

Why the Devil Has No Sense of Humor

A presentation on C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*
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I. Satan as literally No-thing

- A. The doctrine of evil as *privatio boni*, the privation or absence of the Good, the satanic not being equal to the divine, so that in the strict sense we don't believe in the devil: *Credo in Deus* but not *Credo in diabolus*: not Jesus but Michael (or else Raphael or Gabriel) as Satan's opposite.
 - 1. The need to make a right estimate of demonic deception, in both the political and personal worlds, Lucifer being the highest of angels, and thus the force of Darkness.
 - 2. How Dorothy L. Sayers (in "The Other Six Deadly Sins") does better than Lewis in revealing the social reality of the demonic. Letter V as revealing Lewis in his most problematic mode.
- B. The mistake of taking evil either too lightly or too seriously.
 - 1. Too lightly, as in our dandified demons and in the denial of death via funeral "roasts"
 - 2. Too seriously, as in so-called Christian "haunted houses" that scare the Hell out of kids
 - 3. The demonic result: Satan's slickest trick is to convince us he does not exist (Baudelaire).
 - 4. Hence Lewis's stress on the essentially *boring* character of evil, as in his reading the letters in a flat midwestern American accent, unlike John Cleese's high Oxbridge voice
- C. Lewis's recourse to *satire* as the best means of confronting and unmasking the Great Deceiver
 - 1. The recourse to Martin Luther and Thomas More and G. K. Chesterton, an instance of CSL's "mere" Christianity, drawing on the rich resources of the Christian tradition.
 - 2. The use of names that wittily reveal the apish, parasitic, perverted character of evil, especially Wormwood, the Miserific Vision, and Our Father Below
 - 3. Also Screwtape's insistence on his own stuffy honor and dignity, as in a thoroughly nasty business office (Preface to 1961 ed. and Letter XI).

II. Screwtape's desire to make us super-serious and his frustration at his own uncreativity

- A. Satan's surprisingly high regard for "the spiritual" and "inner life" (Letters II and III).
 - 1. As in having us care about things far off rather than near at hand (Letter VI)
 - 2. As in wanting us to concentrate on unselfishness rather than actual charity (Letter XXVI)
 - 3. Or else in obscuring our slow slippage into Hell via the small sins (Letter XII) and religious moderation (Letter IX)
- B. Screwtape's fury at being unable to create a single pleasure (Letter IX)
 - 1. Because real pain and real pleasure are "unmistakably real" taking us out of ourselves (Letter XIII)
 - 2. Because God is "a hedonist at heart" (Letter XXII)
- C. Hence the Satanic hatred of all laughter (Letter XI)
 - 1. Joy—the sheer delight in being present with friends, poking fun at the world's folly, sharing the best things with them in lubricated conviviality.
 - 2. Fun—the emotional release of doing things with acquaintances, often frivolous things.
 - 3. The Joke Proper—good when they enable us to laugh at ourselves and with others, potentially evil when they aim to mock and belittle others and to destroy shame.
 - 4. Flippancy—the refusal to take anything seriously, maintaining an antic stance toward life, so as to hold everything and everyone at a distance, lest they make claims on us