

C.S. Lewis and the Roughness and Density of Life

C.S. Lewis began his academic career at Oxford University as an atheist. He was attracted to faith in Christ through the writings of many such as George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, George Herbert, John Donne, Phillip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, and John Milton. He noticed that these writers were Christian and that they wrote of the Roughness and Density of Life. Lewis was attracted to their honest portrayal of life as we seem to really live it day to day, with all of its complexities. Christian academics would do well to draw inspiration from Lewis's observations at this point in order to write and lecture in a way that is unpretentious and authentic.

Jerry Root is an Associate Professor of Christian Education at Wheaton College and serves as the Director of the Evangelism Initiative. Jerry is a graduate of Whittier College and Talbot Graduate School of Theology at Biola University; he received his PhD from the Open University. Jerry is the author or co-author of numerous books on C.S. Lewis, including *The Surprising Imagination of C.S. Lewis: An Introduction*, with Mark Neal, *C.S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme*, and *The Soul of C.S. Lewis: A Meditative Journey through Twenty-six of His Best Loved Writings*. Jerry is the co-author of *The Sacrament of Evangelism* and co-editor, with Wayne Martindale, of *The Quotable C.S. Lewis*. He also teaches graduate courses (MA in Evangelism and Leadership Program) and undergraduate courses (Christian Formation and Ministry Department) at Wheaton College. In addition, Jerry has been a visiting professor at Talbot Graduate School of Theology and Biola University from 1990 to the present. He and his wife, Claudia, have four grown children - all of whom are married - and thirteen grandchildren.

Introduction

C.S. Lewis wrote of George Herbert's poetry that it was faithful to the "roughness and density of life" (that is, it spoke of life as it is really lived with its complexities and confidences). Density spoke of the "sure words" one can know and the confidence that comes from them; Roughness spoke of the lack of last words and the humility and honesty that comes from that fact.

Mindfulness of this concept of the Roughness and Density of life should be a hallmark of the Christian in the Academy. While it is not the only thing to be mindful of it is a significant thread woven throughout the work of the Christian Academic. This session will explore what this means and why it matters.

1. Theological backgrounds for the Roughness and Density of Life:
2. Roughness and Density of Life:
 - a. It can generalize without overstatement.
 - The late Professor Bruce Edwards observed that the entire academic enterprise demands the ability to see patterns and exceptions (it sees these patterns but does not hide the exceptions nor is it put off by them).
 - Patterns make generalizations possible
 - Exceptions make generalizations honest

- Also see C. S. Lewis's rejection of "The Doctrine of the Unchanging Human Heart"
- b. It can mark a particular example and hold it up as noteworthy without universalizing the application.
- Joseph's suffering led to success: but not all suffering ends as Joseph's did.
 - "Roughness and Density" is an example of hope without inflation and expectation (which for some, is likely to crash into disappointment and despair). In this way Christian scholarship has advantages over some forms of Buddhist scholarship.
 - Note NPR
- c. It can appreciate individual perspective without minimizing the benefits of the larger community: in this way it is dialectically safe.
- Lewis said "In coming to understand anything we must reject the facts as they are for us in favor of the facts as they are". *An Experiment in Criticism*. P. 138
 - It underscores the benefits of community and perspective
 - Illustration: John Godfrey Saxe's *The Six Blind Men and the Elephant*
- e. It values the by-in-large without falsification.
- God does not tempt anyone (*peirazo*); God may allow our testing (*dokimazo*)
 - *hokmah*: the wisdom of prohibition; *bene*: the wisdom of understanding
 - The by-in-large explanation is not given with loss of authority and credit; the overstated (and sometimes the understated) does draw skepticism.
- f. It sees some black and white (or, either/or) but it can also recognize shades of gray
- Sure words without last words
 - Absolutes without absolutism
 - There may be last words as in the case of a final court of appeal; but these last words do not provide answers that settle all discourse whatever the future might hold
 - All truths can be plumbed more deeply; can be applied more widely; and can be understood in coherent relation with other truths.
- g. It is at peace with words like: *ambiguity*, *perplexity*, and *subtle*.

- Peter Ustinov said, “We are united by our doubts and divided by our convictions” (from the Autobiography of Michael York)
- Doubts keep us honest; and honest doubts lead to questions that express curiosities; these often lead to answers; and these lead to awe and wonder; and this ought to lead to worship

h. It accepts “Undeceptions”

- Lewis’s literary critical essay on *Jane Austin*
- Ephesians 4:22 the warning against *the lust of deceit*

3. The Dignity and Depravity of all that is human (man himself and all of his institutions).
Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*.

a. Explain the plot and the character of the Whiskey Priest

b. Explain that I was reading Proverbs for my QT at the very time I was reading Greene’s novel.

4. Respect for the Roughness and Density of Life: keeps the Christian Academic mindful of the need for the love of God undergirding all of his or her work. It exhibits a growing sense of security in the love of Jesus: I John 1:18

a. Man is goofy

b. If man is goofy then we can assume all of his institutions are also goofy including the academy.