PRAISE FOR FROM ATHEISM TO CHRISTIANITY

I am a great admirer of Joel Heck’s philosophical insight and his diligence and thoroughness in research. In true form to the rest of his work, From Atheism to Christianity is both intellectually stimulating and spiritually nourishing and will prove to be a valuable addition to C. S. Lewis studies.

—David C. Downing
R. W. Schlosser Professor of English, Elizabethtown College

Careful in his claims and meticulous about dates, influences, and sources, Heck provides readers with an accurate, insightful, and highly readable account of Lewis’s journey from cynical atheist to joyful Christian. Heck’s storytelling powers illuminate and make comprehensible the winding path that Lewis took on his way to faith.

—Devin Brown
Professor of English, Asbury University
Author of A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis

Atheism is on the rise in our world, supported by a materialist worldview. Nevertheless, my experience reveals that few have actually thought through the overwhelming philosophical and theological problems with atheism. Perhaps no one, in the last one hundred years, wrestled with this issue more reasonably and poignantly than C. S. Lewis as he moved from unbelief to faith. Perhaps no one has explained the route Lewis took in that process better than Joel Heck. Heck is one of the best Lewis scholars in the world and an informative guide. I highly recommend this book!

—Jerry Root
Professor of Evangelism, Wheaton College

This is a fascinatingly detailed and meticulously researched account of Lewis’s slow conversion from atheism to Christianity that traces the influence of the books he read and the friends he made.

—Peter S. Williams
Co-editor of C. S. Lewis at Poets’ Corner (Cascade, 2016)
Author of C. S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists (Paternoster, 2013)
Joel Heck has made a meticulous, detailed study of C. S. Lewis’s journey from Christianity to atheism and back, providing clear and concise information about all the friends, authors, and texts that influenced him on the way. This book will be particularly invaluable to students who have to study Lewis but have little or no knowledge of philosophy or of the intellectual climate in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century.

—Suzanne Bray
Professor of English, Lille Catholic University

Drawing from an abundance of primary and secondary sources, Dr. Heck has provided us with the most thorough and meticulous account available of C. S. Lewis’s journey into, and then out of, atheism. Heck is the foremost authority on the chronology of Lewis’s life, tracing month by month the books and conversations that influenced Lewis’s shifts in thought. He discovers many new, heretofore overlooked sources of influence on Lewis during his fifteen-year journey to Christianity, including idealist philosophers George Berkeley and F. H. Bradley, poets Wordsworth and Herbert, and works on mysticism by Jacob Boehme, Henry More, and William James. Heck draws masterfully from Lewis’s letters, diaries, poems, and autobiographies (including *The Pilgrim’s Regress*). This book is an indispensable resource for any Lewis scholar and for any serious reader seeking to understand Lewis’s conversion from the inside out.

—Robert C. Koons
Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas at Austin

Perhaps no life story communicates the path from doubt to faith better than that of C. S. Lewis. Dr. Heck has written a masterpiece about Lewis’s journey. Not only does this work reference the best scholarship on the life and work of Lewis, it also shares the heart of the author that no one should live and die without hope for salvation.

In my pastoral ministry, I have watched many struggle with faith and doubt. Dr. Heck embraces that tension and uses the story of Lewis to weave the reader to a God of love. There are far too many Christian books that shame atheists for their lack of faith. Finally we have a book that is a safe and intelligent read that you can offer friends and family whom you love.

—Rev. Jim Mueller
Senior Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church, Hurst, Texas
Joel Heck’s splendid book is rich with fresh insights into the events, people, books, and ideas that influenced C. S. Lewis’s journeys to and from atheism. Never patronizing, it should be widely read by both atheists and theists who want a deeper understanding of the dynamics of belief and unbelief.

—Angus Menuge
Professor and Chair of Philosophy, Concordia University Wisconsin
President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society

C. S. Lewis told the story of his fifteen-year journey from atheism to Christianity in his autobiographical books _The Pilgrim’s Regress_ and _Surprised by Joy_. With careful chronology and an examination of a wide range of writings, Joel Heck brings greater clarity to this important period. His use of Lewis’s poetry and letters, among other works, fills in details and gives greater understanding of Lewis’s many influences. The resulting enhanced account of Lewis’s conversion underscores the compelling authenticity of his Christian apologetics in the context of his own faith and understanding.

—Steven P. Mueller
Dean of Christ College, Concordia University Irvine
Author of _Not a Tame God: Christ in the Writings of C. S. Lewis_ (CPH, 2002)
FROM ATHEISM TO CHRISTIANITY

THE STORY OF C. S. LEWIS

JOEL D. HECK

C O N C O R D I A P U B L I S H I N G H O U S E  •  S A I N T L O U I S
To my wife, Cheryl, my companion, my partner, my love on this journey through life together.
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This book began at the Central Texas C. S. Lewis Society, which has met monthly in Austin, Texas, since 1999 and has provided much helpful critique of the manuscript in progress. Those individuals include especially Margaret Humphreys, Johnny Humphreys, Rob Koons, George Musacchio, Bill Laughlin, Claire Ducker, Karen Jordahl, Dorothy Kraemer, Patricia Youngdale, and Larry Linenschmidt, along with other occasional visitors. My heartfelt thanks and appreciation go to each of them for their comments and encouragement.

In addition to this group, I am grateful to a group of people who are either students of Lewis or students of writing or both, have written about Lewis, and read much of the manuscript during its development, making many helpful suggestions, nearly all of which I adopted. My thanks go to Jeffrey Utzinger, Devin Brown, Gene Edward Veith, Suzanne Bray, David C. Downing, Diana Glyer, Andrew Lazo, Angus J. L. Menuge, Adam Barkman, Peter S. Williams, and Stephen Thorson, but also to George Musacchio and Rob Koons once again. And I am grateful to one of my neighbors, Solana Wooldridge, who read this manuscript from the atheist’s point of view and made many additional, helpful suggestions.
One of the world’s most famous atheists of the twentieth century was C. S. Lewis. Although he did not become famous for his atheism, he became famous, in part, because of his atheism. Many other atheists of the twentieth century are well-known both for their expertise in their fields and for being atheists, people like philosophers Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Ryle, A. J. Ayer, P. F. Stawson, Antony Flew, writer Philip Pullman, and others, but none of them has captured the minds and imaginations of people like C. S. Lewis, whose influence far surpasses any of these individuals, and perhaps even all of them combined.

What journey did Lewis travel on his way to atheism? How was it that he left his atheism behind, first for theism and then for Christianity? What were the attractions of atheism for him, and then, much later, what were the attractions of theism and Christianity? Why did his journey from atheism to theism and Christianity take fifteen years? How did his thinking change as those years went by and what stages did he pass through? Who influenced his thought during that time? Who were the authors he read, the teachers and students with whom he interacted, and the friends he made? What did he mean when he once wrote about the “good atheist”?

This book attempts to answer those questions, and, in the answering, offers clues to the meaning of life for the contemporary atheist and theist alike from the perspective of one who knew both atheism and Christianity from the inside. In fact, one of the reasons why the BBC invited Lewis to give the talks that later became the book we know as Mere Christianity was because he had been an atheist for many years.

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Three major events in the recent past have made this book possible.

First, over the past five decades since his death, we have come to understand Lewis’s life better as people have studied his life and writings. Chief among the studies of Lewis’s journey to faith is David C. Downing’s book, *The Most Reluctant Convert*. The publication of three volumes of Lewis’s letters (*The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*), edited by Walter Hooper, has greatly aided such study, as has the publication of other helpful works, including the diary of C. S. Lewis, the diary of his brother Warren, *The Lewis Papers*; the recently published “Early Prose Joy” (an early attempt by Lewis at writing an autobiography); his allegorical autobiography, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*; and his actual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. As a matter of fact, Lewis’s own Preface to *Surprised by Joy* states that he had received requests to tell how he traveled the road from atheism to Christianity.

Lewis once stated that ink was “the great cure for all human ills.” One major assumption guides this book: when Lewis drew a significant conclusion or took an important step in his thinking, he wrote about it. Lewis was a voluminous writer, both in his work as a scholar and in his personal life. He expressed his major ideas in books and essays, sometimes long after he drew those conclusions, in his tens of thousands of letters, and in his on-again-off-again diaries. Often his writing was therapeutic, enabling him to express his thoughts and emotions, drawing strength, understanding, and clarity from doing so. If an idea was important enough to change his thinking, it was important enough to write about in his diary, in an essay or book, or in a letter to one of his close friends. He may have spoken about important changes without writing about them, and certainly he was a great talker, but we can probably never know what he said about those changes.

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2 *The Lewis Papers* are a collection of family papers in the Lewis family from 1850–1930, compiled by Warren Lewis and consisting of letters, diaries, poems, brief essays, and various other documents.

Second, in 2013, three major biographies of the life of C. S. Lewis were published during the fiftieth anniversary year of his death, one by Devin Brown, which connects the writings of Lewis more closely to the changes in his spiritual life than ever before, another by Alister McGrath, and a third by Colin Duriez. Each of these has made important contributions to our understanding of C. S. Lewis, building on many previous biographies, especially George Sayer’s *Jack*.

Third, my own work has resulted in the compilation of a massive amount of information about the life of Lewis in chronological order, which is available through the online resource “Chronologically Lewis.” We now have more information about Lewis than we have ever had, even more information in some places than Lewis himself had. This book stands on the shoulders of those who have studied Lewis. Its goal is to provide greater insight into one fifteen-year phase of his life and to enable readers to better understand both atheism and Christianity—Lewis’s own specific versions of atheism and Christianity—as a result.

Before we move to the introduction, an explanation about Lewis’s use of the word *Joy* is in order for those unfamiliar with his writings. By the word *Joy*—which he distinguished with a capital letter—Lewis did not mean delight or happiness or pleasure, whether due to outward circumstances or an inner state of mind. Joy is delightful, bringing happiness, but not delight itself. Joy is pleasurable, but not pleasure itself. He used several other terms as near synonyms for *Joy*, among them *longing*, *desire*, and the German word *Sehnsucht*. He once defined Joy as an “inconsolable longing”\(^4\) for something beyond human experience, and he described it as thoughtful wishing that began for him at least by age 6.\(^5\) This Joy was fleeting, and it included a desire to have that longing again just as soon as it was gone. For Lewis, Joy was a longing that is perhaps best expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:11, where Solomon writes about God, “He has put eternity into

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man’s heart.” Joy was a longing for something beyond this world, ultimately a longing for God that was put inside us by God Himself. At times before his conversion, he mistook the beauty of art, nature, or music (as well as other things) as the source of longing, not looking behind those objects for their source or even believing that there was anything behind them.

One of the enduring images C. S. Lewis left for readers involves the game of chess. When he was four, Lewis went on vacation with his mother and brother to nearby County Down in Ireland. Before leaving, Lewis had asked his father for a chess set. While in County Down, Lewis asked if his father would remember to buy him that chess set. For many years afterward, the two brothers played chess. Little did he know at age 4 what impact the game of chess would have on both his life and his autobiography.

Lewis described his intellectual and spiritual development as a chess game in which God made four major moves. We can now identify the first two moves to the day, month, and year; the third one within a few months (with a great deal of certainty to the right year); and the fourth move to a six-day period. That was previously not possible. All other change in Lewis’s thinking leads up to or follows those four moves, which serve as the major changes in his pre-Christian thinking. The four major chess moves were the loss of his first bishop, the loss of the second bishop, Check, and Checkmate. The books he was reading, the people to whom he was talking, his personal aspirations, and the changes in his living conditions or his career clarify those four moves. The reader should know that Lewis was an

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intellectual, and that means that most of his spiritual development was the result of much thinking, much reading, and deep conversations. Although few people travel a similar path, our tracing of his mental footsteps will reward us, and we will find most of his thinking within our reach. However, as J. R. R. Tolkien once said of Lewis, “You’ll never get to the bottom of him.” And we won’t, certainly not in this book.

The opening chapters in this book describe how Lewis became an atheist, as well as discuss some of the influences both toward and away from atheism. Then chapters 3 through 7 trace the steps in Lewis’s belief between 1916 and 1931 year by year in some detail, providing insight into skepticism, agnosticism, atheism, Realism, Idealism, pantheism, theism, and Christianity in the process. The concluding chapters provide closure, offering a summary of his return to theism; what Lewis in retrospect thought about atheism; and some conclusions about Lewis, atheism, and God.

Joel D. Heck
Summer 2016

INTRODUCTION

“You can’t start with God. I don’t accept God!”
—C. S. Lewis to Leo Baker,
C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table

On October 12, 1916, the seventeen-year-old C. S. Lewis wrote a strident letter to Arthur Greeves, his boyhood friend. In this letter, he explained a position he had adopted about religion nearly four years earlier. At the time, Lewis was living and studying with William T. Kirkpatrick, a private tutor, in the hope of being successful enough on his scholarship exams to be admitted to Oxford University. Kirkpatrick, the former Headmaster of Lurgan College in Ireland, was living in retirement. He had privately tutored Albert Lewis as a student at Lurgan College, later Warren Lewis, and now the younger Lewis.

Lewis had recently read Sir James Frazer’s The Golden Bough, which had convinced him that Christianity was just one of many mythologies. By this time in his life, Lewis had already rejected Christianity, but Frazer gave him a platform on which to base his atheism. The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion, published as a series of twelve books, compares Christianity to the mystery religions, arguing that Christianity is an imitation of those other religions, including those that held to a dying and rising god. Today scholars regard that viewpoint as invalid.1 As Michael Licona has noted, “There were no dying and rising gods that preceded Christianity. They all post-dated the first century.”2 Consequently, Ronald Nash has stated

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that “the tide of scholarly opinion has turned dramatically against attempts to make early Christianity dependent on the so-called dying and rising gods of Hellenistic paganism.” Most of the rest of Frazer’s book has also been set aside, and today it is remembered largely for its literary influence on authors T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

At this time, Frazer’s book series convinced him so much that he wrote an extensive defense of his thinking to Arthur Greeves, stating,

I believe in no religion. . . . and . . . Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is, all mythologies . . . are merely man’s own invention . . . great men were regarded as gods after their death . . . thus after the death of a Hebrew philosopher Yeshua (whose name we have corrupted into Jesus) he became regarded as a god, a cult sprang up, which was afterwards connected with the ancient Hebrew-Jahweh-worship, and so Christianity came into being—one mythology among many.

This was the position of Sir James Frazer. Lewis drew on Frazer’s works, comparing the various religions of the world with Greek and Norse mythology. For Frazer, human belief evolved from an initial stage of primitive magic to religion and finally to the scientific stage. Although Frazer’s position has since been discarded as contrary to the evidence, many held to this position in the first two decades of the twentieth century. For the young Lewis, religion was a product of superstition and a result of a lack of education and clear thinking.

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5 *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, I, 230f.
6 Paul C. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2000), 131ff. Vitz cites ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt, who has shown that all of the earliest humans and the most primitive tribes that we know have had monotheistic beliefs from the start. In fact, the history of the development of religion has been shown to be one of devolution rather than evolution, i.e., a movement from one god to few gods to many gods.
When he entered Oxford University a year later as an undergraduate, Lewis made numerous friends among his fellow students. One of those friends was Leo Baker. Early in their friendship, probably during their first term together, Lewis yelled at Baker, “You take too many things for granted. You can’t start with God. I don’t accept God!” Stunned into silence, Baker quickly learned that assuming the existence of God was unacceptable for Lewis.

How did C. S. Lewis, the grandson of a clergyman and the child of active church members, come to adopt atheism and what were his reasons for doing so? Why did he adopt atheism so easily, even after being raised in a Christian home? Why then, many years later, did he set aside his atheism in favor of the Christianity he had previously rejected as bondage and become the author of so many best-selling books, especially the Chronicles of Narnia, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Screwtape Letters*? To these questions we now turn.

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CHAPTER 1

THE CAUSES OF LEWIS’S ATHEISM

“I had very definitely formed the opinion that the universe was, in the main, a rather regrettable institution.”

—C. S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis condemns himself in the strongest terms for what he calls one of the worst acts of his life. He allowed himself to be confirmed and to make his first communion in his Belfast church—St. Mark’s, Dundela—at age 16, in total disbelief of the teachings that the church asked him to confirm.¹ The rift between father and son helped to create this awkward situation, and Lewis’s cowardice—his unwillingness to tell his father what he actually believed—drove him to hypocrisy, and the hypocrisy, he explains, drove him to blasphemy. His brother was serving in the war effort in France, unavailable for counsel, and the few friends he had were not ones he could confide in. An entire complex of factors combined to create this regrettable situation.

C. S. Lewis’s atheism began early in life while living in his parents’ household, where the family practiced a superficial form of Christianity. Lewis was a bright and precocious child, and he knew just enough about the Christian faith to think he understood it. Lewis later wrote that during those early years, aesthetic experiences—such as his later

love of music, art, and nature—were rare and that religious experiences were non-existent. He learned what most people learn from their church: how to pray, how to gather for worship, and how to act in church. He tells us that he accepted what he was told, but he had little interest in it. He remembered no emotion that could qualify as truly religious. He also confesses that he recalled almost nothing about his mother’s religion and that he could recall nothing other-worldly about his childhood. Although she was the daughter of a Church of Ireland clergyman, his mother, Flora Lewis, seems not to have modeled, taught, or encouraged personal spirituality, offering instead what Warren once called “the dry husks of religion” that came from the semi-political churchgoing of Northern Ireland. It may only be that Flora ceded too much of the development of her children’s spiritual life to Annie Harper and other maids or that her poor health prevented her from doing more. Either that or Jack—the name his friends called him—may simply have been too young to develop a genuine faith of his own before his mother’s death when he was nine. Their Christianity seems to have been more formal than heartfelt; a church attendance, rather than meaningful, positive relationships with a living God; more a religion of the head than a religion of the heart.

This formal spiritual focus in his early life explains why Lewis later wrote about the difficulty in feeling about God and the sufferings of

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6 The skepticism of Lily Suffern, Flora’s sister, provides a window into the Hamilton family, when Aunt Lily spoke to young C. S. Lewis about the cardinal error of all religions, i.e., the assumption that God existed and cared for us. She also claimed that the importance of Christ lay not in what He said (C. S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis*, 1922–1927 [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991], 128).
Christ as one was supposed to feel. His effort to present these ideas in the imaginary world of Narnia enabled others to see them—as he put it—in their real potency, stripped of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations. The message of the Gospel, as presented to him in his childhood, did not communicate its truth effectively, but rather paralyzed his religious development for many years. Warren’s diary confirms this, describing the sermons of Rev. Gerald Peacocke—Rector of St. Mark’s, Dundela, from 1900 to 1914—as unintelligible during his childhood attendance at St. Mark’s.

Those early years—from age 6 to 12—were also lonely years for Jack, especially after Warren crossed the Irish Sea to attend school in England. Deprived of his brother, the younger Lewis was lonely. He stated that solitude became the chief characteristic of that period in his life. Because he had been born with only one joint in each of his thumbs, he was inept at sports; this limited for him the possible companionships of athletes and athletics and encouraged him toward the solitary activities of reading and writing. Instead of finding companions in his classmates, he developed a sense of companionship with the characters he was reading or writing about. In spite of the companionship of his brother, he once stated of this period in life that he and his brother had no friends. In late 1913, he wrote to his father about the rare blessing of solitude while recuperating in the sanatorium. Later, while a student at Cherbourg House, Lewis called himself “the orphan,” a hint of the alienation he felt toward his father,

8 The unpublished diary of Warren Lewis, April 19, 1931.
9 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 11.
10 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 46. In Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, I, 95, a letter dated November 17, 1914, Lewis wrote about this time at Great Bookham that in that week he had not spoken to anyone except for Kirkpatrick and his wife, and that he did not really mind, since there were few people whose society he preferred to his own.
11 Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, I, 44, n. 44.
12 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 59.
but he also wrote that there he made his first real friends.\textsuperscript{13} While it is odd that he was making friends for the first time at age 14, his solitary activities of reading and writing were contributing factors. His father Albert Lewis once confided in Warren that he was concerned that his younger son would be more of a hermit than ever by studying with a private tutor, W. T. Kirkpatrick, and he had reason to be concerned. Some of the poems Clive wrote during that period, especially the poem “Loneliness,”\textsuperscript{14} expressed the solitude of one living in a world with few friends. What would become a great strength of Lewis—his friendliness and cordiality to almost anyone he met—was at this time in his life almost completely absent. And, as we will see, this solitude had an impact on Lewis’s religious beliefs.

**Suffering and the Death of Flora Lewis**

Just as Lewis was beginning his mornings in prayer and considering what it meant to love his neighbor as himself, a tragedy occurred that made it hard for him to believe in a loving God: in 1908, his mother, Flora Hamilton Lewis, died of cancer. That tragic death began a long journey for nine-year-old Lewis, and the primary conclusion he made was that, if such tragic events can happen, God must not exist. God is supposed to be good, and no God would have allowed such tragedy. No growth, no learning, no redemption can come from suffering. When he later discovered a quotation from Lucretius,\textsuperscript{15} Lewis saw that quotation as representative of what he felt: “Had God designed the world, it would not be / A world so frail and faulty as we see.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 58.


\textsuperscript{15} Lucretius was a Roman poet and philosopher who lived during the first century BC, from 99 to 55 BC.

\textsuperscript{16} Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 65. The Lucretius quote is from *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5, 198–99. According to *Surprised by Joy*, 144, he discovered this quotation at least as early as his time with Kirkpatrick (1914–17).
The prayers that he was taught to say did not result in his mother’s return to health. The world is frail and faulty when your mother dies, especially when she dies while you are in your tender years. Later Lewis would write about this early period in his life, “I had very definitely formed the opinion that the universe was, in the main, a rather regrettable institution.” In his thinking, the death of one’s mother in such a tragic way could not possibly be part of the plan of a loving God. Lewis described his mother’s death in this hopeless way: “It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.”

Later he would write that Walter Hilton’s warning about prayer would have provided the necessary correction, since Hilton had argued that we must never use prayer to try to extort anything from God. That no one offered Hilton’s warning reminds us that for much of his childhood and boyhood he lacked the kind of spiritual direction that would have helped him in his spiritual life and would have made some sense of suffering. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis summarized the core of the argument about suffering, “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.”

Couple this argument with a world of nature which does not favor life;

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18 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 21. Or as one man more recently put it, “My whole world disappeared” (Lynn Davidman, *Motherloss* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000], 32). This book is a study of sixty people who lost their mothers when they were between the ages of ten and fifteen.
all life ends without hope, as Lewis wrote, and in the same way.\textsuperscript{21} Then, later in his autobiography, he reflects on how he originally thought, referring to his views early in life this way: “The inexorable ‘laws of Nature’ which operate in defiance of human suffering or desert, which are not turned aside by prayer, seem at first sight to furnish a strong argument against the goodness and power of God.”\textsuperscript{22}

Decades later, Lewis wrote a letter to his former student (and former atheist) Alan Richard Griffiths. Walter Hooper informs us that Alan Richard Griffiths matriculated at Magdalen College in 1925 and that Griffiths read English with Lewis as his tutor from 1927 until 1929.\textsuperscript{23} He comes into the story a great deal later on because both he and Lewis were at approximately the same stage in their spiritual lives in the late 1920s, so much so that Lewis called him his “chief companion”\textsuperscript{24} on his spiritual journey. Lewis explained to Griffiths how he came to adopt atheism: “The early loss of my mother, great unhappiness at school, and the shadow of the last war and presently the experience of it, had given me a very pessimistic view of existence. My atheism was based on it.”\textsuperscript{25}

Beginning that sentence with the death of his mother shows the preeminence of that great loss in his life. A pessimistic view of existence that was the foundation of Lewis’s atheism was based on her death as well as other tragic events; his inability to understand setback left him without the resources to make sense of such suffering. Later he wrote that his argument against God resulted from a universe that

\textsuperscript{22} Lewis, \textit{The Problem of Pain}, 19.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis}, I, 834, n. 82.
seemed cruel and unjust. He had seen much pain and suffering in his mother’s last days, in the sometimes cruel school system, between people and nations during the First World War, and even in his own life. There is, perhaps, nothing that is more common to atheists than the shared belief that the universe is too cold, harsh, and uncaring for there to be a God.

THE EMOTIONAL LOSS OF HIS FATHER

Lewis tells us that he lost his father at the same time he lost his mother. Partly because of his emotional makeup, and undoubtedly because he loved her deeply, Albert Lewis had great difficulty dealing with the death of his wife, Flora. The difficulty was compounded for several reasons. First, Flora died on Albert’s forty-fifth birthday. Second, earlier that year Albert had lost his father, Richard. And, third, eleven days after Flora’s death, his brother Joseph died. Albert had great difficulty coping with the accumulation of pain and loss, as anyone would. After this devastating series of losses, all of them within six months of one another, Albert’s two sons crossed the Irish Sea to Wynyard School for their education. They had been separated from their mother by death; they were now, both geographically and emotionally, separated from their father by their schooling. This decision brought both sons closer to each another, but it alienated them from their father.

Some of the additional reasons for alienation between father and sons are mentioned later in the letters and diaries of the two brothers. They called him the Pudaitabird, or P’daitabird or PB, a name they invented because of the way he pronounced “potato.” Warren wrote about Albert’s avoidance of breaking his daily routine, which is why Albert failed to see his younger son off to the First World War in France in 1917 and also would decline to visit him while Lewis was recuperating from war wounds in a London hospital almost a year

later. Albert’s emotionalism, his frequent inability to reason to a logical conclusion, his desire to control every conversation, his sense of the theatrical, and often hearing only what he wanted to hear all contributed to a growing distance between father and sons. The letters and diaries of both brothers document similar gaps in Albert’s fatherly responsibilities when the boys were much younger. For example, Lewis once wrote to Leo Baker, describing home as “a synonym for busy triviality, continual interruption and a complete lack of privacy.” These characteristics of their father explain why Warren once wrote, “My afternoon had no interior comforts to compensate for the weather, for it was spent in writing to the PB, which I think I dislike more than any of my obligations.” While Lewis’s letter to Alan Richard Griffiths—quoted earlier—does not mention his father, it does mention his “great unhappiness at school,” for which he blamed his father.

Not named by Lewis, but often a part of the adoption of atheism, is an absent, harsh, abusive, or dysfunctional father, which is a recurring feature in the biography of well-known atheists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, Thomas Hobbes, Jean Meslier, and many others. Psychologists have developed the connection between a child’s understanding of his father and his

29 Joan Murphy, daughter of Joseph Lewis, Jack’s cousin, said of Albert, “He was a very dominant, even domineering man” (C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society, Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe, eds. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 170).
32 The unpublished diary of Warren Hamilton Lewis, an entry dated September 22, 1925.
33 Vitz, Faith of the Fatherless, 128. There are, of course, other reasons, some mentioned by Vitz, including painful experiences with representatives of religion and painful struggles within the self. See also chapter 2, “Atheists and Their Fathers,” 17–57, in its entirety, and chapter 5, “Superficial Atheism: A Personal Account,” 130–38, which lists additional factors such as social unease, the desire for acceptance, personal independence, and personal convenience.
understanding of God, the so-called defective father hypothesis.\textsuperscript{34} As a result, “an atheist’s disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies the rejection of God.”\textsuperscript{35} This hypothesis clearly applies to the Lewis brothers, far more because of their father’s emotional distance and dominating personality than for any abuse or harshness. When the Lewis brothers rejected their father, they also rejected God.\textsuperscript{36}

**EARLY SCHOOLING**

The Lewis brothers suffered one of the worst educational experiences of their day at Wynyard School in Watford, a city located just northwest of London, under Headmaster Robert Capron. Warren had enrolled there in 1905, and Jack started at Wynyard three years later, less than a month after his mother’s death. Capron frequently used corporal punishment as a disciplinary and educational tool. Because of this, but especially because of poor instruction, the boys learned very little. Though once a reputable school, Wynyard had declined a great deal by the time the Lewis brothers arrived. Eventually Capron left the school, was later certified insane, and died at the Camberwell House Asylum in south London only a year after the younger Lewis left the school. C. S. Lewis described it as a “hole” in an early letter to his father, and Warren once admitted that for an entire term he had done the same four math problems over and over again in order to escape the watchful eye of the Headmaster.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite the atheism of his childhood, at Wynyard, young Lewis actually went through a time of believing in Christianity.\textsuperscript{38} He attended

\textsuperscript{34} Of course this hypothesis is by no means absolute. For example, J. R. R. Tolkien, who played a major role in bringing Lewis to faith, experienced an absent father from the age 4 onwards and was never, as far as we can tell, an atheist.

\textsuperscript{35} Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless*, 16.

\textsuperscript{36} Older brother Warren also became an atheist, as he indicates in his diary on the date May 13, 1931 (*Brothers & Friends* [New York: Harper & Row, 1983], 80).

\textsuperscript{37} *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, I, 7. See also George Sayer’s *Jack*, 60 and *The Lewis Papers* 3:40.

\textsuperscript{38} Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 33.
St. John’s Church, Watford, where he heard Christian teachings from people who actually believed them with the result that he came to believe them also. That means, of course, that he had not believed them previously, largely because of the sterile atmosphere in the Lewis household in Belfast. This Watford experience resulted in Lewis beginning to pray, read the Bible, and obey his conscience. There, he wrote, he discussed religion with his school friends in a healthy and profitable way, an indication that Christianity was more than a set of dogmas—it was something he actually attempted to live.

THE ADOPTION OF ATHEISM

During the years after his mother’s death in 1908, Lewis attended church, held to the Christian faith while at Wynyard School, and struggled with believing in a benevolent God. Then, in 1911, he began to attend Cherbourg House, and during that time he adopted a formal belief system: atheism. He tells us that he was fourteen years old when he became an atheist. He had attended church several times during his first year at Cherbourg, but he never wrote as positively about worship services at Cherbourg as he did at Watford. He stated about his time at Cherbourg that he did not have a single emotion which he would have considered religious. He had tried to understand why the stories of Christianity were not sheer illusion when everyone understood that the Roman gods and goddesses were not characters from history. In his autobiography, he states that no one attempted to explain the difference, and no one showed how Christianity was a fulfillment of paganism. As had been the case at home, he lacked the spiritual direction that he needed from his instructors at Cherbourg

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40 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 63. See also Lewis, “Early Prose Joy,” 28f. See also a letter to John Rowland, dated June 9, 1944, located in the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.
42 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 63.
House, nor did he realize how firm a historical foundation Christianity was based upon.

Pagans believed that the gods were involved in the lives of people, sometimes requiring a sacrifice in order to stop a plague and at other times creating a sense of longing for a better world through their literature. The Norse and Greek myths expressed the interest of the gods in human activity, and the presence of dryads and nymphs in their world of nature showed that pagans believed some divine presence was quite near. They did not divest the world of the divine, as the modern materialists had done, and their myths about a supreme deity, or various deities, reinforced their conviction that they were accountable to higher powers. But no one explained this sense of the divine, and its similarity to Christianity, to the young Lewis.

The beginning of Lewis’s formal atheism took place at a date sometime between his fourteenth birthday and his departure from Cherbourg House the following July.\(^{43}\) Lewis’s letters to Arthur Greeves show him vigorously defending his atheism and pointedly ridiculing Greeves’s Christianity for its alleged lack of evidence. Lewis’s early poem, “‘Carpe Diem’ after Horace,” which he wrote in October 1913, reflects the pessimism of his newly adopted thinking. Horace was the leading Roman poet of the first century BC, writing during the time of Caesar Augustus. Horace used the phrase “carpe diem,” “seize the day,” as an Epicurean statement about enjoying the moment, or living for today.\(^{44}\) Here young Lewis celebrated the momentary rather than the eternal and adopted the position that humans should enjoy the brief amount of time we have because soon death will end all.

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\(^{43}\) In other words, between November 29, 1912, his fourteenth birthday, and the end of that school year at Cherbourg, July 29, 1913 (“Early Prose Joy,” 28). Since seven of the eight months of this period of time belong to 1913, that makes the year 1913 more likely as the year he became an atheist. However, Miss Cowie was replaced in May 1912, and his rapid decline began at that time. Therefore, December 1912 or January 1913 seems very likely.

\(^{44}\) Horace, *Odes*, 1.11.
The poem *Quam Bene Saturno*, also written while Lewis was at Cherbourg, concludes with words that challenge authority while complaining about the human lot in life. The poem, which begins with “Alas!” and concludes with the line “With grim array our path surround,” demonstrates a pessimistic worldview—no peace; only famine, slaughter, fire, and sword—and an acknowledgment of the Roman gods Saturn, Neptune, and Jove.

Perhaps such expression about the Roman gods was fed by a conviction that came from Lewis’s reading the ancient mythologies. As he read them, he began to wonder why Christ could not be placed on the same level as Adonis, Apollo, or Neptune. He called his turn to atheism the anthropological route to atheism, apparently indicating that he saw Christ, or at least the worship of Christ, as a human invention on a par with the worship of the Roman deity Jupiter.

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis himself suggests that the immediate cause of his atheism was Miss Cowie, the Cherbourg House matron who was dabbling with occult movements, Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and Spiritualism. He partially absolves her, however, stating, “Nothing was further from her intention than to destroy my faith.”

Lewis admired many things about her, perhaps because she provided the motherly support he had lost when his mother died, but her departure from Cherbourg at the mid-point of Lewis’s schooling at Cherbourg (May 1912) resulted in the departure of the good effects of her presence and the remaining of the bad. From that time on, Lewis

48 This seems to be what Lewis meant by “the anthropological argument,” as evidenced in “Religion without Dogma,” *God in the Dock*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), especially 131f.
49 The term *theosophy* is a general word for study of the occult.
50 A combination of occult teachings, Jewish mysticism, Gnosticism, and other teachings, claiming secret knowledge handed down from ancient times (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/510019/Rosicrucian).