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Interpretation and the shaping of experience: theology of suffering and C.S.Lewis' *A Grief Observed*

Abstract

C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* remains one of the most popular and highly recommended books on grief for bereaved people, and yet some of the experiences Lewis recounts strike readers as distinctive and unfamiliar. . In this paper I draw attention to these distinctive, less familiar experiences, and make sense of them in the light of Lewis' theology. In so doing, I provide one example of how a person's worldview can shape their experience – in this case, how the phenomenology of grief is infused by the person's conceptual world. At the end, I point to some of the practical (pastoral and clinical) implications of my analysis, and also to some implications about our understanding of the nature of grief.

Introduction

A Grief Observed is an edited version of a journal the Christian writer C.S. Lewis kept following the death of his wife. In addition to experiences familiar to many, arguably the most prominent themes of the journal are striking, distinctive, and not commonly shared. These themes relate to acute fears, early in the journal, regarding the construction of mental images of his wife, accompanied by a sense of God's absence, and, later in the journal, to the resolution both of these fears, and of the sense of God's absence. In this paper I will draw attention to these distinctive features of Lewis' grief, and consider them through the lens of aspects of Lewis' theology. In so doing I will draw attention to the way in which interpretation – here, theological interpretation – can infuse and shape experience, including experiences of grief.

I will proceed in the following way. First, I will draw attention to some features of Lewis' experience of grief which, I will suggest, are distinctive. I will then turn to some theological themes in Lewis' wider corpus: his purgative theology of suffering, and negative (or apophatic) theology. I will then return to *A Grief Observed,* and show how this theology helps to make sense of the distinctive aspects of his grief highlighted at the beginning. I will then illustrate a further point drawing on some work in psychoanalysis: that the relationship between interpretation and experience is likely to go both ways and be multi-dimensional. Finally, theology is probably more interesting to religious people than non-religious people; with this in mind, at the end I will point to some reasons why (at least some) non-religious

people should be interested too, and to some implications of this paper for our attempts to understand the nature of grief more generally.

A Grief Observed seems to have been written by Lewis entirely for his own therapeutic benefit (Gresham, 2001, xxi). He only submitted it (pseudonomously) for publication at a slightly later date, at which point he may have cut some sections out, but did not add further sections. Therefore, while he may have decided later to publish it to help others, we can be reasonably confident that the book also reflects Lewis' actual experiences. This is important for this paper, the overall point of which is to highlight the extent to which someone's theology – and by extension their worldview more generally - can significantly shape their experience.

A Grief Observed: some distinctive themes

A Grief Observed is the edited journal Lewis kept following the death of his wife, (Helen) Joy Davidman. Davidman died on 13th July 1960 and Lewis submitted the journal for publication on 27th September of the same year – the journal covers an undefined interim period of at least a month (Wynn, draft, 9). Davidman and Lewis were well-established friends but relatively recent lovers. They initially had a marriage of convenience (via a civil ceremony) in order for her to keep her right to remain in the UK in 1956, but then fell in love and had a Christian rite the following year. By this time Davidman was already ill with the cancer that ultimately killed her: the marriage service took place at her hospital bed (L'Engle, 2001, vi).

Lewis published *A Grief Observed* pseudonymously – and the book was even recommended to him by friends who thought it may provide some consolation in the face of his bereavement. It is still recommended by therapists to people in bereavement today (see e.g. Recommended bereavement books and funeral poems | MuchLoved). This may in part be because, as Kate Saunders notes, 'there is so little literature about the weird landscape of grief … *A Grief Observed*… is the most accurate account of bereavement, in all its shock and guilt and pain, that I have ever seen, and reading it made me cry with the relief of not being entirely alone.' (Saunders in Lewis, 2015a, 91, 92).

As Saunders indicates, many people who have experienced grief will recognise their own experience of grief in much of Lewis' description. To give a few examples of, I think, common experiences in grief articulated in *A Grief Observed*:

> No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing….
>
> There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says…. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 3)
>
> Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything.
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 9)
>
> I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 12)

In spite of these, I think, commonly recognisable experiences, as Lewis' stepson, Douglas Gresham, noted, the *'a'* in the title of *A Grief Observed* is significant. Lewis' journal is not intended as the experience of an 'everyman'. In support of this point, others have not only compared, but also contrasted, Lewis's experience with their own (e.g. L'Engle in Lewis, 2001; Freely in Lewis, 2015a, 101 - 106).

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Lewis' experience relates to his fear, expressed repeatedly early on in the journal, that, in trying to remember his wife (whom he calls 'H.'), he will sentimentally misrepresent her. This is a fear that takes central stage in much of the first part of the journal. For example:

> But the bath of self-pity, the wallow, the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of indulging it – that disgusts me. And even while I'm doing it I know it leads me to misrepresent H. herself. Give that mood its head an in a few minutes I shall have substituted for the real woman a mere doll to be blubbered over. Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it.
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 4)

> Already, less than a month after her death, I can feel the slow, insidious beginning of a process that will make the H I think of into a more and more imaginary woman. Founded on fact, no doubt, I shall put in nothing fictitious (or I hope I shan't). But won't the composition become more and more my own? The reality is no longer there to check me, to pull me up short, as the real H so often did, so unexpectedly, by being so thoroughly herself and not me.
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 16)

> Slowly, quietly, like snow-flakes – like the small flakes that come when it is going to snow all night – little flakes of me, my impressions, my selections, are settling down on the image of her. The real shape will be quite hidden in the end. Ten minutes – ten seconds – of the real H would correct all this. And yet, even if those ten seconds were allowed me, one second later the little flakes would begin to fall again. The rough, sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness is gone.
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 17)

Experiencing, noting and mourning the fading of memories is not unique to Lewis. For example, Jacqueline Dooley, reflecting on her experience of grief following the death of her daughter Ana, writes:

> Memories are fragile too. Before Ana died, my memories of her bloomed, vivid…. Now all I have is the old memories and I am holding on to them too tightly. They disintegrate under my scrutiny, slipping away like sand through my desperate fingers…. (Dooley, 2020, cited Ratcliffe, forthcoming, 132).

Dooley's comment differs from Lewis' concern in that she notes the fading of memories, whereas Lewis fears not so much not-remembering, but misremembering. But what I think is more distinctive about Lewis' experience is the *fearful preoccupation* he has about misremembering H., and the fact that this fear plays such a prominent, central role in his description of his grief. , This worry, which is expressed early in the journal, is accompanied by a further aspect of Lewis' experience that has been noted as distinctive: a pervasive sense of God's absence. Lewis puts this sense of God's absence in the following way:

> Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. [….] go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the

> inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. (Lewis, 2015a, 5)

Maureen Freely, writing from the perspective of an atheist who had a non-religious upbringing, writes of the way in which, while much of Lewis' experience is recognisable to her, 'What made no sense to me was the question that makes its first appearance in the seventh paragraph and dominates the rest of the book, 'Meanwhile, where is God?' What did he mean by this question? What was lurking underneath?' (Freely in Lewis, 2015a, 104). Finding Lewis' sense of God's absence in grief unfamiliar is not limited only to non-religious people. Madeleine L'Engle contrasts Lewis' experience to her own: 'Perhaps I have never felt more closely the strength of God's presence than I did during the months of my husband's dying and after his death' (L'Engle in Lewis 2001, vi)

These two distinctive themes – the fear of misremembering his wife, and the sense of God's absence – recur throughout the book and (as Freely writes of the latter), they also dominate it. As one might expect, they do not remain static, but change significantly over the course of the journal. One thing that unites these otherwise-apparently-disparate themes is that some aspect of his relationship with God or with his wife is shown to be inadequate, and (Lewis believes) has been or needs to be shattered by the experience of grief. For example, one of the things Lewis fears most is that the real H will be forgotten, and substituted instead by a mental composition of her, 'a mere doll to be blubbered over'. One of the things he misses most is being 'pulled up short', , and the 'sharp cleansing tang of her otherness' which serves to smash his mental images of her. Regarding his relationship with God, Lewis reflects that, what he previously took to be faith was in fact imagination, since he believed himself able to believe in God in the face of suffering: in fact, when the suffering happened to him, his faith is revealed as 'a pack of cards' – in other words, as being unstable and having no foundation. Here, Lewis writes:

> Bridge-players tell me that there must be some money on the game 'or else people won't take it seriously'. Apparently it's like that. Your bid – for God or no God […] - will not be serious if nothing much is staked on it. And you will never discover how serious it was until the stakes are raised horribly high; until you find that you are playing not for counters or for sixpences but for every penny you have in the world.

> Nothing less will shake a man – or at any rate a man like me – out of his merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs. [….]
>
> (Lewis, 2015a, 31)

According to Lewis, then, faith is tested – and in his case found lacking - through experiences of significant and severe suffering such as grief. What is more, Lewis sometimes seems to speak of his experience of grief as, at least from this perspective, a good or necessary thing. For example he writes: 'And I must surely admit – H would have forced me to admit in a few passes – that, if my house was a house of cards, the sooner it was knocked down the better. And only suffering could do it' (Lewis, 2015a, 31).

Lewis explicitly compares the revealed inadequacy of his faith in God, and the revealed inadequacy of his love for his wife:

> I begin to see. My love for H was of much the same quality as my faith in God. I won't exaggerate, though. Whether there was anything in imagination in the faith, or anything but egoism in the love, God knows. I don't. There may have been a little more; especially in my love for H. But neither was the thing I thought it was. A good deal of the card-castle about both. (Lewis, 2015a, 34)

While Lewis recounts that his grief is not linear but that 'everything repeats' (2015a, 46), there is nevertheless a significant turning point in Lewis experience of grief as recounted in the journal. In particular, there is a point after which some of Lewis' fears about both constructing a fake image of his wife, and feeling a sense of God's absence, begin to subside or resolve themselves. This turning point occurs when 'something quite unexpected happens' (2015a, 36). The unexpected 'something' occurs in the wider context of the weather being better, and Lewis having slept well – in short, when his 'heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks' (2015a, 36). Lewis recounts that 'suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned H least, I remembered her best' (2015a, 36). What is more:

> it was something (almost) better than memory; an instantaneous, unanswerable impression. To say that it was like a meeting would be going too far. Yet there was that in it which tempts one to use those words. It was as if the lifting of the sorrow removed a barrier (2015a, 36).

Lewis remembers his wife best when his sorrow is less intense, not more. And it is following this incident or 'something' that 'happened' that Lewis' fears about constructing images of

his wife, and having a 'house of cards' faith in relation to God, begin to subside or to be resolved. When he writes about this – and it is a theme he writes about at length – he uses the language of the inadequacy of images (here, mental images), and of the 'iconoclasm' of reality – that is, of the way mental images are shattered by human experience, including the experience of grief. To take just a couple of examples:

> It doesn't matter that all the photographs of H. are bad. It doesn't matter – not much – if my memory of hers is imperfect. Images, whether on paper or in the mind, are not important for themselves. Merely links. Take a parallel from an infinitely higher sphere. Tomorrow morning a priest will give me a little round, think, cold, tasteless wafer. Is it a disadvantage – is it not in some ways an advantage – that it can't pretend the least *resemblance* to that with which it unites me? (Lewis, 2015a, 51 – 52)

> All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her foursquare and independent reality. And this, not any image or memory, is what we are to love still after she is dead. (Lewis, 2015a, 52)

> Not my idea of God, but God. Not my idea of H, but H.' (Lewis, 2015a, 53)

Here, too, Lewis finds his sense of God's absence has also shifted. At the beginning of the journal when he goes to God he finds 'a door slammed in your face'. In this later period, when he asks questions of God he continues to get 'no answer'. However, this is 'a rather special sort of 'No answer'. It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze' (Lewis, 2015a, 54, 55).

So far in this paper I have drawn attention to some themes in Lewis' *Grief Observed* that present as fearful or worrisome in the earlier part of the journal, but which have some resolution towards the end. These fears relate to constructing false mental images of his wife, to having had both faith in God and love for H which reveal themselves as having only been a 'house of cards', and to experiencing a sense of God's absence. I have argued that these are somewhat related to one another: they occur in proximate passages and follow a similar trajectory, and there are points at which Lewis explicitly draws connections between them. I have also suggested that these themes are distinctive, rather than being ubiquitous or commonly-recognisable experiences in grief. To the extent that this is correct, these themes I think call for some further reflection and elucidation. In the last section of the paper I will

return to *A Grief Observed* to attempt this. To prepare the ground for that, I will first turn to some theological themes found in other of Lewis' work, which I think are relevant to these aspects of Lewis' experience of grief.

Lewis' purgative theology of suffering

In one incident in C.S. Lewis' earlier (1952) children's novel, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* Eustace, a selfish and petulant character, is turned into a dragon as a result of his avaricious – i.e. dragonish – behaviour (Lewis, 1998, 99). Initially, and in keeping with his character until that point, Eustace's response is an unsympathetic one: he feels relief since, far from being afraid of things, he has become a terror himself, who can even use his dragon strength to get even with his travelling companions over imagined wrongs. However, it is at this point, for the first time in the book, that Eustace begins to demonstrate some more likeable traits. In Lewis's words:

> But the moment he thought this he realized that he didn't want to [get even]. He wanted to be friends. He wanted to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things. He realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. An appalling loneliness came over him. He began to see that the others had not really been such fiends at all. He began to wonder if he himself had been such a nice person as he had always supposed. He longed for their voices. He would have been grateful for a kind word even from Reepicheep. When he thought of this the poor dragon that had been Eustace lifted up its voice and wept. (Lewis, 1998, 100).

Eustace eventually manages to communicate with his travelling companions what has happened, and they resolve to find a cure. In the meantime however, 'it was clear to everyone that Eustace's character had been rather improved by becoming a dragon. He was very anxious to help' (Lewis, 1998, 109). At the same time, Eustace himself is miserable, since he feels both a burden to his friends, and is also plagued by the pain caused by a dragon's bracelet he greedily put on his arm as a boy, which has become far too tight for him now he is a dragon.

When a cure eventually does come, it comes from Aslan, a lion who represents the figure of Jesus in Lewis' Narnia chronicles. As Eustace later recounts it, his cure, which has a rather dreamlike quality, consists in Eustace being told to scratch off his scales, resulting in him peeling off a layer of his dragon-skin, 'as if I was a banana' (Lewis, 1998, 116). But here he reaches an impasse: after he has peeled away three layers, he is still no closer to being a

boy again. At that moment he realizes that peeling away his own skin is ultimately no good, and that Aslan has to do it for him (Lewis, 1998, 116 – 117). And when Aslan does, it is effective but it is also far more painful. In Eustace's own words:

> The first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. [….]
>
> Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was, lying on the grass, only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on me – and threw me in the water. After than it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. (Lewis, 1998, 117 – 118)

As a result of this incident, Eustace becomes a better person. As Lewis puts it: 'It would be nice, and fairly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy". To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. …. Yet] The cure had begun.' (Lewis, 1998, 120)

This story exemplifies some key aspects of a theology of suffering that is found in much Christian thought in general, and in work by Lewis in particular. According to this theology of suffering, suffering is, or at least can be, purgative or cleansing. Through it, a person does, or at least can, become less sinful, and more loving towards others and (correspondingly) closer to God.

Two aspects of the idea are worth noting here. First, this idea has analogues in non-religious literature about the way in which difficult life experiences can lead to personal growth – for example, it is a thought recognizable in much self-help literature. However, a distinctive element of it in a Christian context is that – as is highlighted by the fact that ultimately Aslan rather than Eustace needs to peel off Eustace's scales – ultimately the purgation and transformation is a work of grace, rather than human effort. In other words, it

is precisely not *self*-help, though the person may have to predispose themself to the work of grace in order to be receptive to it.

Second, in some other Christian thought, this transformative aspect of suffering is understood aetiologically, in that it is posited as a reason for why God allows or even causes people to suffer (e.g. Hick, 1966). Thus, a purgative theology of suffering can become a theodicy: an explanation of why God allows, or even causes, suffering. In Lewis' work we sometimes find the purgative theology of suffering on its own (as in the story of Eustace – where there is no sense that Aslan was involved in turning Eustace into a dragon as a means to his transformation). However, elsewhere we find it with an aetiological element. This is most evident in Lewis' 1940 *Problem of Pain,* which seeks to respond to the question of why a loving, all-powerful God would allow suffering, by pointing to the purgative or transformative potential of suffering as a reason for why God causes suffering. For example:

> Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well for us. [….] What then can God do in our interests but make 'our own life' less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible source of false happiness? (Lewis, 2015b, 94)

<u>The Dark Night of the Soul and negative theology</u>

A further idea relating to a purgative theology of suffering sheds further light on *A Grief Observed*. This is the idea of the Dark Night of the Soul. The Dark Night of the Soul is a term associated especially with the sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, St John of the Cross, and is a way of making sense of a distinctive phenomenon in Catholic (and perhaps other forms of) spirituality: that people new to the spiritual life will often experience intense feelings of joy and peace when they pray, but that this will often be followed by a period – potentially a lengthy period – of spiritual dryness, and even a sense of God's absence – often giving rise to significant mental anguish. According to John, this is caused by God, in order to lead the person from a faith that relies upon instantaneous gratification to a deeper kind of faith. In John's own words:

> it is at that time that they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction, when in their opinion the sun of divine favour is shining most brightly on them, that God darkens all this light and closes the door and the spring of sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often and as long as they desired. (*Dark Night* 1.8.3)

We might understand the Dark Night of the Soul as one version of a purgative theology of suffering, aimed to make sense of a very distinctive form of spiritual suffering. And, with purgative theology of suffering more generally, at least in John's case it has an aetiological dimension: God is the cause of the person's Dark Night, and the Dark Night is explicable in terms of God's ultimately good intentions for that person (that is, union with God).

John distinguishes between two kinds of Dark Night: the Dark Night of the Senses, which is characterised by spiritual dryness and which is experienced by many, and the Dark Night of the Spirit, which is a far more severe kind of Dark Night and which is characteristically experienced only by people who are advanced in the contemplative life. The Dark Night of the Soul involves the absence of emotional or psychological gratification in prayer; the Dark Night of the Senses involves a loss of any kind of consolation whatsoever, and a breakdown in (and surrendering of) our established categories. Both kinds of Dark Night involve suffering. Thus, for instance, Denys Turner points to the similarities between the experience of both kinds of the Dark Night, as John describes it, and the phenomenology of depression. As Turner puts it:

> […] John's account of the sufferings of the 'Dark Nights' as he calls them is uncannily similar to what a person will give from the inside of the experience of depression.
>
> All the characteristic symptoms are there, from the lowest levels of the physiological – the distaste for food, the gnawings of anxiety in the pit of the stomach – through the disabling of the sensory powers – the dulling of the eye and ear, the souring of taste, the rawness of touch, the rankness in the nose – from all these symptoms in which depression is lived out in the body, to all those symptoms intensified in their metaphysical reference to the emotions and so extended upon the whole power of enjoyment itself; all those experiences parallel and match in detail John's account of what he calls 'the passive night of the senses'. And on top of these are the generalized and objectless fears, the evacuation of meaning, the collapse of memory into random associations, the sense of the pointlessness of any willed pursuit which, for John, characterize the 'passive night of the spirit'. And above all, perhaps, the parallel is found in the experience of *passivity* of both. (Turner, 1988, 159).

John's writing on the Dark Night is part of the tradition of negative mystical theology associated especially with the sixth century theologian we now know as Pseudo-Dionysius

the Areopagite. At the heart of negative mystical theology is the idea that union of God involves breaking down our images and conceptions of God, which (while helpful to spiritual beginners), are flawed and ultimately become a hindrance to the spiritually advanced. Negative mystical theology, then, is iconoclastic, not in the sense of negative mystical theologians objecting to physical icons or pictures used for devotion, but in the sense that it sees human faith as prone to idolatry (inappropriate attachment to earthly images and conceptions), and as thus ultimately impeding the spiritual life. Correspondingly, spiritual progression towards union with God involves the negation of human (physical but also mental) images and conceptions of God, which God ultimately transcends (see *Ascent* 3.37.6; Acosta-Garciá and Zamora, 2017).

To take one well-known and highly-influential example: Pseudo-Dionysius begins *The Mystical Theology,* quite startlingly, by addressing God as 'Trinity beyond all essence, all divinity, all goodness!' (*Mystical Theology* 1.1). She or he (we don't know which – but henceforth 'she') goes on advise her reader to 'leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect' in order to ascend to union with 'him who transcends all being and all knowledge' into the 'super-essential radiance of the divine darkness' (*Mystical Theology* 1.1). She laments that this ascent is not available to 'those attached to the objects of human thought'. Pseudo-Dionysius is seen as an apophatic rather than cataphatic theologian meaning that she focuses not on what God is but on what God is not, but ultimately she regards God as transcending even negative as well as positive attributions. So, for example, she says, 'there is no contradiction between the affirmations and the negations, inasmuch as he [God] infinitely precedes all conceptions of privation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions' (*Mystical Theology* 1.2).

<u>Lewis in the mystical theological tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius and St John of the Cross</u>

Lewis engaged with the ideas of both Pseudo-Dionysius and St John of the Cross in both pre-*Grief Observed* writings such as *Miracles* (1947) and in books written shortly afterwards (and published posthumously) such as *The Discarded Image* (1964) and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964) (see Downing, 2005, p. 68; 75 - 78).

For example, in his *Letters to Malcolm,* written shortly after *A Grief Observed* (in 1964), Lewis agrees with Pseudo-Dionysius when he writes about the way in which not only anthropomorphisms, but also the abstractions that are intended to counter them, are on their own inadequate and misleading in relation to God. Lewis says:

> This talk of 'meeting' [God] is, no doubt, anthropomorphic; as if God and I could be face to face, like two fellow-creatures, when in reality He is above me and within me and below me and all about me. That is why it must be balanced by all manner of metaphysical and theological abstractions. But never, here or anywhere else, let us think that while anthropomorphic images are a concession to our weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth. Both are equally concessions; each singly misleading, and the two together mutually corrective. Unless you sit to it very lightly, continually murmuring 'Not thus, not thus, neither is this Thou', the abstraction is fatal. It will make the life of lives inanimate and the love of loves impersonal.
>
> (Lewis, 2020, 26)

Pseudo-Dionysius argues that not only positive language about God, but also the negative language (i.e. about what God is *not)* which is intended to correct the positive language, is inadequate. Here, Lewis mirrors that, arguing that not only anthropomorphic language about God, but also the abstract language intended to correct it, is inadequate. The similarity is drawn out in a later Letter, where Lewis links abstract language with *negative* language in the context of debating whether God is passible or impassible – that is, whether God has emotions or not. Of the Bible's representation of God, which often speaks of God having emotions, Lewis says:

> We are constantly represented as exciting the Divine wrath or pity--even as "grieving" God. I know this language is analogical. But when we say that, we must not smuggle in the idea that we can throw the analogy away and, as it were, get in behind it to a purely literal truth. All we can really substitute for the analogical expression is some theological abstraction. And the abstraction's value is almost entirely negative. It warns us against drawing absurd consequences from the analogical expression by prosaic extrapolations. By itself, the abstraction 'impassible' can get us nowhere. It might even suggest something far more misleading than the most naïf Old Testament picture of a stormily emotional Jehovah. Either something inert, or something which was 'Pure Act' in such a sense that it could take no account of events within the universe it had created.
>
> (Lewis, 2020, 69)

The Bible's representation of God as passible (or having emotions), then, is analogical, and we can avoid the absurd conclusions of the analogy to human experience (that God is

susceptible to change and passion) by accompanying the analogy with a 'not' in the form of an abstraction (here, impassibilism). However, this 'not' could also misleading since, taken on its own, it would suggest that God, being not passible, is instead inert or indifferent. While both anthropomorphic language and theological abstractions are partial and inadequate, Lewis strikingly regards the anthropomorphic as the *less* problematic since, while the abstract may seem 'less naïf and anthropomorphic', in fact the real difference is that the anthropomorphism the abstractions involve is simply 'more subtly hidden and of a far more disastrous type' (Lewis, 2020, 72). Here, Lewis both draws on Pseudo-Dionysius and departs from her thought, since Lewis regards language about God as analogical (and thus a literal form of speech – for example, saying that God has emotions is true, though 'emotions' means something different in the case of God than in the case of humans). In contrast on this point, Pseudo-Dionysius thinks positive language about God is always metaphorical (and so literally false). In this way, Lewis retains Pseudo-Dionysius' both positive and negative language about God is both necessary and inadequate, while arguably softening her radical apophaticism by regarding abstract (negative) language about God as analogically true rather than metaphorical (i.e. false).

In the same set of *Letters,* Lewis responds to the crisis and pain of his imagined interlocutor Malcolm by reflecting on Christ's suffering. In particular, Lewis draws attention to Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion (where Christ asks God for the cup to pass away from him – or for him not to have to suffer torture and death on a cross) and in his cry of dereliction (the moment on the cross at which Christ cries 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' [Matthew 27:46]). Here Lewis argues that Christ's suffering and death exemplifies common elements in all human suffering:

> First, the prayer of anguish; not granted. Then He turns to His friends: They are asleep, as ours, or we, are so often, or busy, or away, or preoccupied. [….] There is still appeal to the People [….] But they have become overnight (it is nothing unusual) a murderous rabble shouting for His blood. There is, then, nothing left but to God. And to God, God's last words are, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?.
>
> You see how characteristic, how representative, it all is. The human situation writ large.
>
> (Lewis, 2020, 58, 59)

The cry of dereliction is sometimes thought to pose a problem for Christian teaching: according to Christian doctrine, Christ is God incarnate, so what sense can be made of the idea that God experienced God-forsakenness? Lewis implicitly answers this puzzle, appealing explicitly to the idea of the Dark Night of the Soul as this is understood by St John of the Cross. He says:

> It is saints, not common people, who experience the 'dark night'. [….] The 'hiddenness' of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him, and therefore God Himself, made man, will of all men be by God most forsaken?
>
> (Lewis, 2020, 60)

Christ's experience of God-forsakenness makes sense, given the relationship between holiness and closeness to God (on the one hand) and a sense of God's absence or the Dark Night of the Soul (on the other). Here, then, we had a web of related theological ideas that part-constitute Lewis' worldview: suffering is (or can be) purgative; this purgative aspect has (or is sometimes thought to have) an aetiological dimension, in that it is sometimes regarded as the reason God causes suffering or allows it to happen. Furthermore, a particular and distinctive form of religious suffering is the Dark Night of the Soul, a principle part of which is a sense of God's absence. This sense of God's absence is often caused by God to bring the person closer to God – though it is also (at the same time) an indication that the person already has a close relationship with God. And through this experience of the Dark Night, the person's mental images of what God is are shattered. Through the experience of the Dark Night and in other ways, the person comes to learn that not only the positive statements they had thought were true of God, which are anthropomorphic, but even negative language about God, which seem to be the reverse of those positive statements, are inadequate. Ultimately through the experience of suffering (and especially through experiencing a sense of God's absence) they become closer to God, which requires the shattering of both positive and negative mental images.

Having outlined some of these aspects of Lewis' theology, I will now return to *A Grief Observed,* to consider how they might shed light on the distinctive aspects of Lewis' experience of grief I highlighted earlier.

Theology in *A Grief Observed*

We have already that there are a number of aspects of Lewis' experience of grief that are distinctive, and that at least invite some kind of reflection (see Freely in Lewis, 2015a). These include, early in Lewis' grief, a fear about misremembering his wife, and a problematic sense of God being absent. Later in the journal, he talks about the resolution both of this fear and of the sense of God being absent in a problematic way. One of the things that is key to this is Lewis' iconoclasm: his contention that we need our images and conceptions of God to be smashed. We have seen several instances of this in *A Grief Observed* already, but to give one further example, Lewis says:

> Images, I must suppose, have their use or they would not have been so popular. (It makes little difference whether they are pictures and statues outside the mind or imaginative constructions within it.) To me, however, their danger is more obvious. Images of the Holy easily become holy ideas – sancrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are 'offended' by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not. But the same thing happens in our private prayers. (Lewis, 2015a, 52)

Rowan Williams explains these iconoclastic passages in *A Grief Observed* in the following way:

> … the implication is […] that God *cannot but* continuously shatter your images of him. And given what has been said about how it is only the living being that overturns our projections, that maintains the tang of otherness, it is he shifting, painfully expanding character of our thought about God that best shows what it means to call him 'living'. If our experience is littered with broken images of God – and deep pain and grief will certainly do this – then we are left either with no believable God at all or with a God whose otherness becomes more daily resistant and powerful; and alive (Williams in Lewis, 2015a, 86 – 87)

Lewis' iconoclasm about God is matched by an equal iconoclasm about reality as a whole and (in particular) about his wife. Thus, later in the journal, Lewis can say, 'It doesn't matter that all the photographs of H. are bad. It doesn't matter – not much – if my memory of hers is imperfect. Images, whether on paper or in the mind, are not important for themselves' (Lewis, 2015a, 51 – 52). Later in this passage, drawing on an analogy to the eucharist, Lewis talks about the way in which having a true image of something can be an obstacle, rather than an aid, to union with the thing itself. In so doing, Lewis draws an explicit parallel between images of God, and images of creatures such as his wife: in both cases, the temptation to become attached to images rather than the thing itself is to be resisted. Mark Wynn brings out this aspect of Lewis' thought well when he says:

> Here, then, there is a[…] challenge to the grieving person: they are to avoid the kind of salve to grief that would come from keeping the person's memory alive in a domesticated form – in a form that has ceased to challenge and unsettle, as it is simply a creature of our own desires. So this is a […] form of false grieving. (Wynn, draft, 13)

And again:

> Here Lewis seems to be building up what we might call an epistemology of the dead. The dead are not best known through grieving, or at least, not through emotionally charged grieving. On the contrary: there is too much need in such grieving, and that neediness can lead us to misrepresent the dead, as we grasp at them, rather than allowing them to present themselves on their own terms. Lewis's experience also implies that so far as there is genuine knowledge of the dead, it is not imagistic. As we have seen, if we are working with images, then we are at risk, on his view, of the tricks of composition that we associate with memory. By contrast, in the experience Lewis describes, the dead person is presented in a non-imagistic 'impression'. (Wynn, draft, 16)

The thing iconoclasts seek to avoid is idolatry. A significant aspect of Lewis' experience of grief seems to involve a journey from imagistic attachments (whether to mental pictures or abstract conceptions), to being united with the beloved (God, his wife), precisely because of the (relative) absence of such attachments. For Lewis (as for St John of the Cross) this

journey from attachment to images, to proper union, entails suffering: 'if my house was a house of cards, the sooner it was knocked down the better. And only suffering could do it' (Lewis, 2015a, 31). Lewis conceptualises his grief, then, along the lines of a Dark Night of the Soul, which includes (among other things) a purgative theology of suffering: like Eustace's scales, Lewis' pack of cards needs to be removed as an aspect of spiritual growth. The distinctive and striking themes we find in *A Grief Observed* are in fact familiar ones within the Christian mystical tradition – though Lewis is perhaps unusual in relating them not only to God, but also to creatures including his deceased wife.

Interpretation can affect experience – and experience can affect interpretation

So far I have put forward a very basic argument: Lewis' experience of grief was infused by his theology of suffering and by the Christian mystical tradition, which sees the breaking down of images of God (*via* suffering) as necessary for true union with God. In other words, Lewis' worldview (and, we might think, other people's worldviews – whether religious or otherwise) significantly affected his experience of grief.

Some psychoanalytic literature suggests there may be a further aspect of interest to Lewis' account of his experience of grief that is relevant here. David Aberbach argues that mystics often tend to be people who have experienced significant childhood grief (such as the death of a parent), and, in addition, there are similarities between childhood grief and the experience of the Dark Night. In the context of discussing John of the Cross, Aberbach says:

> The awful sense of abandonment which pervades the Dark Night is likely to be especially strong among those who suffer loss, as John did, in childhood. The greatest affliction of the Dark Night, which John depicts so movingly, is probably little different from the anguish suffered by any child bereaved of a beloved father. (Aberbach, 1989, 89)

Among the mystics who experienced significant childhood grief, in addition to John of the Cross, we can point to St Teresa of Avila, St Terese of Liseux, St Ignatius of Loyola, and St Teresa of Calcutta (see Aberbach, 1989, 83 – 109; Zagano and Gillespie, 2010, 62 – 64). Perhaps what is going on in these cases is that the journey from imagistic attachments to union with God is phenomenologically different (and more severe) for people who have experienced childhood grief, precisely because the sense of God's absence in this process

recalls the earlier loss of a parent (or parent figure), and causes the person to relive in some sense their earlier grief. This possibility seems relevant to the case of Lewis, whose mother died of cancer when Lewis was nine years old (Gresham, 2001, xiv). If this is a factor, then it seems that Lewis' own journey of faith may be influenced by that earlier loss, so that there is something of a Dark Night of the Soul about it. Furthermore, it seems not extraordinary to think that both the loss of his mother and his experience of (something like) a Dark Night in turn affects his experience of grief in relation to his wife.

This suggests that, not only does Lewis' theology affect his experience of grief, but also that there is an earlier experience of grief that may in turn have influenced his theology, where 'theology' includes some combination of experience and theorising about faith. I do not mean to put too much weight on this point, which is wholly speculative, but I think it is suggestive of a relationship between interpretation and experience that is entirely consistent with, but more complex than, the 'interpretation shapes experience' point that I have made earlier in this paper. Apart from anything else, it is illustrative of what is perhaps an obvious point – namely, that the interpretation-experience relationship is not only one-way or one-dimensional. Interpretation shapes experience, in Lewis' case because his experience of grief is infused with certain theological ideas. But our earlier experience can also affect our later experience, and the sense we make of our later experience.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the way in which Lewis' theology shaped his experience of grief. In so doing, it has provided some kind of account for some of the more distinctive, rather than familiar, aspects of Lewis' account of grief in *A Grief Observed*. What this points to more generally is that interpretation affects experience. Of course, it is not only religious interpretations that affect experience, and it is not as though there is some raw experience (grief) on to which extra add-ons become bolted, which include religion. Rather, all experience of grief will be affected by the person's worldview – whether their worldview is monotheistic, atheistic, pantheistic or whatever. Narratives (for example, relating to the Dark Night of the Soul) can infuse an experience so that, as the experience unfolds and develops over time, the phenomenology (here, of grief) is different from what it would be if the person were not familiar, or so deeply familiar, with such a narrative. While there are probably some near-universal features of grief, then, this paper points to some ways in which people's

experiences of grief are also likely to be different and distinctive, in part because of their worldviews.

There are (at least) two implications of this for our understanding of grief more generally.[1] First, we might note that in Lewis' case, and in many other cases, grief is best understood not simply as an emotion directed at the loss of a person, but as something that changes the way in which the world as a whole is perceived and experienced. In Lewis' case and in at least some other cases, the experience of grief may be interwoven with a much larger life narrative. For example, Lewis seems to speak of H.'s death as something like a test of his love for her and his faith in God, revealing the flimsiness of both. This is in keeping with the prior understanding he has of suffering, including his own suffering, and his understanding of his life as a kind of spiritual journey which we find in autobiographical work such as *Surprised by Joy.* Second, my account of Lewis' grief casts doubt on the possibility of providing a single unitary account of grief in general – or at least a single unitary account that involves thick description – because it highlights the fact that grief is experienced in quite diverse ways.

There are also, I think, significant implications for people who are therapists (broadly construed). Religious people will sometimes say they don't seek counselling and other psychological interventions from secular therapists because they think those therapists won't understand the religious aspects of their experience (Jenkins, 2011). As one person puts it, 'When I was ill, I certainly learned very quickly to keep the spiritual side of myself separate from the rest of myself whenever I met with any of the "professionals"' (cited Jenkins, 2006). For this reason, some religious literacy, including sympathetic engagement with religious concerns and experience, is important if therapists are going to be able to help religious (as well as non-religious) people, in the context of grief and more generally.

We might wonder what exactly that means in practice. Does it, for example, mean that therapists should be expected to learn about the theological interpretations of their patients? Or does it rather mean that therapists just need to be sensitive about the degree to which religious views might impact someone's experience of grief, without needing to understand the theological details?[2] I think the greater the religious literacy among therapists,

[1] I owe both of these points to an anonymous peer reviewer.
[2] Thanks to an anonymous peer reviewer for helpfully raising this question.

the better – but having a detailed understanding of all possible religious interpretations and their theological underpinnings may be impracticable. Perhaps what is most important is that therapists have some religious literacy (such that they can see similarities and differences between ideas patients describe, and ideas already in their theological toolkits), combined with a sympathetic (non-patronising, non-judgemental) approach to people's religious views. Currently it seems that patients' perceptions are that this is often lacking. In addition, the religious training therapists receive needs to be non-superficial, and not undertaken as a tick-box exercise. Relatedly, it needs to involve insider perspectives about the relevant religious traditions, since descriptions by insiders are often more nuanced, and since they are more likely to evoke a sympathetic rather than distanced response.

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