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# The Weight of Forgiveness: A Critical Exposition of Sin in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

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**Abstract**

*Religious ideologies have always attempted to answer the questions of meaning and purpose; questions that fixate and will continue to fixate the human condition. Story-telling has been imaginatively used to weave narratives that help give meaning to theological assertions that are sometimes too convoluted for adherents to identify with. This paper will try to critically assess the Christian concept of sin and how it is being portrayed in the popular children fiction, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe written by C.S. Lewis. The paper will attempt to critically assess what children and adults alike learn through this engagement of theological positions found within literary texts.*

**Keywords: Children's literature, Morality, Christian theology, Sin.**

Religion has played and will continue to play a crucial part in shaping the world we live in. However in today's age of scepticism, religion is often looked at with doubting eyes and often followed up with accusatory voices. No longer is it looked at as a universal source of answer to the world's problems. Religion has often been pushed to the margins and no longer wields the unconditional influence in societies the world over that it once did. Questioning the relevance of religious doctrines is necessary as it engages us in our constant quest for the truth. To do so however

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requires us to understand the theology behind a religious truth claim. Theological studies therefore play a vital role in establishing, critiquing or challenging the religious traditions held by different religious communities. How has literature played a part in exposing us to these religious claims and how successful a medium of instruction is it? Readers develop attachments to the characters they read about. As readers empathise with the experiences of the characters they read about within the texts, they are in fact identifying with the ideological positions that the characters of these texts embody or represent. Through this process of identification, they are continuously making sense of the positions taken up by these characters within the narrative of the texts. This eventually nudges them into subscribing to or rejecting some of the ideological positions that the author is wielding through his/her narration.

Ideological exchanges taking place within texts are not limited to a particular age group; if they purport ideas that claim universal adherence, they should embody a universal quality about them. A religious position is one that embodies a universal claim. The paper will make a philosophical assessment of the Christian truth claims regarding sin and its impact upon a community of believers. By critically analysing the text *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* which has often been slated as children's literature, I seek to explore the impact of religious doctrines that have percolated down to texts consumed by children and the pedagogic influence these texts wield. Since texts are not only limited to a particular reading audience, I also will consider how adults may engage with children's stories at a level that is more critical.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* is a book series written by C.S. Lewis consisting of seven high fantasy novels that narrate the adventures of children from our world who find doorways that lead them to the fictional world of *Narnia*. In this world of magic, mythical beasts and talking animals, the children explore the world and in the process learn to make sense of who they are and what they want to be in life. They play a crucial role in the unfolding history

of *Narnia* and are called upon by Aslan the Lion who is also the creator of *Narnia* to do battle with the malevolent forces that seek to destabilise the natural order. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the second book in the book series and deals with the adventures of four siblings as they find a wardrobe that magically transports them to the fictional world of *Narnia*. Their adventures force them to confront the realities of struggle and survival and the allegiances they forge and the choices they make prove to be crucial steps in determining how their stories will eventually unfold.

American critic and author Natalie Babbitt is of the opinion that the differences between children's books and adults' books are not necessarily as simplistically differentiated as one may think. She says that "children's books are neither necessarily less serious than adults' books, nor necessarily concerned with 'simpler' or 'different' emotions: 'there is, in point of fact, no such thing as an exclusively adult emotion, and children's literature deals with them all."[1] Children's literature therefore should not be misjudged as being a literature with a narrative suited only for a child's imaginative capacity. The imaginative construction of the fantastical world of *Narnia* in the book, a world of fantasy which exists on a different plane of reality to our own, does not exclude from its scope of influence the moral as well as philosophical debate that arise in a rationally constructed world. Working on John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, George P. Landow held that "feeling and imagination play- and should play- crucial roles in moral decision; so that to develop the imagination is to develop a mature human mind."[2] This notion of a 'mature' mind is in fact modelled around the idea of the adult perspective and its response to reality.

Addressing issues of right and wrong is no easy task. Different ideological positions will have different ways of rationalising what is and is not right. Since the *Narnia* series subscribes to a Christian worldview, the ideological position being taken up by Christianity in terms of right and wrong is intimately associated with the idea of God. *Narnia* too is bound by a moral law that may

seem quite obvious as seemingly good and evil forces do battle for supremacy in the world of *Narnia*. However an incident within the book involving Aslan the Lion, the creator of *Narnia* and the most powerful being in that universe needing to submit to the demands of the White Witch who represents the evil faction within the *Narnia* universe throws the idea of power and accountability into question. The incident in question involves an act of treachery by Edmund, one of the children who had entered *Narnia* and had harboured intentions to rule over his other siblings by betraying them into the hands of the White Witch. Despite being rescued from the clutches of the White Witch and being brought into safety, this children's book takes an unconventional turn. Being scolded and learning from one's mistake is not enough. The price that needs to be paid is high, high enough that it would require the death of Aslan, the creator to ensure that Edmund's mistake is 'paid' in full.

Assessing this particular episode to determine its pedagogic objectives for both the child and the adult reader, a critical reading would reveal that the author Lewis has inserted the central tenet of the Christian worldview in the text. Just as Aslan must die to right the wrong of Edmund, this episode allows us to explore the necessity of the death of God for the wrongs of humanity through a critical assessment of the Cross of Christ. In a world that is becoming increasingly sceptical towards religious truth-claims and God, the question of God's existence or non-existence raises a number of issues with morality being one such area of interest. Richard Taylor, a prominent American philosopher makes the assertion that "(t)he idea of moral obligation is clear enough, provided that reference to some higher lawmaker is understood. In other words, our moral obligations can be understood as those that are imposed by God. But what if this higher-than-human lawmaker is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation still make sense?"[3] He responds to this question in the negative and he goes on to say that "(t)he concept of moral obligation is unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone."[4] Reflecting on the modern mindset that has become

increasingly sceptical in relation to belief in religion and the notion of God, Richard Taylor significantly points out the predicament thus faced. He writes:

> "The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, without noticing that in casting God aside they have also abolished the meaningfulness of right and wrong as well. Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things as war, or abortion, or the violation of certain human rights are morally wrong, and they imagine that they have said something true and meaningful. Educated people do not need to be told, however, that questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion."[5]

V.N. Volosinov is of the opinion that all sign systems are ideological in nature as language plays not merely just a simplistic role of denoting meaning but also serve to provide an evaluative role as well.[6] Volosinov also argued that, "(T)he domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs"[7]. In the book, Aslan must sacrifice himself at the Stone Table which represents a symbol of shame and death that he must approach as he is hounded by all his enemies. This episode is not unlike what Jesus had to undergo during his walk to Golgotha and the link between the stories is essentially an allegorical account of the Christian worldview. The child reader, though not necessarily aware of the religious elements within the text, still comes into contact with this religious experience through this fictional account in a literary text. Accusations of religious propaganda being employed by the author have been raised but propaganda implies either deception or exaggeration to make a position more appealing when compared to the counter-perspective. This accusation however does have its limitation at it may omit an author's ideological position which he may wish to express at some level within his/her writings. For Lewis, his understanding of life and its expression within the literature he writes about is intimately weaved together by his Christian worldview. The positions that the different characters take therefore become representative of the

arguments that either validate or defy the Christian worldview that Lewis shares through his textual accounts.

When we critically approach the symbolic significance of the Cross of Christ, we are confronted by a number of theological assertions chiefly related to sin, propitiation and redemption. These are all expressions of a moral order and the consequential justice that must take place within a moral universe grounded in a moral God. The cross then plays a central role in the Christian moral argument as Stott highlights its purpose: "(it) is an exposure of human evil, (and) is at the same time a revelation of the divine purpose to overcome the human evil thus exposed."[8] To understand why the death of Christ is necessary and see why the forgiveness of sins is so crucial to the Christian worldview, Stott cautions us in our approach and mentions the problems that arise if we trivialise something like 'sin'. He considers the arguments that seek to bypass the need for God to forgive through Christ's death as flawed. He argues thus:

> "For us to argue 'we forgive each other unconditionally, let God do the same to us' betrays not sophistication but shallowness, since it overlooks the elementary fact that we are not God. We are private individuals, and other people's misdemeanours are personal injuries. God is not a private individual, however, nor is sin just a personal injury. On the contrary, God is himself the maker of the laws we break, and sin is rebellion against him."[9]

An attempt then is needed to establish what 'sin' is from a theological perspective and this in turn allows us to assess man's relationship with God in relation to sin from the Christian worldview. Emil Brunner defines sin accordingly: "Sin is defiance, arrogance, the desire to be equal with God, ... the assertion of human independence over against God, ... the constitution of the autonomous reason, morality and culture."[10] Stott too is in agreement with this definition and also highlights the consequences brought upon by sin. He reasons that "(s)in is not only the attempt to be God; it is also the refusal to be man by shuffling off responsibility

for our actions."[11] Responsibility is a key issue in the Christian worldview and it is due to this that Lewis does not make light of the issue even in a book that is supposed to be for children. How is responsibility being introduced to the child reader as well as the adult reader/critic? To suggest that death becomes a logical result of one's actions is no easy notion to swallow, either for the child or the adult. And yet this is exactly what the episode of the Stone Table and the Cross of Christ suggest. Our actions do have consequences and the necessity to understand the responsibility that choices entail become a crucial element in understanding what literature can instruct both children and adult readers alike.

Stott highlights that the "problem of forgiveness is constituted by the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion, between God as he is and us as we are."[12] It follows therefore according to Stott that the "obstacle to forgiveness is neither our sin alone, nor our guilt alone, but also the divine reaction in love and wrath towards guilty sinners."[13] This is so because although, as Stott points out, 'God is love', yet he cautions us to remember that "his love is 'holy love', love which yearns over sinners while at the same time refusing to condone their sin."[14] Stott understood the philosophical dilemma regarding the concept of God's 'holy' nature and raises the following questions: "How, then, could God express his holy love? – his love in forgiving sinners without compromising his holiness, and his holiness in judging sinners without frustrating his love? Confronted by human evil, how could God be true to himself as holy love?"[15] To highlight this need for the death of Christ and the necessity of the cross, C. H. Dodd points out that sin and atonement are "not to (be described as) the attitude of God to man, but to describe an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe."[16]

Someone *ought to* take up the responsibility of propitiating the moral process that is grounded in God's 'holy' reaction to sin or defiance against him. Brunner understood the importance of responsibility and asserts that responsibility and man's nature are

intrinsically linked together. He argues that "one who has understood the nature of responsibility has understood the nature of man. Responsibility is not an attribute, it is the "substance" of human existence. It contains everything..., (it is) that which distinguishes man from all of the creatures..."[17] Brunner concludes his argument that "if responsibility be eliminated, the whole meaning of human existence disappears."[18] C.S. Lewis too took responsibility very seriously and in his essay 'The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment' he elucidates what he finds lamentable namely "the modern tendency to abandon the notion of just retribution and replace it with humanitarian concerns both for the criminal (reform) and for society as a whole (deterrence). For this means, he argues, that every lawbreaker 'is deprived of the rights of a human being...'"[19] To take one's responsibility seriously and carry the weight of the penalty that is the result of the mistakes made is a necessary action that 'man' must confront as Lewis insists that "to be punished, however severely, because we have deserved it, because we 'ought to have known better', is to be treated as a human person made in God's image."[20]

To highlight the ideological leanings found within the book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it may be noted that the moral order that the book subscribes to is not self-contained; it is in fact aligned with a moral order that exists outside it. Thus Aslan's response to the White Witch's claims for Edmund's life for his betrayal was simply that "His offence was not against you."[21] Though the child reader may not understand this reference to the offended party, the adult reader may critically arrive at the conclusion that this implies a standard that must be grounded in the idea of morality, a moral law that pervades Narnia which is in fact the moral law that is part of the Christian worldview. To further highlight the attempt by the author to speak of an all-pervasive moral order that does not limit itself merely to Narnia, he makes references to an entity that exists on the fringes of the book series who is in fact the ruler of all; the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. In the conversation between the White Witch and Aslan we notice this

appeal to an 'order' or 'law' that has already been put in place that bounds Narnia together, an order that cannot be circumvented otherwise destruction will befall Narnia itself if the laws are not followed or satisfied. She makes her claim on Edmund's life thus:

> "... what is engraved on the sceptre of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea? You at least know the Magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill... that human creature is mine. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property."[22]

This reference to the 'Emperor-beyond-the-Sea' will not be understood if the reading of the text is limited to the book. The reading needs to extend beyond this book and the entire series too. This is in fact a reference to God and the ideological intent of the author to introduce these references within a children's narrative cannot be understated. The children who read these lines will not be able to find the answers to some of these questions and it therefore pushes them to probe further if their thirst for the truth behind these words is not quenched. Even from an adult reading, the moral arguments that are associated with religious dialogue are not only of interest but raise many probing issues as well. From a simple word or reference, even Children's Literature can be a window to more ideologically mature musings.

The need to establish a moral order that is grounded on a supreme-being is implied when Aslan himself reacts with great displeasure at the suggestion that one should attempt to bypass the moral demands of the 'Emperor-beyond-the-Sea'. He does not take it lightly. His simple response to the suggestion to bypass this 'atonement' is a question which speaks volumes: "Work against the Emperor's Magic?"[23] His implied meaning is that the moral order of the universe cannot be dismissed so easily. It is also interesting to note the consequences that arise when we analyse the implications of the White Witch's statement on her act of killing Aslan at the Stone Table. She triumphantly asserts:

> "And now, who has won? Fool, did you think that by all this you would save the human traitor? Now I will kill you instead of him as our pact was and so the Deep Magic will be appeased. But when you are dead what will prevent me from killing him as well? And who will take him out of my hand *then*? Understand that you have given me Narnia forever, you have lost your own life and you have not saved his. In that knowledge, despair and die."[24]

This episode where death seems to have conquered and silenced Aslan would naturally bring 'despair', as the White Witch points out, for the children characters in the book as well as the children readers who've come to intuitively pledge their allegiance to the protector Aslan. Yet to introduce to the child the idea that death is not the end but rather a door to something more complete than the previous life is a fundamental view held by almost all world religions. This episode throws us into the topic of soteriology (from the Greek *soteria*, 'salvation') which deals with 'theories of the atonement' or 'the work of Christ'.[25] As the children mourn the death of Aslan, death does not overwhelm him but rather, he overcomes it as "(t)he Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan."[26] The reason behind Aslan's escape from the penalty of death is because, according to him:

> "Her (the White Witch) knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."[27]

This is a direct reference to the concept of the atoning quality of the Cross of Christ. As had been pointed out, child readers who are yet unfamiliar with these concepts are slowly but surely introduced to these ideological thoughts through art. Though they are not expected to be able to completely grasp the whole concept

of sin, redemption and re-creation as found in the Christian religious belief system, such stories help to introduce readers to these concepts. Literature provides that platform to share religious ideas in a manner that prepares the reader for possible future encounters into more advanced conceptions of religious truths.

Reflecting on the story where Aslan 'needed' to satisfy the White Witch's demands for a life in exchange for Edmund's own, we see the lesson of responsibility that is being enforced upon the mind of the readers, especially the child. The references to Christ and his atoning sacrifice can be seen in the book when Aslan himself claims that "I have settled the matter. She has renounced the claim on your brother's blood."[28] To a child, there is nothing but joy to have a protector to come to the rescue especially in a time of need. The identification for children therefore with good is represented by the act of sacrifice, a lesson taught by Aslan's sacrificial attitude. This of course is also a fundamental Christian principle and the child readers are subtly being persuaded to model their own gradual character transformation into adulthood based on the character models as encouraged by these books.

Moving to an adult's perspective of redemption the question may be raised, "Why did Aslan or Christ for that matter need to die?" Just as the White Witch was mistaken in her understanding of the 'Deeper Magic' and despite Aslan's words that she was deceived because she did not understand it well enough, we should be careful to note that the ideological implications of these assertions made are not so simplistically resolved. Why is the Cross of Christ so important to the community of faith? As theological studies developed, so too did the understanding of the nature of the cross evolve. No longer was it linked to a transaction that God needed to agree upon with another external party. This notion cannot philosophically hold weight because that would raise up the contradiction of an all-powerful being submitting to another power, thus rendering the claim of omnipotence void. Stott links the relationship as one that exists only between the moral law and God,

"(f)or the law is the expression of his own moral being, and his moral being is always self-consistent."[29] Nathaniel Dimock captures this truth well in the following words:

> "There can be nothing... in the demands of the law, and the severity of the law, and the condemnation of the law, and the death of the law, and the curse of the law, which is not a reflection (in part) of the perfections of God. Whatever is due to the law is due to the law because it is the law of God, and is due therefore to God himself."[30]

This statement helps to clarify the relationship between God and the law that we break, a law that is grounded in his moral being that does not exist independently of God but is in fact an expression of his 'holy' nature. That is why Anselm in his book *Cur Deus Homo?* asserts that "God owed nothing to the devil but punishment"[31] but something is definitely owed to God and it is man who owed to God something that needed to be repaid. Anselm defined sin as "not rendering to God what is his due"[32] this being what Stott refers to as the necessity of "the submission of our entire will to (God's will)."[33] Therefore to sin, according to Anselm, is to take away from God what is his own, which means to steal from him and so to dishonour him.[34]

The dilemma in the relationship between man and God lies in this fundamental point of conflict whereby, as Anselm points out, "man the sinner owes to God, on account of sin, what he cannot repay, and unless he repays it he cannot be saved"[35]. In order to address this problem, Anselm asserts that the responsibility needs to be taken by Christ because "there is no-one... who *can* make this satisfaction except God himself.... But no-one *ought* to make it except man; otherwise man does not make satisfaction." Therefore, "it is necessary that one who is God-man should make it".[36]

The necessity then of the cross and the death of one of the Persons in the Trinitarian Godhead is the solution to man's restoration to a relationship with God. It is important to note that God is to satisfy himself and only himself in this act of forgiveness

so as to stay consistent with the ontological concept of the greatest conceivable being. Stott makes the claim that "(t)o say that (God) must 'satisfy himself' means that he must be himself and act according to the perfection of his nature or 'name'. The necessity of 'satisfaction' for God, therefore, is not found in anything outside himself but within himself, in his own immutable character."[37] The need for God to take some form of action is, as P. T. Forsyth claims, an attribute that is perfectly compatible with his nature as "the holiness of God... is meaningless without judgement" and the one thing God could not do in the face of human rebellion was nothing. Forsyth argues that God "must either inflict punishment or assume it. And he chose the latter course, as honouring the law while saving the guilty. He took his own judgement."[38] This reconciliation is made possible only by God's choice to take an active role in man's redemption only through Christ. David F. Wells says that, "...man is alienated from God by sin and God is alienated from man by wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God can look on man without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated."[39]

What then are the implications of this sacrifice through Christ for the Christian community? What does Aslan's act of sacrifice which gives Edmund new life imply for the character as well as the readers? Edmund experiences a conviction that will sustain him throughout the book series; his allegiance to Aslan will not waver despite facing odds that seem too insurmountable to overcome without compromising his allegiance to Aslan. The author presents the idea to children that belief in Aslan or an ideology may be challenged but one must stay true to it because it has been tested and it has been found sufficient. For a Christian community with adherents from all age-groups, Stott makes the argument that the death of Christ and its implications are far reaching for the spiritual, moral and social growth of the community as "Christians can no longer think of themselves only as 'created and fallen', but rather as 'created, fallen and redeemed'."[40] And this is a great incentive upon

the community to change as it lays bare the need to acknowledge our inadequacies and our debt to God through his act of grace for the cross is, as Stott points out:

> "On the one hand, ... (it is) the God-given measure of the value of our true self, since Christ loved us and died for us. On the other hand, it is the God-given model for the denial of our false self, since we are to nail it to the cross and so put it to death. Or, more simply, standing before the cross we see simultaneously our worth and our unworthiness, since we perceive both the greatness of his love in dying, and the greatness of our sin in causing him to die."[41]

And being thus redeemed and 're-created' Stott says that those who have experienced this new life must be what they were always intended to be during our initial creation to affirm, "our rationality, our sense of moral obligation, our sexuality (whether masculinity or femininity), our family life, our gifts of aesthetic appreciation and artistic creativity, our stewardship of the fruitful earth, our hunger for love and experience of community, our awareness of the transcendent majesty of God, and our inbuilt urge to fall down and worship him. All this (and more) is part of our created humanness."[42] This in fact is a holistically inclusive notion that touches all points of a person's life. Making this choice and accepting all the consequences that are associated with this choice are not to be taken lightly for the 'born-again Christian'.

It is clear then that this shows both the power and danger of literature as it can provide the drive to further push readers towards taking an ideological stance as supported by the books children read. However to accuse literature as propaganda, which Lewis has himself been accused of, is to limit the understanding of literature and its place in society. For literature paints a picture of reality and its power and its appeal lies in its ability to suggest, not make incontrovertible claims to truth. It is then up to the individuals to choose whether to follow these suggestions and pursue the truth of the messages further. In fact it is this pursuit of

the truth behind the theological claims made in this literary piece that affords us the opportunity to delve deeper into these texts to unravel the complexities of these theological concepts. Critically approaching this text, we notice how religious doctrines can find expression within texts enabling religious dialogue to take place within the experiences of the various characters. And this is true for any ideological position that the author may wish to share to his/her readership. For the child reader, the positions taken up by the characters they identify with will eventually mould them into subscribing to the ideologies that these particular characters represent. Similarly, the theological implications of sin and its removal for the Christian adult affirm the need to understand one's life and the need to recreate it. What is the weight of forgiveness? To be pardoned for a wrong we commit is no simple experience to dismiss. Aslan did not need to die for Edmund. Similarly God did not need to die for humanity. But the idea of a person, being or entity that personally identifies with our problems is a powerful incentive to believe in the said person/being/entity. Whether it is the child's allegiance to Aslan or the adult's commitment to Christ, an act of grace and to be personally accepted despite our weaknesses and our flaws has proven and continues to prove to be a powerful persuasive force.

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