



# Identity Politics, Western Culture, and Christian Faith:

## Lessons from C. S. Lewis on Rationalism, Romanticism, and Christendom

Today's large-scale Muslim immigration into Europe, an immigration which, quite apart from any fears about terrorism, has the potential to change the public face of that continent in which the Christian faith came to maturity, understandably fuels an effort on the part of Europeans and North Americans in defense of their own culture. But any defense of the secular West raises questions both about what is being defended and upon what grounds. Is it the post-Christian West that is to be defended? And will such a defense be based upon principles presumed to be universal, such as those derived from the Enlightenment, or upon particularistic ideals that claim their origin in blood or soil, ideals which ultimately can be equated with a kind of paganism? Or, is it to be a defense of Christendom, or at least of Christian moral tenets? The issues

involved here are far-reaching, and in order to understand them better I think that an indirect approach may be most fruitful in clearing our minds and setting out the essentials of each position.

C. S. Lewis' last novel, *Till We Have Faces*, a retelling of the Psyche-Cupid myth, is probably his most profound work of fiction. The novel is set in a fictional pagan kingdom, apparently somewhere north of the Black Sea and shortly before the fall of the Persian Empire to Alexander the Great. Along with Lewis' typically superb storytelling, the novel features explorations of themes such as men and women, love, sex, and marriage, even statecraft. But one overriding theme of the novel is that of particularity and universality, or to be more specific, that of religion and philosophy. Let us see how this novel can serve as a frame-

work to focus attention on questions of particularity and universality as they apply to Western culture, Muslim immigration and identity politics.

The Kingdom of Glome, where the story is set, is dominated by the cult of the goddess Ungit, a type of the Greek Aphrodite, but of the more bloody Near Eastern variety to whom human sacrifices were sometimes offered. The narrator of the story is Orual, oldest daughter of the King, and the aspect of the plot that concerns us revolves around a captive Greek slave, nicknamed the Fox, whom the King her father buys because he intends to have his hoped-for son (never begotten, however) "brought up in all the wisdom" of the Greeks. This is not because the King has any inclination himself to philosophy, but solely for the prestige value of Greek culture at that time



and place. The two competing strands, the clear rationality of Greece and the dark worship of Ungit, are embodied in two figures, the Fox and the old priest of Ungit.

The Fox, far from an atheist, more like a deist, and the priest of Ungit represent two polarities of human thought, the universal and the particular, or the thin or clear and the thick, as Lewis himself referred to these in one of his essays. Greek thought sought after universal truths everywhere accessible to reason; the paganism of Glome was content with stories and myths, cults and sacrifices, as had been handed down by their ancestors. In one dramatic scene the old priest tells the King that it is necessary, in order to avert disasters from the kingdom, to make “the Great Offering”, to sacrifice a selected person to the goddess or the son of the goddess, and the King, afraid that he will be the victim, allows the Fox to try to refute the priest’s discourse, which was based on sacred pagan stories and in which he had spoken of the mysterious and sinister Brute, who is, “in a mystery, Ungit herself or Ungit’s son, the god of the Mountain; or both”:

In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect [for] a man so offered is said to be Ungit’s husband, and a woman is said to be the bride of Ungit’s son. And both are called the Brute’s Supper. And when the Brute is Ungit it lies with the man, and when it is her son, it lies with the woman. And either way there is a devouring . . . many different things are said . . . many sacred stories . . . many great mysteries.

The Fox replies in the rational language of the Greeks:

“Do you not see, Master,” said the Fox, “that the Priest is talking nonsense? A shadow is to be an animal which is also a goddess which is also a god, and loving is to be eating—a child of six would talk more sense. And a moment ago the victim of this abominable sacrifice was to be the Accursed, the wickedest

person in the whole land, offered as a punishment. And now it is to be the best person in the whole land—the perfect victim—married to the god as a reward. Ask him which he means. It can’t be both.”

But the priest does not reply with arguments based on Greek modes of thought.

“We are hearing much Greek wisdom this morning, King,” said the Priest. “And I have heard most of it before. I did not need a slave to teach it to me. It is very subtle. But it brings no rain and grows no corn; sacrifice does both. It does not even give them boldness to die. That Greek there is your slave because in some battle he threw down his arms and let them bind his hands and lead him away and sell him, rather than take a spear-thrust in his heart. Much less does it give them understanding of holy things. They demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book. I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.”

Let us see how this contrast applies to certain issues in contemporary culture, and indeed to the history of human thought.

Most of the human race throughout history has been like the devotees of Ungit. Their religion has been based on sacred stories and rites handed down from who knows whom and who knows when. “No one has ever seen the composer of the Vedas, and it is impossible to imagine one”, said Vivekananda, a nineteenth-century Hindu teacher. Such a conception of man’s relationship with the divine is one of par-

ticularities, of “dark places” and of “life and strength”, not of rational and universal reasoning. Even those speculations of pagan India or China often considered as philosophy did not really escape that way of thinking, and did not create philosophy as Europe came to know it. For Europe, or rather Greece, was different. The Greek people, wrote Jacques Maritain, “may be truly termed the organ of the reason and word of man as the Jewish people was the organ of the revelation and word of God”. In Greece philosophy began, philosophy that, yes, could be and often has been used as an enemy of supernatural religion, but the only type of philosophy that could effectively critique the mass of myths and sacred stories that generally has provided the religious foundation of mankind.

On the intellectual level, the myths and sacred stories of the Greeks themselves were no match for philosophy, and in the two or three centuries after the death of Socrates in 399 B.C., philosophy administered an intellectual defeat to pagan religion. There was practically nothing that could be said on behalf of paganism by a philosopher, without a radical reformulation of the pagan myths as simply philosophical truths clothed in allegory. Thus in Lewis’ novel, after the old priest dies, the new priest who has learned to think in the Greek manner from the Fox explains that the goddess Ungit “signifies the earth, which is the womb and mother of all living things” and that Ungit’s son “is the air and the sky, for we see the clouds coming up from the earth in mists and exhalations”. In this way philosophy killed paganism, at least in the mind of the intelligentsia.

About the same time as paganism was dissolving, the true God was born into the human race in a story that was particular and sacred but this time was also historically true. Here was no mass of mythic contradictions. Yes, there was and is mystery in the Catholic faith, but that faith is not like paganism. It can, partly with the aid of philosophy itself, justify its claims and give a “reason for the hope” that constitutes the Christian message, as St. Peter taught

(I Peter 3:15). Thus in Christendom philosophy flourished, and whatever of life paganism still retained among the common people received its deathblow from the Church and her teachings—from her sacred teachings about our salvation by the Blood of the God-Man, but this time a sacred teaching that did not shun the wisdom of the Greeks but sought it and refined it and used it. Hence was created a mixture of sacred particularities with universal truths, something truly new and unique in the world. Thomas Aquinas and many others were as finished philosophers as Plato or Aristotle, but they worshipped the Incarnate God-Man and partook of the sacred offering of his Body and Blood as well, without doing violence to their status as philosophers.

For many reasons outside the scope of this article, however, Christendom, the sacred yet rational culture created by the Church, did not last. Protestants fell away, and within the Catholic world itself elites began to ignore, then to despise, the Faith. By the eighteenth-century Europe's loss of its faith was well along, but it clung to reason, or to a sort of semblance or shell of reason. The reasoning of the Enlightenment was a sort of reason, but it was hardly robust, hardly able to grasp the whole of reality. It was desiccated, partial, mocking, reductionist. And soon a rival to this shallow reasoning emerged and offered itself as an alternative. This was what we call the Romantic. The artificial clarity of the second half of the eighteenth century began to be replaced by the heavy and sometimes dark particularities of the Romantics. The universalism of the Enlightenment, rejecting both the mysteries of the Faith and the real range of reason, failed to satisfy men's souls, and the result was the increasing

embrace of the particular, the passionate, but also the irrational, even the dark irrational. In the music of the nineteenth century there is the passionate sublimity of a Beethoven but also the witches' sabbath of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*.



The desiccated rationality of the Enlightenment was not utterly banished, and since then it has existed in an uneasy rivalry with the particularities of Romanticism. In our time, under the blows of postmodernism, the rationalities of the Enlightenment are in retreat, an uneven and sometimes slow retreat to be sure, but an unmistakable retreat nevertheless. Reason, as officially represented today, stands essentially for the same empty formulas as it did in the Enlightenment, and it is increasingly despised, increasingly unable to say much on its own behalf. Peoples, tribes may we say, are making claims not in terms of reasons grounded in Greek universalities, but in terms of their identity, their blood, their race (as they term it), their soil. The ineffectual response of the Enlightenment is to mumble and to retreat into multi-culturalism, to concede this demand and that, pretending all the while that it has not betrayed its own stated commitment to its variety of universalism with its belief in the essential sameness of everyone and everything. Thus a university dean

yields to demands which mock his university's formal commitment to reason and equality, while the German chancellor welcomes Muslim immigrants into her country in the name of the universal values of the Enlightenment, blind to the simple fact that while all peoples are one in nature, the lack of specificity of human nature allows for the existence of very different cultures, of very different expressions of our single humanity. The official upholders of the Enlightenment are fearful, fearful to offend demands made by those who care little for the Enlightenment and its universalism. This should not surprise us, though, for as the old priest in Lewis' novel said, Greek wisdom "does not even give them boldness to die".

Here we have a paradox. Mere universalism, however true, "does not even give them boldness to die". Christendom made use of Greek wisdom, but it joined that wisdom to a particular sacred story about a God dying and rising again. The civilization of Christendom was a common way of life created by the Church, but not a vague or dreary sameness, for it put down roots in different places and varied as upon a common theme. Christendom was always universal and particular at the same time. Its foundations were indeed universal, a message entrusted to the Church to be preached to the entire world, but it was the particularities chiefly that gave our ancestors "boldness to die", not syllogisms, even syllogisms that are true and necessary for right thinking. Men do not usually die for the law of non-contradiction, but for their homes, their king, and their shrines.

How does this apply to our own times? It is hardly odd that the influx of Muslims into historically Christian lands, into Europe and (in much fewer numbers)

North America, is evoking a reaction among some which is grounded solely in particularity, in identity and blood. But any reaction grounded only in such particularities is a radically insufficient response, always unworthy of a Catholic who can never abandon the universalism of the Faith. Catholicism can never rest solely upon the particular. Moreover, in another paradox, despite its strange appearance in Western eyes, its remnants of an otherwise forgotten tribal age, the claim that Islam makes for itself is grounded in an assertion of universality. Even if it can exhibit a particularity, extending even to the barbaric, still as an Abrahamic religion it pretends to a universal revelation intended for all mankind. Thus in the end it will never be intellectually satisfactory to oppose Islam's claims with mere assertions of identity and particularity. Even though more is needed than universalism to hold a civilization together, in the intellectual realm claims grounded in universality (even when misplaced) will always be stronger than claims based merely on blood and soil.

Today, however, both in Europe and in North America, efforts to assert the cultural identity of European peoples—whether

called identity politics or the alt-right—have frankly embraced particularity. In their most extreme forms, apparently more widespread in Europe than in North America, they are openly pagan, that is, they are attempting a revival of the cults of old European pagan gods as the ultimate expression of European identity. Seeing where Enlightenment rationalism has led us, and sensing that so many others are making their claims simply on the basis of *what they are*, they want to do the same thing. But even if this were possible, even if real paganism could be revived, it is the wrong thing to do. Wrong because the Greeks were correct in their discovery of universality, wrong above all because the one true God has already given us that fullness of both the particular and the universal which is the Catholic faith, and which is the only genuine identity open to European peoples. For a Catholic an assertion of Western particularities is not enough. The West is nothing but a secularized shell of Christendom, and it is Christendom that we must seek, however unlikely it is that we shall find it—at least anytime soon.

One thing more. Christendom was always a culture open to all, open to be sure

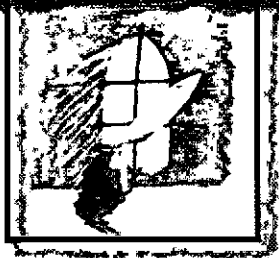
not with a dreary sameness but with a vibrancy of local color and local difference. But it is closed to no nation, to no peoples. It is not wrong or irrational for European peoples to desire to keep their way of life (to the extent that it is a Christian way of life), nor even to restrict or limit the entry of those who are apt to radically change that life, but it is both wrong and irrational to base their claim for that way of life merely on the particularities of their own blood and soil or to regard others as different in any sense which mocks the essentials of human nature. As Catholics all our prayers and aspirations for our common social existence must ultimately be grounded in the Faith. Otherwise our endeavors are not worthy of our ancestors, who, not only were willing to fight to preserve Catholic Europe, but likewise risked their lives to carry their Catholic faith to all the corners of the earth and incorporate all nations into the one fellowship of God's people.

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## New Voices

## New Poetry in English

By Denise Sobilo



*"Murder is no better than cards,  
if cards can do the trick."*

—C.S. Lewis  
*"The Screwtape Letters"*

### Small Sins

Easily pardoned with but a pennyweight of penance; venial, as to seem insignificant works of Satan's seigneurial. These little things do little harm; no need for any then to gall at such small offences as if mortal peril. And yet, venal the sin's effects are seen to work, and cumulative, to enthrall the soul. For pennies purloined become in time a whirlwindfall of worldly gain and heav'nly loss, wretched before the wailing wall.

The devil will collect withal:  
the moving finger then will scrawl;  
tally the sins, though each be small;  
and write the sinner for the fall.