INTRODUCTION: OXFORD’S BONNY APOLOGIST

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C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) is the world’s best-known and most-admired Christian apologist. More than fifty years after his death, his books continue to sell in the millions, and countless readers around the globe have been influenced and inspired by his writings. In a 2004 Christianity Today survey, Lewis’s Mere Christianity (1952) was named the best religious book of the twentieth century. Yet, curiously, Lewis is not generally considered a major figure by academic theologians (MacSwain & Ward, 2010, pp. 1-2). There are very few books that discuss his religious writings with the scholarly depth and rigor they deserve (but cf. Purtill, 2004; Beversluis, 2007; Williams, 2013; Baggett, Habermas, and Walls, 2008). This book attempts to do just that.

Lewis himself was not a professional theologian or philosopher, but a highly regarded professor of English at Oxford and Cambridge, specializing in medieval and Renaissance literature. After being an atheist for many years, Lewis converted to Christianity in his early thirties. Over a period of approximately two decades, Lewis published a series of widely-read works of Christian apologetics, including The Pilgrim’s Regress (1933), The Problem of Pain (1940), The Abolition of Man (1943), Miracles (1947), and Mere Christianity (1952). As a testament to Lewis’s growing popularity as a Christian writer, Time magazine featured him on the cover of its September 8, 1947 issue. Since his death in 1963, Lewis’s reputation as a Christian author and apologist has continued to grow.

What accounts for Lewis’s success as an apologist? First and foremost, I believe, clarity and logic. Lewis was a master of clear, forceful, chiseled prose. Moreover, like Franklin Roosevelt in his famous fireside chats, Lewis was able to communicate difficult ideas in simple, direct language that people of all backgrounds could understand. As a communicator, Lewis was arguably one of the giants of the twentieth century.

Lewis was also a master of logical reasoning and intellectual combat. For more than a decade, he served as president of the Oxford Socratic Club, a student organization dedicated to open discussion of the arguments for and against Christianity. At nearly every meeting, Lewis was there, “sniffing the imminent battle and saying ‘Aha!’ at the sound of the trumpet” (Farrer, 1992, p. 142). Despite regularly locking horns at these meetings with such secular heavyweights as A. J. Ayer, Antony Flew, Bernard Williams, and Gilbert Ryle, Lewis would “always maintain the cause,” and “no one could put Lewis down” (Farrer, 1992, p. 142).
Despite Lewis’s immense popularity as an apologist, one must still ask: Are his apologetical arguments sound? Can they stand up to rigorous intellectual scrutiny? That is the central focus of this book.

Lewis defended Christian belief on many fronts, and it would be impossible to consider all his apologetical arguments here. To keep things manageable, we have selected what we consider to be Lewis’s five most important apologetical arguments: the argument from desire, the argument from reason, the moral argument, the trilemma argument, and Lewis’s response to the problem of evil. The first four arguments are examples of positive apologetics: the attempt to provide positive rational justification for religious belief. The last argument—Lewis’s answer to the problem of evil—is a piece of negative apologetics: the attempt to defend religious belief by responding to objections.

So what are these five arguments, and are they rationally convincing? Let us begin with the argument from desire.

1. The Argument from Desire

Lewis’s argument from desire (or argument from joy, as some call it) is a modified version of a stock medieval and Renaissance argument for life after death. Versions of the argument are offered by Aquinas (1945, p. 692), Ficino (1948, pp. 211-212), Hooker (1845, p. 201), the authors of The Spectator (1907, p. 126), and many others. There are two basic forms of the argument, one philosophical and the other broadly theological. The first appeals to the Aristotelian dictum that “nature does nothing in vain.” Aquinas offers a typical statement of this philosophical version of the argument:

[I]t is impossible for natural desire to be unfulfilled, since “nature does nothing in vain.” Now, natural desire would be in vain if it could never be fulfilled. Therefore, man’s natural desire is capable of fulfillment, but not in this life . . . . So, it must be fulfilled after this life. Therefore, man’s ultimate felicity comes after this life (Aquinas, 1956a, p. 166).

The second version of the traditional argument from desire appeals not to the supposedly naturally knowable notion that all natural desires must be satisfiable, but to the confidently posited goodness and faithfulness of God as revealed in both Scripture and human experience. The Cambridge Platonist John Smith (1618-1652) offers an eloquent version of this form of the argument in his Selected Discourses (1660):

[The soul] knows that God will never forsake his own life which he hath quickened in it; he will never deny those ardent desires of a blissful fruition of himself, which the lively sense of his own Goodness hath