

## ARGUMENT, EVIDENCE, AND RELIGION

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MARVIN KOHL

Review of Erik J. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, 243 p. + x. \$21.99 paperback.

The past decade has witnessed an increase of interest in atheism that might also be described as an insurgence against belief in God. Under the banner of what may be broadly called the naturalistic point of view, critics have protested against arguments defending God's existence and those concerning the need for, or utility of, theistic belief. The latter is discussed by Erik J. Wielenberg in his earlier book *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*,<sup>1</sup> where he maintains that a belief in the existence of the Christian God is not necessary for life to have meaning or for the existence of morality and virtue, since there are objective ethical truths independent of religious belief.

In most of his new book, *God and the Reach of Reason*, Wielenberg deals with C. S. Lewis's arguments for the existence of God by imagining a confrontation on the issue between Lewis, Hume and Russell. In the first chapter, Wielenberg analyzes Lewis's solution for the "problem of pain" (or problem of evil, of how there can be suffering in the world with a good and almighty God), in the second, he analyzes several other arguments for the existence of God by Lewis, including his reworking of the argument from morality, an argument from reason, and argument from desire, and in the third, he considers Lewis's argument from miracles. About these arguments Wielenberg concludes that "Lewis's proposed solution to the problem of pain is incomplete, that his cumulative case for the existence of a Higher Power is, overall, not terribly weighty, and that (consequently) his effort to establish an adequate philosophical foundation for a historical case for the Resurrection of Christ fails." (152) The fourth part of the book is concerned with finding areas of agreement between Hume, Russell, and Lewis on the relation of reason and faith, the argument from design, and the nature of true religion.

Philosophers of religion may find the discussion of Lewis's weak fideism rewarding reading because, unlike the extremist, Lewis is content to argue that what may first be accepted on faith may subsequently find rational support. The book also includes a discussion of the problem facing atheists of giving an evolutionary account of human intentionality and of the claim that moral truths are necessary truths, important but all too brief discussions of happiness and love, and an attempt to coax the Owl of Minerva off her perch by suggesting that philosophy of religion might more fruitfully explore kinds of agreement between believers and non-believers, all written with subtle argument combined with a wonderful tolerance for disagreement.

One area in which Wielenberg finds agreement between Lewis, Hume, and Russell is in what he views as their common passion for evidence and argument. All three, he says, believe "in the importance of following the evidence and on the difficulties humans face in doing this." However, it seems to me that Lewis has two different epistemologies: a proximate one that reveres evidence and an ultimate one that does not. From the perspective of the ultimate epistemology, a Christian should intuitively seize upon the truth on the basis of understanding and celebrating human nature and the history of its culture. It is on the basis of this intuition that Christians are and will continue to be convinced of the verity of "mere Christianity" (Lewis's term for core Christian doctrine). If this is true, then it is misleading to suggest that "all three thinkers share a common perspective: Follow the evidence" (202). Lewis, Hume, and Russell may each have a burning passion for the truth and evidence. But having a passion is one thing; having the same degree of commitment to evidence is another.

According to Russell, it is almost always a mistake to believe without evidence. Respect for evidence is not to be simply tacked on after a faith commitment. So to say as Russell continually does that evidence is the heart of rational belief is tantamount to saying that one also must begin with this kind of critical scrutiny. For Russell, a mere Christianity common to nearly all Christians, a Christianity based on intuition is, at best, the abnegation of having a passion for truth and, at worst, ludicrous or even evil.

Expressed differently, and this time from Lewis's perspective: For a truly religious person, belief in the existence of God is not quite like belief that Bertrand Russell was born in 1872. Truth for him is ultimately other than provability. Truth, from this perspective, involves a

sagacity that answers the human need for hope and genuine Christian understanding. This is why the British philosopher J. R. Lucas holds Lewis to be “the twentieth-century’s 139th psalm.”<sup>2</sup> With a subtle elegance, the 139th psalm reflects many of Lewis’s sentiments and reads as follows:

O Lord, Thou hast searched me, and known me.  
Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising,  
Thou understandst my thought afar off.  
Thou measurest my going about lying down,  
And are acquainted with all my ways.  
For there is not a word in my tongue,  
But, lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether.  
Thou hast hemmed me in behind and before,  
And laid Thy hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
Too high, I cannot attain unto it.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, for Lewis, knowing it all is beyond us, but an acquaintance with and acceptance of mere Christianity is not. By way of sharp contrast, Russell would remind us that, while we may be historically aware of the Christianity Lewis holds so dear, we are not, in any genuine cognitive sense, acquainted with it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Lucas, “The Restoration of Man: A Lecture Given in Durham, on Thursday, October 22nd, 1992 to Mark the Fiftieth Anniversary of C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*”, *Theology* 1995, 553

<sup>3</sup> 139th Psalm, King James Version