

# THE PRINCETON - C.S. LEWIS NEXUS: TIGERS TOUCHED BY JACK

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*For anyone interested in seeing or sharing our presentation after today:*

*Email us if you want to receive a link to clips of today's event at the webpage above, where we also show many ways this Oxbridge polymath influenced the lives of Princetonians. See video clips from the past two years, plus articles, remembrances, and interviews with five Princeton professors in our "Princeton Chronicles" series.*

## I. SETTING A TABLE FOR OUR C.S. LEWIS FEAST

**A. Princeton Chaplain Dean Gordon and CSLS-P founders:** The late Dean Ernest Gordon, who deeply appreciated Lewis, helped three students to launch the C.S. Lewis Society at Princeton in 1974. The founders--Dr. Alberto Coll '77, Stuart Knechtle '78--have recorded their story of this launch with Arch Davis, a grad student. The group this trio led began to sponsor lectures on topics in academics and Christian apologetics, hosting leading intellectuals and authors. What they started continues today.\*



**B. Dr. John Fleming,** a Princeton English Literature legend hired in 1965, is (among many distinctions) a recognized Lewis scholar who has opened the realm of *Lewisiana* to countless students. His chapter on Lewis as "**Literary Critic**" opens the magisterial book, *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*.

→ One in the Class of '72, a Superior Court Judge in New Jersey, caught the Lewis-spark...

**C. Turning Points:** C.S. Lewis models the quandary of a brilliant student, studying at an elite university (Oxford), and grappling with the "God and Christianity" question. His period of atheism lasted almost 20 years but in 1931 he "gave in"—a "most reluctant convert." Hat tips to J.R.R. Tolkien for his role, and to Max McLean for capturing this journey in his film "*The Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C.S. Lewis*." Lewis wrote of his saga in *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy*.

→ Many of us came to Christianity like Lewis, kicking and screaming, dragged by the weight of the evidence—e.g. Princeton Chemistry Prof Andrew Bocarsly: see [youtube.com/watch?v=hyJHiOCUJZA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyJHiOCUJZA). My Princeton story is similar, and my most influential guide in growing in faith was C. S. Lewis, especially through *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain* (!), *Miracles*, *God in the Dock*, *Perelandra* and *The Great Divorce*. (I am tempted to add Lewis's other Sci-Fi books and 12 others.)

**D. C.S. Lewis déjà vu:** Sitting at Jack's feet reminds us of a *superb Princeton lecture or preceptorial!* Lewis shows us: (1) vast knowledge and appreciation of the classics and philosophy (a P-connection), (2) integration of cutting edge science, even quantum mechanics (a huge P-nexus); (3) the role of a humble servant. Just as we cherish "Princeton in the nation's service," Lewis models a similar spirit--we might call it "*in humanity's service*." This is shown in his huge number of letters, his extreme generosity, and much more. *Especially we see this in Lewis's response to BBC's proposal to broadcast his insights on Christianity to Great Britain.* (Excerpts are on the last page.)

## II. MERE CHRISTIANITY—AN OVERVIEW OF BOOKS I AND II

**Intro:** A few years ago, **Princeton University Press** selected *Mere Christianity* as one of the great religious books of all time, with a fascinating story as to how it came to be. Thus it deserved its own “biography,” and George Marsden was invited by Princeton U. Press to write *C. S. Lewis’s ‘Mere Christianity’: A Biography*.\*\* This most famous book by Lewis (aside from the seven Chronicles of Narnia books) is arguably the most impactful C.S. Lewis book among Tigers of Old Nassau. So let’s dive into the opening sections that Lewis might have called, “The Art of Being Shocked.”

### A. Lewis begins *Mere Christianity* by noting something peculiar about human beings: we constantly appeal, in our statements, to standards of behavior.

1. The fact that we *quarrel* over who is right shows our tacit agreement of a fixed code to which an appeal can be made; if we did not accept this code, we would have to fight it out. We don’t argue whether the code is correct; rather, we argue that we have come closer to fulfilling it—or, if we have broken it, we argue that we had a legitimate reason for doing so.

→ Even a professed relativist, if someone cuts in front of him in line, will be upset—and he won’t excuse the behavior if the person says that in his “culture” it’s okay to cut people off!

2. Lewis argues that this *moral/ethical code is universal and cross-cultural and is written in our conscience*, and, if that is the case, it must have a super-natural source.

3. In another of his books--*The Abolition of Man*--Lewis calls this code the *Tao*. The Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals not only presupposed the existence of the Tao, the Nazis (like all people) were aware of it but chose to break it. The best way to define the Tao: *It is the way we expect other people to treat us!*

4. Many anthropologists argue that morality is not cross-cultural, but varies wildly from culture to culture; but that is simply not true. Since Freud, moderns have taken marginal, abnormal behavior and treated it as if it were the norm; but the only reason we *recognize* psychopaths is that we know right from wrong.

→ In an appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis shows that the Tao is universal and cross-cultural by lining up quotes from diverse cultures (Greek, Roman, Norse, Hindu, Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Native American, and Anglo-Saxon) and showing that the core values of all these cultures are virtually equivalent.

5. **Responses:** Some critics say the Tao is not super-natural but is made up by prophets, but that too is false: the true role of prophets is not to introduce *new* laws but to *remind* us of the old ones. Prophets who make up new moral codes are *false* prophets. Other critics say the Tao must be man-made for we teach it to our children; but we also teach them math and we don’t make that up. Morality/math are not invented but discovered.

6. **Yet other critics** argue that ethical behavior is merely the acting out of a natural instinct (for survival, for procreation, to defend one’s family), but that is only partially true. We *do* follow natural instincts, but what happens when we must choose between two instincts that are at odds with one another? The only way we can choose is by appealing to a third thing (*tertium quid* in Latin) that will allow us to choose which instinct to follow.

7. But if this third thing allows us to choose *between* instincts then it cannot itself be an instinct: the ruler we use to tell us which piece of wood is the right length for the room we are building cannot be itself one of the pieces of wood; if we want to know which note we should play next on the piano, we appeal not to the notes on the piano but to the score.

8. The fact of the matter is that we (unlike the animals) are moral/ethical creatures; only man does (or does not do) what he *ought* or *should*. Animals merely follow the laws of nature, while we follow the laws of *human* nature that are written in our conscience (the Tao). **Lewis’s key takeaway: There is a Law of Right and Wrong, and yet we break it every day.**

**B. Though we know that we must keep the Tao, we find we cannot: every religion (and every person) knows this, but only Christianity takes it seriously.**

1. While religion tells us that we can't follow the Tao but we should try anyway, Christianity seeks a more radical solution to sin.
2. If, as most moderns believe, Jesus Christ was *only* a good moral teacher, then he really has little to offer us; Christ, inasmuch as he was a prophet, merely restated the universal Tao.
3. The solution to our ethical dilemma *cannot* come via a restatement of the Tao (even a perfect one like the Sermon on the Mount); it is clear that we have not and never can keep it.
4. The main mission of Christ was not to teach but *to invade*. Our world, writes Lewis, *is enemy-occupied territory and "Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed . . . in disguise" and is calling us to join his cause.*
5. In contrast to the belief (initiated by Rousseau) that men are perfectible creatures who lack only proper education, Lewis asserts we are *"rebels who must lay down [our] arms."*
6. The problem with man is *not* ignorance and poverty, but sin, rebellion and disobedience. We can neither perfect ourselves nor our society by our efforts; the evil that prevents us lies not in a few villains or bad social planning or widespread illiteracy, but in the heart of every fallen human being.
7. Christianity begins with a humble confession that we cannot satisfy the requirements of the Law (the Tao) and a surrender of our whole self to Christ.
8. Christ is God himself in human form; through his suffering and death on the cross, *he paid our debt*. This sets the stage for him to bring us back into a right relationship with God (and the Tao).
9. Though he resists defining the exact nature of the Atonement, Lewis makes it clear that salvation rests not in the Tao but in sharing in the Life of Christ.

**C. In his most famous apologetical statement, Lewis gives another compelling reason why we cannot dismiss Christ as merely a good man and nothing more.**

1. Christ claimed to be the Son of God and to have the power to forgive sins; if he was not, in fact, who he claimed to be, then he was either a raving lunatic or the greatest liar that ever lived.
2. Christ, then, is either a Liar, a Lunatic, or the Lord (Lewis's Trilemma); the one thing we cannot say about him is that he was a good man but not the Son of God. Indeed, if Jesus was not the Son of God, the Pharisees were *right* to condemn him!
3. This Trilemma only works because Jesus was a Jew and therefore a monotheist; had he been a Hindu and claimed to be one with God, his statement would not have been blasphemous.
4. For the Jew, Muslim, or Deist, God has no son; for the Hindu, Buddhist, or New Ager, we are all sons of God—Jesus is unique because he claimed to be the only-begotten Son of God.
5. The Trilemma cannot be extended to all holy men and prophets (Moses, Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed): these prophets only claimed to have heard from God and to have been a conduit for his word. *Jesus claimed to be God himself in the flesh.*

Louis Markos, Professor in English & Scholar in Residence at Houston Christian University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; he is the author of 25 books, including *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*, *C. S. Lewis for Beginners*, *From A to Z to Narnia with C. S. Lewis*, *The Myth Made Fact*, *From Plato to Christ*, *From Achilles to Christ*, and *Ancient Voices: An Insider's Look at the Early Church*. His *Passing the Torch: An Apology for Classical Christian Education* is due out this fall from IVP Academic.

\* "CSLS-P" refers to the C.S. Lewis Society at Princeton, which went into an inactive state in the 1980s until 1992, when it was revived with the founders' permission and moved to Trinity College in Trinity, Florida. It is now called Apologetics Inc. though the C.S. Lewis Society name is used for public events.

\*\*A videotaped review of this book is up at [princetonandcslewis.com](http://princetonandcslewis.com) –presented by Doug Whallon '72.

## APPENDIX

### **Excerpt from a letter of Dr James Welch of BBC to C.S. Lewis on 7 Feb 1941:**

*Dear Mr. Lewis... I write to ask whether you would be willing to help us in our work of religious broadcasting. The microphone is a limiting, and rather irritating, instrument, but the quality of thinking and depth of conviction which I find in your book [**The Problem of Pain**] ought sure to be shared with a great many other people; and for any talk we can be sure of a fairly intelligent audience of more than a million. Two ideas strike me: (1) You might be willing to speak about the Christian, or lack of Christian, assumptions underlying modern literature. (2) A series of talks on something like 'The Christian Faith As I See It, by A Layman': I am sure there is need of a positive restatement of Christian doctrine in lay language."*

### **Lewis's reply on 10 Feb 1941...**

*Thanks for your kind remarks about my book. I would like to give a series of talks as you suggest, but it would have to be in the vacation. Modern literature would not suit me.*

*I think what I mainly want to talk about is the Law of Nature, or objective right and wrong. It seems to me that the N.T., by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always assumes an audience who already believe in the Law of Nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I give a series of talks I should mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then. Some title like '**The Art of being Shocked**' or '**These Humans**' would suit me. Let me know what you think of this and how many talks and at what dates (roughly) you would like. Yours sincerely, C.S. Lewis*

### Other Quotes from C.S. Lewis, to whet the appetite...

Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither. *—Mere Christianity*

Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important. *—God in the Dock*

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has arisen—not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. *--"Is Theology Poetry"*

The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God. *—Mere Christianity*

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. *—Mere Christianity*

Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you do, and you will presently come to love him. *—Mere Christianity*

We regard God as an airman regards his parachute; it's there for emergencies, but he hopes he'll never have to use it. *—The Problem of Pain*

It cost God nothing so far as we know, to create nice things: but to convert rebellious wills cost him crucifixion. *—Mere Christianity*