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Abstract

Investigates Lewis's portrayal of priests and the divine in *Till We Have Faces*.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*—Religion

Three Bridge-Builders: Priest-Craft in *Till We Have Faces*

David W. Landrum

IN a recent article in *Mythlore*, Nancy-Lou Patterson notes that the figure of Ungit, the goddess of Glome in *Till We Have Faces*, has received very little critical attention even though her part in the novel is a major one. What is said of Ungit could also be said of those who serve her. Two priests of Ungit are major characters in the Lewis novel, and yet they have not received a great deal of critical attention and are usually regarded as rather marginal figures who do not play a big part in the story. I would like to argue that priests in Lewis's tale are very important characters, pivotal to the story's development, highly symbolic, and essential to its theme. *Till We Have Faces* contains a great deal of priest-craft. Three characters in the novel are priests, the two priests of Ungit already alluded to, and the priest of Psyche whom Orual meets when she visits a neighboring kingdom. All represent perspectives on the Divine, and the development of this perspective as it is illustrated in the persons of these three priests is corollary to Orual's growing understanding of why the gods do things the way they do. If we are to fully understand *Till We Have Faces*, we must understand something about the characters of the priests, who they are, what they represent, and how Lewis uses them symbolically to illustrate his theme.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* gives the following very good definition of a priest:

A priest is a person who functions officially to establish or preserve contact between the superhuman world and a human community. His office precedes his individuality. Because of his mediating function he has a leading part in ritual and has the task of guarding and preserving the knowledge of the religious tradition. (766)

The priests in the novel provide the earthly links between Ungit and Psyche and their human communities of worshipers. Especially with the first priest, the un-named "old Priest of Ungit," the individuality of the man is overshadowed by his office. In all cases, the priests are the guardians of rituals and ritual traditions that are greater than themselves.

Lewis, with his knowledge of Latin, would also have been aware of another perspective on priesthood. He would have known that the term priest is associated with the Latin world *pontifex*, or pontiff, which through twists of popular etymology was linked to the Latin word *ponto*, “bridge,” to mean “bridge builder.” A priest is a bridge-builder between heaven and earth, between God and human beings. In the last part of *The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader’* Lucy wants to know the way into Narnia from her world. Aslan replies, “it lies across a river. But do not fear that, for I am the great Bridge Builder” (215). Aslan is a figure of Christ, the Great High Priest of the book of Hebrews, who bridges the chasm between God and the human race. The priests in *Till We Have Faces* are similar, but the links they each provide to the divine are very, very different.

The first priest we encounter is the old Priest of Ungit from Orual’s childhood. We never learn his name. His individuality has been erased by his function as a representative of the goddess. Orual fears him. She writes in her memoir:

I think that what frightened me (in those early days) was the holiness of the smell that hung about him—a temple-smell of blood (mostly pigeons’ blood, but he had sacrificed men, too) and burnt fat and singed hair and wine and stale incense. It is the Ungit smell. Perhaps I was afraid of his clothes too; all the skins they were made of, and the dried bladders, and the great mask shaped like a bird’s head which hung on his chest. It looked as if there were a bird growing out of his body. (*Till* 11)

Orual identifies the Priest with his priestly accouterments. His association with the goddess is strong.

What is notable about the old Priest is his fearless, total, and unswerving allegiance to Ungit. Ungit is a fertility goddess who ensures the growth of crops, the coming of rain, and human reproduction. The Fox identifies her with Aphrodite, goddess of love, though he notes she is more like the Babylonian Aphrodite, more a goddess of birth, than the Greek goddess of sex and beauty (8). Early in the book, the King, Orual’s father, wants a male child. On his wedding night, he calls the Priest in to bless the union, and when his wife is in labor the Priest is also present. When a girl, Psyche, is born, the King is enraged and chides the Priest, asking why Ungit has not respected his many offerings. He then threatens to break her image to powder and kill the Priest in the process. The Priest, Orual says, is “not in the least afraid of the King” (15). In

fact, he rebukes him for the threat, reminding him that Ungit hears and does not forget. He notes ominously, "You have already said enough to call down doom upon all your descendants" (16).

This unshakeable courage is characteristic of the old Priest. Later, when the multitudinous troubles have descended upon the Kingdom of Glome, the Priest, now blind, calls on the king and lays down an ultimatum. Though accompanied by an armed guard, he comes to the King's chamber alone and confronts him with news that the Accursed One is from the King's House. The King attempts to intimidate the Priest by threatening his life. He prods him with his dagger and threatens to drive it in. He interprets the Priest's move against him as a bid for power. But the Priest is still. Orual, as much as she dislikes him, marvels at his self control. He does not flinch. He tells the king,

"Drive it [the dagger] in, King, swift or slow, if it pleases you. It will make no difference. Be sure the Great Offering will be made whether I am dead or living. I am here in the strength of Ungit. While I have breath I am Ungit's voice. Perhaps longer. A priest does not wholly die. I may visit your palace more often, both by day and night, if you kill me. The others will not see me. I think you will." (54)

The old Priest is fearless in his devotion to Ungit. The King relents and the Great Sacrifice is made.

The old Priest of Ungit has been variously described. Peter J. Schakel compares him in the scene in the King's council chamber to the blind prophet Tiresias in *Oedipus* (26), and this may be a valid description. But as a symbolic entity in the book, he goes far beyond this classical association. What Orual marvels at is his *devotion* to Ungit, his unshakeable conviction that her ways are right, that obedience to her is paramount, that her power and the correctness of her ways are undebateable certainties. He is a paragon of devotion and lies firmly in pre-Christian and pre-rational culture. He embodies and typifies the pre-modern piety that Lewis occasionally commented upon in his writings. The old Priest represents what was best and worst about ancient paganism. John Balsbaugh notes that his "belief and devotion are marks of a man who truly knows there is more to life than himself or his race, a man who has the strength to act in accord with a greater cause," and he goes on to call this "the fearlessness imparted by a sure knowledge of the holy" (205).

The best of ancient paganism was, to Lewis, this ardor for what it perceived to be the Divine. He recognized this trait and praised it in a poem called "A Cliché Came Out of Its Cage." Here Lewis mentions "the circumspection and the holy fears" as being admirable (*Poems* 3), and dwells on the virtues of humility, chastity, respect for parents, reverence for the gods, moderation, devotion to duty—things that often characterized ancient religion. The old Priest's disposition toward the Divine is admirable, and his wisdom is grudgingly recognized by Orual, though the Fox has repeatedly characterized the Priest as a charlatan who uses his priestly office to gain power. Even Psyche, who will be sacrificed by this Priest remarks on his perceptiveness and insinuates that the Fox, who has been such a philosophical opponent of him, does not know the entire truth.

Another admirable characteristic of the old Priest is his understanding of the nature of the Divine. At one point the Fox tries to argue against him by noting that he has contradicted himself in his descriptions of Ungit, the Shadowbrute, and the Accursed. The Fox relies on logic—the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, that a thing cannot be itself and some else simultaneously—but the old Priest is not in the least impressed. He scoffs at such reasoning, noting that he has heard it many times before. Here again, his speech is worth quoting at length:

"They [the Greeks] 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." (*Till* 50)

To bind the gods (or God) to prescribed codes, to articulate logical parameters and then demand that Divinity stay within them, is folly. The old Priest knows this and realizes that contradictions are entirely admissible when dealing with something superhuman and suprarational.

The other side, the more unattractive side of the man, is his ruthless adherence to received tradition. He has participated in human sacrifice on many occasions. His insistence on following Ungit seems to have erased all human feeling in him so that he behaves as an automaton of sorts. He apparently feels no compassion toward Psyche, though he feels no hatred toward her

either. She is the Accursed probably through no fault of her own; the goddess is requiring a certain thing of him, and he must discharge his duty. Life is reduced to these sorts of simplicities, and there is no reasoning, no room for additional considerations, nothing but the will of the deity. Something about this reductionism is chilling. Something about what Orual calls his "holiness" is crude and repulsive.

Lewis had commented on this tendency in a letter to Sheldon Vanauken, where he remarked upon the phenomenon of "real archaic primitive religions," noting that they "are not moral enough," later calling this archaic faith, "unredeemably savage religion" (*A Severe Mercy* 90). Such religion is in tune with the rhythms of nature and recognizes the place of the primal in our spiritual make-up. All the same, there is something disturbing about it and often something immoral or perhaps *unmoral* that turns one away with a shudder. The mention of human sacrifice, the suggestion of temple prostitution at the House of Ungit, Orual's statement that some men are made into eunuchs for Ungit's service, repel one from the old Priest's system, however otherwise laudable it might be.

After the incident with Psyche, the old Priest drops out of the story for a while and his successor appears. This is Arnom, who is in contrast to his predecessor, and whose character represents an entirely different aspect of relations to the Divine.

From the beginning, Arnom is described as strikingly dissimilar to the old priest. He is a skilled physician. His knowledge of surgical science has apparently given him a somewhat rationalistic bent, because he is on a first-name basis with the Fox. Orual notes that "those two [Arnom and the Fox] seemed to understand each other well" (*Till* 205). He is young, clean-shaven, and he lacks the aura of holiness and the absolute devotion so characteristic of the old priest. He is pragmatic and agrees to a strategic trade-off with Orual when he is first introduced in the novel.

Arnom very quickly falls under the influence of the Fox's teaching. When books of Greek literature and philosophy begin to arrive in the kingdom, Arnom learns to read them. And during the course of his tenure as priest we see the religion of Ungit begin to change somewhat. As Orual describes it,

Arnom had opened new windows in the walls and her house was not so dark. He also kept it differently, scouring away the blood after each slaughter and sprinkling fresh water; it smelled

cleaner and less holy. And Arnom was learning from the Fox to talk like a philosopher about the gods. The great change came when he proposed to set up an image of her—a woman-shaped image in the Greek fashion—in front of the old shapeless stone. (234)

The statue he brings into the Temple of Ungit is a white, life-like statue of Aphrodite. Later on in the novel, Orual again notes the “new way of talking about the gods which Arnom, and others, had learned from the Fox” (271). Arnom represents the infusion of rationalism and rational ethics into religion. He is willing to consider and incorporate innovative ideas.

These two priests of Ungit represent what Lewis considered to be the two contradictory but also complementary sides of religion. The old Priest represents the primitive religion, the religion of blood, sacrifice, fertility, birth, the land, the elemental forces with which the ancients lived. Arnom represents a more rationalistic approach. It is noteworthy that Arnom does not entirely do away with the old worship of Ungit, though he does modify its forms of expression.

Arnom, the rationalist, introduces innovations to the religion of his people, but on ritual occasions he still wears the old costume of the high priest: the bird’s head, animal skins, and bladders. Sacrifice in the temple does not stop, though it is cleaned up somewhat. The girls of Ungit (and whether they are temple virgins or temple prostitutes I have never been able finally to decide) are still present. The old, shapeless statue of the goddess still stands opposite the marble image of Aphrodite. However rationalistic he is, he cannot eradicate the old worship because it satisfies in a manner that purely rationalistic, intellectual worship cannot.

Lewis is also aware of the tension between these two spiritual realities, ritualism and rationalism, but knew that one somehow complements the other. Psyche articulates this very well when she contrasts the teachings of the Old Priest with those of Lysias, the Fox. Psyche acknowledges that he has brought enlightenment to her and says, “‘It’d be dark as a dungeon within me but for his teaching” (70). But then she makes the following critique of his rationality:

“He calls the whole world a city. But what’s a city built on? There’s earth beneath. And outside the wall? Doesn’t all the food come from there as well as all the dangers? . . . things growing and rotting, strengthening and poisoning, things shining wet . . . in one way (I don’t know which way) more like, yes, even more like the House of —” (70-71)

Orual completes the sentence for her: the house of Ungit. Psyche has realized that rationality, with its universal ideals and its Platonic projections,

is an inadequate philosophy because it does not take into account the physical realities that are foundational to life. However philosophical one is, eating, breathing, sweating, experiencing growth and decay, are the essence of existence. The rarified idealism of the Fox does not allow for these particular truths to enter his system and in this his philosophy falls short.

Nor can the religion of rationalism satisfy the emotional cravings of the common people who worship Ungit. One scene in the novel has Orual attending the annual temple festival that marks the beginning of a new year. Arnom is in his full priestly regalia and, though he seems bored, participates in the ritual breaking out of the temple door. The common people are bonded in this ceremony. Orual sees that it gives them hope and joy and even momentarily reconciles enemies. Later on she observes a woman sacrificing to the old, shapeless stone figure of Ungit. She asks her why she does not sacrifice to the new image. The woman replies, “. . . ‘she wouldn’t understand my speech. She’s only for nobles and learned men. There’s no comfort in her’” (272). Rationalistic religion does have its limits. It can bring comfort to the mind, but not the emotions, not the heart and will. The limits of rational religion are also the limits of Arnom’s innovations.

But there is a third priest in *Till We Have Faces*, and he should not be overlooked. He is the priest of Istra whom Orual meets on a trip to Essur. This occurs many years after the incident of Psyche’s sacrifice. Orual has established such stability and order in Glome that she can take a vacation. With an entourage, she visits Essur, a land of forests, waterfalls, and beautiful glades. Orual wanders into a temple there and meets a priest who tells her the story of the goddess worshiped in Essur. Orual is shocked to find that the goddess is her sister, Psyche, that she herself is a character in the story the priest is telling, and not a very savory character at that.

Orual does not like the priest of Psyche. She repeatedly characterizes him as “simple,” “childish,” “rather silly than cunning.” She constantly interrupts the story he is telling. Rather like the Fox, she wants to critique rationally what he is saying, analyze his story, and prove it is false. This approach is incomprehensible to the Priest, who insists, “It’s the sacred story” (242). After he is finished, Orual angrily leaves him, resolved to write her story for all the world to read.

The third priest, though a minor character, reveals another aspect of religion, and that is its domestication. The priest has a sacred story to tell, and whatever

Orual thinks of him, the gods are using him as an instrument to communicate truth to her. Most of us have enough of the Romantic in us that we look down on religion that is domesticated, that has become so much a part of daily life that there is little remarkable about it to its adherents. Many of us, and I include myself in this, insist that religion be aesthetically pleasing, numinous, exciting, spiritually spectacular, before we will give it much attention or interest. But is not the ideal situation one where religion becomes so much a part of daily life that one no longer thinks of it as religion? The priest reacts blankly to Orual's questions by insisting, "It's the sacred story" (242). He does not seem to comprehend the reason behind her pointed inquiries on some of its content. The sacred is the sacred. It is of a different nature than daily discourse. It is not to be questioned and analyzed. However simple, childish, or foolish the priest of Psyche is, his understanding of the Divine and of divine workings is far greater than Orual's.

These three priests represent aspects of the Divine which I think Lewis saw as constituting genuine religion. They are all bridge builders, but the links they provide are never adequate for Orual because none of the things each of them represent is adequate by itself. They are what Orual calls "the two halves" of her own upbringing (151), the halves that had never made a whole for her. The old Priest's religion of fertility recognizes part of reality, but not all of it. Arnom's rationalistic, philosophical take on the Divine brings light and understanding but cannot satisfy the soul. The priest of Psyche's childlike acceptance of Divine story is admirable but would seem rather pointless by itself. The combination of these three things, the fusion of what these three priests represent, adds up to the comprehensive understanding of the Divine that Orual only vaguely arrives at before her death.

Lewis suggested in a poem called "Reason," which Peter Schakel comments upon in the Preface to his book *Reason and Imagination* (ix), that two elements were predominant in his mind and that he struggled to reconcile them. One was reason, represented by Athena:

Set on the soul's acropolis the reason stands
A virgin, arm'd commercing with celestial light,
And he who sins against her has defiled his own
Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;
So clear is reason. (81)

Reason defines, makes clear, brings in light, just as Arnom's innovations bring light into the Temple of Ungit. It is exacting and demanding. To violate it is perhaps an unforgivable transgression. But reason does not constitute the whole of the intellectual universe. There is also imagination:

But how dark imagining,
Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night:
Dark is her brow, the beauty of her eyes with sleep
Is loaded, and her pains are long, and her delight. (81)

The language with which imagination is discussed consists of images of darkness and of sexuality. There is something seductive about imagination. It is rooted in earth, night, the warmth and delight of intimacy. If one transfers these motifs to the realm of religion, we see how well they fit the two aspects of Ungit worship represented by Arnom and the old Priest. One is dark and sensuous, one is bright and forbidding. In the remainder of the poem, Lewis speculates how these two realms could be united, could be brought together. If they could, he says, then it would be possible to "wholly say, that I BELIEVE" (81).

Lewis eventually recognized that this combination of conflicting elements was successfully united in Christianity. In the same letter to Sheldon Vanauken quoted earlier, Lewis asserted that while Hinduism fails to unite the two strands of expression that give substance to religion—the ritual and the ethical or rationalistic—Christianity "compels a high brow like me to partake in a ritual blood feast, and also compels a central African convert to attempt an enlightened universal code of ethics" (*Severe* 90). Christianity has its mysterious, ritualistic, primal facets: believers eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood; they are born again, are the branches nourished by the True Vine, celebrate a rising from the dead that coincides with the rites of Spring. On the other hand, Christians use their rational intellects in an attempt to understand and follow the ethical codes of behavior set down by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, the writings of Paul and Peter and the other apostles, the codes set out in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. Either of these things are inadequate, but combined and told in the narratives of Scripture and Tradition, they constitute a spirituality that can satisfy thoroughly, a proper bridge to bring together the far shores of Heaven and Earth.

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Kilcolman Castle

Few spots there are where oft the Christian Muse
 Has touched the earth, Urania the Blessed,
 But in these stoney walls, eternal news
 Was given form in knights who met their test,
 And ladies loyal in love, who in their zest,
 Not passive, but across the plains, through trees,
 Rode boldly forth; not only these expressed,
 But all the varied world in varied keys,
 Likeas a piece baroque which, meant to please,
 No single tune has sung, but counterpointed,
 So did the Muse, when giving fluid ease,
 Tell Spenser so to write, and him annointed.
 Within these castle walls, this stoney frame,
 His prayer was answered: the Sacred Muse here came.

—Joe R. Christopher

(In August 1999, Joe Christopher attended a conference near Doneraile, County Cork, Eire, commemorating the 400th anniversary of Edmund Spenser's death. While there, he read a paper titled "An Irish Critic on an Irish Poet," discussing C. S. Lewis's writings on Spenser's poetry. One evening was spent at the ruins of Spenser's home, Kilcolman Castle, where a banquet was held in the field; afterwards, Irish bagpipers played at the castle. Christopher wrote the Spenserian sonnet, "Kilcolman Castle," the next morning.)