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WHAT HAS POETRY TO DO WITH APOLOGETICS? T. S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" for the Apologist

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Tertullian famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Apologists today might ask a similar question: "What has poetry to do with apologetics?" The answer is: a great deal. Just as philosophy indeed has an important place in Christian thought, so too imaginative literature has a significant, if often unrecognized, place in the work of apologetics, as another mode in which the Holy Spirit can reach the hearts and minds of unbelievers. C. S. Lewis said that reading George MacDonald's fantasy novel *Phantastes* was what set him on the journey that ultimately led to faith: "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."¹

What Has Poetry to Do with Apologetics?

Apologists today face significant challenges in making a case for Christianity. The influence of postmodernism in today's culture means that logical and evidential arguments are often considered irrelevant, and the New Atheists have contributed to an intellectual and cultural atmosphere hostile to Christianity. Literature is valuable in this context because it offers a way to present the faith imaginatively and experientially; stories and poetry can evade atheist hostility and satisfy the postmodern desire for a compelling narrative without sacrificing the truth claims of orthodox Christianity.

T. S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" serves as an excellent example of how imaginative literature can be used effectively in apologetics. The poem is a first-person account of the journey to Bethlehem from the perspective of one of the "wise men from the east" (Matt. 2:1 ESV); it is also an extended metaphor for the journey of conversion. Because it is a powerful and meaningful poem in its own right, independent of its use in presenting the gospel, it provides an authentic and inviting entry point for apologetics.²

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Establishing common ground between the apologist and the skeptic is an essential early stage in the apologetic endeavor. Without such common ground, discussions can easily

degenerate into assertions, on both sides, of entrenched positions. Not only does this kind of sound and fury usually signify that nothing has been communicated, but it often puts the apologist in an antagonistic relationship with the atheist.

At its most basic level, having common ground means that the apologist and the skeptic have a shared understanding of the meaning of key terms of the debate. As noted C. S. Lewis scholar Michael Ward makes clear, "It is no good arguing for 'God' or 'Christ' or for 'the atonement' or even for 'truth' until the apologist has shown, at least at some basic level, that these terms have real meaning. Otherwise they will be just counters in an intellectual game, leaving most readers cold. Likewise, apologetic arguments for the authority of 'the Church' or 'the Bible' or 'experience' or 'reason' itself, must all be imaginatively realized before they can begin to make traction on the reader's reason, let alone on the reader's will."³

Because literature allows the reader to enter into another's perspective or experience, it can help the apologist and the skeptic to develop a shared, imaginatively realized meaning for words such as "conversion" and "belief." "The Journey of the Magi" is literally about a physical journey, and metaphorically about conversion to Christianity. The use of the journey as a metaphor for the experience of accepting Christ as Lord invests the idea of "conversion" with real meaning for both the skeptic and the apologist. The skeptic may or may not want to continue on this particular journey of conversion, but the concept now has meaning at a deep level. Further meaningful discussion is thus made possible.

IMAGINING IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND

Apologetics is sometimes a pastoral as well as an intellectual activity, and empathizing with the difficulties faced by a skeptic can help the apologist foster deeper conversations. However, genuine empathy with atheists can be difficult for Christians who have known the Lord most of their lives; the experience of not knowing God or of doubting His goodness may seem utterly alien. The resulting lack of empathy can lead to missed opportunities or even serious misunderstanding. Literature can help to bridge the gap by allowing the apologist to enter imaginatively into the seeker's perspective.

"The Journey of the Magi" helps the apologist feel how wrenching the shift from unbelief to belief can be. The poem opens with a description of the difficult journey faced by the magi en route to Bethlehem: "'A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey: / The ways deep and the weather sharp, / The very dead of winter.'"⁴ The narrator continues to recount the difficulties of the journey, from the "refractory"⁵ camels to "the villages dirty and charging high prices."⁶ With candor, the narrator remarks, "There were times we regretted / The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, / And the silken girls bringing sherbet."⁷

Christians recognize that the salvation Christ offers is worth infinitely more than all the things of the world. A seeker's hesitancy in turning toward Christ and turning away from worldly pleasures may thus seem unreasonable. As Michael Ward cautions, however, the word "salvation" may not have anything like the meaning for an

unbeliever that it does for a Christian. For the unbeliever, the things of this world are real and appealing; the things of the Kingdom are merely promises or hints. The seeker is likely to share the experience of the magi, who are haunted by doubts and fears even on the road to Bethlehem: "At the end we preferred to travel all night, / Sleeping in snatches, / With the voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly."⁸

What of the encounter with Christ? Many seekers have experiences that they acknowledge as encounters with God— yet they may still not be ready to accept Christ as Lord. Likewise, many atheists refuse to accept the reality of God even in the face of what seems like ample evidence. Why not? Eliot again allows the reader to experience the struggle toward belief. Of their encounter with the Incarnate Christ the narrator says, "We had evidence and no doubt."⁹ However, even with this certainty the narrator struggles with assimilating this experience: "I had seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."¹⁰

Eliot's agonized narrator reminds the apologist that even in the face of overwhelming evidence, the choice to accept Christ as Lord is not always easy. The way of Christ is, after all, the way of the Cross. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?...For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:3, 5).

"The Journey of the Magi" also reminds apologists to be empathetic about the seeker's fears of rejection. Becoming a Christian may lead to hostility from loved ones, and accepting the claims of Christ means turning against the ways of the world. The poem's unsettled ending serves as a reminder of that point: "We returned to our places here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods. / I should be glad of another death."¹¹ The seeker may need the reassurance of fellowship in order to proceed on the journey of conversion.

IMAGINING IN ORDER TO DESIRE

Desire plays a significant role in the process of conversion. As C. S. Lewis notes, "If we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object, and will even appear as the rival of that object."¹² Despite all the efforts of naturalistic philosophers, Lewis notes, "we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy."¹³ This desire is for union with God; however, the desire is naturally "wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies."¹⁴ One function of apologetics, then, is to help awaken this desire in seekers and direct it to the proper end.

In his essay, Lewis explains how scriptural imagery can direct our desire rightly. However, most skeptics and seekers today are unlikely to be as familiar with biblical imagery as Lewis's readers, and they may also have negative associations with the Bible. As a result, other forms of literature may be more useful for the apologist in awakening that desire for God and in providing a way to recognize, focus, and direct that desire toward its right end.

“The Journey of the Magi” provides just such an imaginative experience that can help awaken and direct a seeker’s hidden desire for God.¹⁵ The narrator is an outsider, a traveler who seeks the Messiah without knowing exactly what he expects to find. The reader is thus invited to step into an experience that allows for doubts and fears, yet also draws the reader to consider important questions: What would it be like to seek Christ? What would it be like to find him?

“The Journey of the Magi” deliberately leaves many questions unanswered. At the center of the poem, the narrator finds that words fail him in attempting to describe his encounter with the infant Jesus: “it was (you may say) satisfactory.”¹⁶ Such wordlessness in the face of the Word made flesh is a profound reminder that apologetics ultimately points not to an idea, but to a Person. Eliot’s poem invites the skeptical or seeking reader to step back from words and arguments, and to consider the bigger picture: what does it mean *for me* that God became incarnate?

Furthermore, throughout the poem Eliot uses Christian images without explanation, inviting further exploration. The “three trees on the low sky”¹⁷ evoke the Crucifixion, but leave it tantalizingly on the edge of experience. The “old white horse”¹⁸ hints at the triumphant Christ of Revelation. The “tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel”¹⁹ suggests the miracle of wine and water. The open-ended quality of “The Journey of the Magi” allows space for the as-yet-unconvinced reader to reflect on who Christ is, with an imagination enriched by images that carry powerful symbolic content and biblical associations.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“The Journey of the Magi” provides a starting point for the apologist seeking to enter imaginatively into the experience of an uncertain seeker after Christ. The larger possibilities of practicing this kind of engagement are significant. For instance, the imaginative process outlined here can be used in more challenging terrain, such as finding a foothold for empathy in a fully atheistic worldview such as that presented in Phillip Pullman’s overtly hostile *His Dark Materials* novels. However slender the thread of shared experience or emotional connection may be in such works, if apologists can find it, it can provide the beginnings of a bridge of genuine communication to even the most antagonistic atheist.

Imaginative literature such as “The Journey of the Magi” provides a way for the reader to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8 ESV). No other form of apologetics can serve in exactly this way, providing an experiential mode of engagement with Christianity that complements the intellectual mode of apologetic argument. As C. S. Lewis put it: “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.”²⁰ Literature can help the reader to see the world, if only for a moment, illuminated by the light of Christ. Such an experience can be life-changing.

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NOTES

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1955), 181.
- 2 "The Journey of the Magi" is a classic of English literature. It is widely available in anthologies as well as online at sites such as the Poetry Archive: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=7070>.
- 3 Michael Ward, "The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics," in *Imaginative Apologetics*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM Press, 2011), 72.
- 4 T. S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi," *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 1–5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 7–9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 15–19.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 36–38.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 39–42.
- 12 C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1949), 29.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 15 Such was my own experience.
- 16 Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi," 31.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 20 C. S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1949), 140.