says, “We know nothing of religion here: we think only of Christ.” In his reply to an invitation to remain in Heaven, the Ghost says to the Solid Person, “Of course I can’t come with you. I have to be back next Friday [in Hell] to read a paper. We have a little Theological Society down there.”

In still another overheard conversation, the Solid Person tells a self-pitying Ghost, “Friend, . . . Could you, only for a moment, fix your mind on something not yourself?”

During his visit with a Solid Person/Teacher — the earthly Scottish author George Macdonald — Lewis learns that “Hell is a state of mind. . . . But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly.” Again, “There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity, that they never gave a thought to Christ.” And again, “All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.”

Later, to a Ghost who loves to paint, a Solid Person says, “When you’ve grown into a Person (it’s all right, we all had to do it) there’ll be some things which you’ll see better than anyone else.”

To a Ghost-like mother on the excursion from Hell to seek her departed son, a Solid Person says with love and mirth, “That’s what we all find when we reach this country. We’ve all been wrong! That’s the great joke. There’s no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living.”

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Finally, near the end of the excursion, the Solid Person/Teacher kneels down on the solid grass with Lewis and shows him a tiny crack in the soil. It was through this crack in the soil that the bus had come from Hell. Then the Teacher explains, “All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of this world, the Real World.” And of Time the Scottish Teacher says, “. . . [It] is the very lens through which ye see . . . something that would otherwise be too big for ye to see at all. That thing is Freedom: the gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of eternal reality.”

Reflections on One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology, by John Polkinghorne (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

DR. JOHN POLKINGHORNE is both a mathematical physicist and an Anglican priest. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society, an Honorary Professor of Theoretical Physics at the University of Kent, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Vicar of Blean, Kent.

In this fascinating book Polkinghorne links the age-long conflict between science and theology with the age-long human quest for an understanding of matter and mind. Science has largely focused on the nature of matter, while religion/theology has involved the nature and destiny of mind.

Polkinghorne shows that, in this century, science has had to abandon all mechanical models of the universe. It has had to abandon God as a Divine Mechanic. Material reality is ultimately nonmechanical, unpicturable, undisclosable, unrevealable.

We may begin with material bodies like mountains, oceans, animals and plants; but if we proceed by reduction to determine their constituents, we finally reach atomic and subatomic levels that quantum physics has shown to be profoundly uncertain and unpicturable. The universe of matter and energy is finally derived from the curvature of time and space, and they are fashioned from nothing (cf. Hebrews 11:3).

Metaphysical reality — mind, spirit, consciousness — is likewise unpicturable, undisclosable, unrevealable. They all are metaphors of physical reality and do not exist in and of themselves. Not surprisingly, oriental mysticism has therefore postulated a Nirvana (“extinction of the self”) of ultimate nothingness.

If, then, we explore the final frontiers either of matter or of mind, we ultimately arrive at nothing.

Polkinghorne thus concludes his thesis by declaring that science and religion/theology are no longer in conflict. Indeed, he states that science and religion/theology find their synthesis in sacrament — which unites the physical and the metaphysical into one. Then he states, “The greatest sacrament, compared to which all others are types and shadows, is the Incarnation in which ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth: we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.’”

Kenosis¹ and Transformation

In this sacrament of divine *kenosis* (self-limitation), God, who is ultimate Being, adopted metaphor/symbol as his own reality. The personal human God was proleptically (anticipatorially) disclosed in metaphoric reality by his birth, life, death and resurrection. At this First Coming the human God not only disclosed his person and personhood; he left a universal and profound legacy of human metaphoric self-consciousness, of self-identity, of human personhood that had not previously existed.

This human self-consciousness has propelled the human race for the last 2,000 years. Although this self-identity/self-consciousness has been misused and misapplied, the self-identity of personhood is a beginning reflection of the divine identity, the divine personhood. Man is made in God’s image. It will yet be shown that such personhood provides the essential and ultimate basis for the human potential to act incognito, to reflect the Anonymous Jesus. It is not possible to act

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anonymously without an inviolate sense of self-identity. It is not possible to love the neighbor unless we simultaneously love ourselves.

For those who claim their present endowment and who long in faith for the imminent eschatological disclosure (Parousia or Second Coming) of symbol/reality that exists only in personhood, there awaits the exciting prospect of transformation to new heights of personhood that will permit an open future and will provide an eternal freedom to act as Jesus acts, to live as he lives — in an anonymity that does not threaten reality. “It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

The imminent Parousia (Second Coming) will so disclose the reality of Jesus’ Person that human self-identity, human personhood, will then be so eternally inviolate that we can fully live as he lives — wholly for the other. In this glad day the human God will celebrate the sacrament with us as he promised: “I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. . . . I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:16, 18). Jesus is himself the Sacrament — not only of *kenosis* but of transcendence. We celebrate him. And as we celebrate him (the Other/all others), we ourselves become eternal metaphors of his own personal human reality. The Second Coming thus continues the transformation of humanity begun so utterly anonymously at his First Coming.

Reflections on Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World, by John Polkinghorne (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1989).

IN THIS IMPRESSIVE and carefully reasoned book, John Polkinghorne shows that God’s love involves divine self-limitation. In love he yields himself to the “other.” Likewise, God’s eternal freedom involves both *kenosis* (self-limitation) and transcendence. Thus, at Creation God’s creatorly activity in the emerging cosmos implies that he makes “room” for the “other” and for “otherness.” He no longer solely occupies the “same space,” the “same time,” etc. On the other hand, at Creation the cosmos is given existence and the opportunity for interaction with the Creator and he with it.

Then, in the course of history, God acted in/on himself to accept the *kenosis* (self-limitation, self-emptying) of the Incarnation — birth, life, death, resurrection. He irrevocably adopted the mental/conscious/material existence of mankind as his own reality. History now shows that his *kenosis* led to the elevation of self-consciousness of all mankind. His consciousness made “room” for our consciousness — the consciousness of his “other.”

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Now we await the Parousia (Second Coming), the imminent and glorious future Appearing of “this same Jesus” (Acts 1:11). At his Appearing he accepts the *kenosis* (self-limitation) of sharing the universe and eternity with a transcendent race of human beings fashioned in his own image. His eternal condescension creates “room” for our

transcendence. Our responsive love and *kenosis* make “room” for his transcendence and the transcendence of all “others.” This is true freedom. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

Endnote

1. The Greek word for self-emptying is *kenosis*. “. . . God is considered as absolute letting-be, as self-giving, as self-spending. Kenosis [self-emptying] is understood as the way God relates to the world; creation is a work of love, of self-giving.” — Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 94.

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