

**POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY
AND THE CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS OF C. S. LEWIS**

BY

DONALD NEIL WILSON

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**SUPERVISOR: Prof C Wethmar
CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr K Roy**

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I, Donald Neil Wilson, declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at another university/institution.

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ABSTRACT

Epistemology in its contemporary post-modern ethos is generally believed to be inseparably hinged upon language. This of course ensures a major paradigm shift in the disciplined human conceptions of reality. It has been stated and is widely acknowledged that the Kantian *Noumenal barrier* has, in this recent shift, been proved to be looming far closer than it was ever previously considered. This new barrier to the world of 'objective absolutes' comprises a barrier of semantics and syntax, and calls for a radical restructuring of all the human sciences. There is surely no discipline in the humanities that can claim immunity to this colossal shift in epistemology, and theology (particularly of the Evangelical variety) is no exception to the rule.

The impact of post-modern epistemological assumption upon contemporary Evangelicalism presents to those who adhere to this school's position, a profound challenge. Conservative Christians, who hold to the propositional universality and the objectivity of biblical truth, find in the post-modern ethos little sympathy and no rational justification granted for their 'metaphysical objectivity'. A major challenge therefore to Evangelical Christianity at the present time is this: Is there, in the light of the challenge of post-modern epistemology, any reasonable justification for continuing to adhere to the evangelical claim that God has spoken in unchanging propositional terms that are universally valid and binding? It would seem that in this regard many evangelicals are feeling pressured. Evidence of the pressure of this challenge can readily be found either in the growing contemporary evangelical tendency towards advocating a more cooperative attitude to the post-modern ethos, or in the reactionary theology of schools of thought like the Spiritual Warfare Movement.

The writings of Clive Staples Lewis (1898 – 1963) have been proven effective in the countering of negative challenges to Christian faith for the past sixty years. Lewis, as an apologist, in the opinion of many intellectual searchers, positively and convincingly countered modernistic objections to faith in his own time. Modernistic assumptions prevailed in the Western world in

Lewis' day that tended to discredit a rational belief in the supernatural. Lewis was widely held to be an effective apostle to counter this modernistic scepticism.

It is the conviction of the present writer that C. S. Lewis apologetics can be just as effectively utilised today in addressing *post-modern* challenges, as it was fifty years ago used to answer the questions raised by modernism. Lewis in all of his Christian writings, reveals an underlying epistemology that I believe (because it is based firmly upon Christian orthodoxy), has stood the test of time. The apologetics of C. S. Lewis may serve to answer post-modern challenges just as rationally as it did modernism.

In this thesis, Lewis' underlying epistemology will be examined. This will comprise the first part of my work. The second part of the thesis deals with the post-modern epistemological challenge to Evangelicalism as a world-view. The final part of this thesis consists of a dialogue between the most common post-modern challenges to evangelical thinking, and rationally compelling answers thereto that are found in Lewis' writings.

TEN KEY TERMS

Accommodated Rationality.

Categorical Imperative.

Epistemology.

Myth.

Noumenal Barrier.

Semantics.

Supernatural.

Syntax.

Thing in Itself.

Transposition.

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TO MELODY, PAUL, AND DANIELLE

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INTRODUCTION

The following paragraph, written by educational theorist Henry Giroux, encapsulates the essential spirit of what is now termed epistemological Post-modernism (Cahoone 1996:693),

The enlightenment notion of reason needs to be reformulated within a critical pedagogy. First, educators need to be sceptical regarding any notion of reason that purports to reveal the truth by denying its own historical construction and ideological principles. Reason is not innocent and any viable notion of critical pedagogy cannot exercise forms of authority that emulate totalising forms of reason that appear to be beyond criticism and dialogue. This suggests that we reject claims to objectivity in favor of partial epistemologies that recognise the historical and socially constructed nature of their own knowledge claims and methodologies.

The sentiment expressed in the above paragraph by a leading contemporary thinker in American educational circles would have provoked immediate shock and resistance in academic circles perhaps less than thirty years ago. Giroux is suggesting that education strategy needs to jettison formerly held ideas of absolute truth and objective reality, and replace such considerations with alternative models of individual and subjective reality construction. Such sentiments as this are generally accepted as viable in many education circles today (McCallum 1996:10). Post-modernism is now firmly entrenched as the *currently respectable* mind-set of those academically '*in the know*'. The entire post-modern world-view is, in the final analysis, based upon an epistemological assumption. In other words, this world-view begins from, and is confined to, in all of its investigative considerations, the interpretive functioning of the human mind (Lyotard 1984:14). The traditional Western objective conceptions of duality, i.e. right and wrong, true and false, physical and mental are today rejected by many

thinkers, as merely being culturally conditioned and subjectively imposed value judgments. The post-modern emphasis lies not with any hypothetical objective 'absolutes' that humanity is to harness or adhere to, but with the subjective experience of the human mind as it functions within its inescapable linguistic, environmental, cultural, and psychological context. Post-modern epistemology has influenced all of the major areas of contemporary thinking i.e. Education, Psychotherapy, Law, the Physical Sciences, and to a large degree, Religion. McCallum describes post-modernism thus (1996:12),

Now in the late twentieth century, we are caught up in a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: *postmodernism*. Unlike Darwinism, postmodernism isn't a distinct set of doctrines or truth claims. It's a *mood* - a view of the world characterised by a deep distrust of reason...It's a *methodology* - a completely new way of analysing ideas. For all its ideas and advocates, postmodernism is also a *movement* - a fresh onslaught on truth that brings a more or less cohesive approach to literature, history, politics, education, law, sociology, linguistics, and virtually every other discipline including science. And it is ushering in a cultural metamorphosis - transforming every idea of everyday life.

The impact that the above world-view is having or has had upon contemporary thinking in all of the academic disciplines is of late probably the most written about thesis topic of the academic humanities. It may well be true as some suggest, that post-modernism signifies the end of Western civilisation as we know it, and it may well, for all we know at present, be the mind-set for a new world order. It may, on the other hand, be yet just another phase in shifting sands of philosophical tastes that will eventually die away and, as the pendulum swings,

be replaced by yet another dominating world-view. Although it is still far too soon to know how great the impact of post-modernism may yet become, it is vital to understand, that it cannot - especially by the Evangelical Christian community - be ignored. In the light of this, I therefore make no apology for producing yet another thesis on the subject of post-modernism's impact upon the Christian faith. I believe that there are soteriological issues that are raised by post-modern theory that simply must be addressed in order to justify the continuity of orthodox Christian thinking.

This dissertation will focus, as one of its aims, upon the impact that post-modern thinking has had upon the discipline of Christian theology - and more specifically, on Christian apologetics. In Christianity, especially in its evangelical form, a definite and inbuilt epistemology is presupposed from start to finish. What I mean by this is that it is possible and necessary for the human comprehension to attain a certain (albeit limited) objective understanding of absolute reality. Truth and falsehood, light and darkness, good and evil, for example, are all simply assumed by orthodoxy to be objectively comprehensible realities for all of humanity, all of the time. Absolutes exist outside of human subjectivity, it is believed, that need to be universally communicated by means of the propagation of the Christian message. If however, this above presupposed absolute is removed from Christian *kerugma*, then no matter how many times and ways Christianity is conceptualised, demythologised, or systematised anew by its academics and innovators, it ceases to be in essence the religion that it has been for the past two *millennia*. To put it another way, Christianity is, in its

theoretical form, based upon absolute assumptions, if these absolute assumptions are denied, then the historical theoretical content of Christianity stands completely ungrounded. McCallum writes (1996:202),

You may have noticed that evangelicalism, like modernism, insists on consistency. Both evangelicals and modernists have historically believed in the use of reason, beginning with the law of non-contradiction: 'A is not non-A'. So, for instance, the Creator can't be a personal God and an impersonal force at the same time. By taking the same stand as modernism in this particular area - though not in others - evangelical Christians have placed themselves in the direct line of fire of the growing post-modern consensus.

Epistemological post-modernism flatly denies any human comprehension of objective absolutes whatsoever (Cahoone 1996:21). In the light of this fact, it is undeniable that, on epistemological grounds, postmodernism and Evangelical Christianity is utterly irreconcilable as bedfellows. Strangely enough though, many Evangelical thinkers have attempted in many ingenious ways, to ford this unbridgeable chasm (e.g. Swartz and Codrington, *South African Baptist Journal of Theology* 1999:121). To the present writer's understanding however, there can never be the possibility of a happy coexistence with these two opposing world-views. When all of the academic subtleties have been swept away, one is faced with an *either-or* dilemma; if the post-modern subjective approach to epistemology is granted, then consequentially, Christian *kerugma* is of no objective validity at all (Cahoone 1996:531).

It is with the above dilemma in mind, that this dissertation is written. The epistemological claims that are presupposed by the post-modern mind-set have

proven at very least corrosive to many formally and confidently held assumptions in the Evangelical Church movement (McCallum 1996:199). Ontological Relativism, that which is the inevitable consequence of post-modern epistemology, is presently influencing the Church's very approach to evangelism and its relationship towards other faiths. Doctrines such as *human depravity*, *vicarious atonement*, *eternal retribution*, and *special revelation*, can all be denied or at very least, radically reinterpreted (Shorto 1997:14), once their absolute and objective foundations are removed (McGrath 1993:109). The result of this epistemological shift in Evangelical Christian circles is becoming increasingly evident. Thinking Christians are being compelled to become less confessional and more existential in their religious focus (Brooke 1998:35). Mysticism and the practice of occult methodologies are in many cases now widely emphasised in churches at the expense of doctrinal content. What is known generally as, *Spiritual Warfare*, and *Positive Confessional Praying*, are now, in evangelical circles, widely preached and practiced (McCallum 1996:199). The Evangelical reaction to the post-modern epistemology has also tended towards a far less aggressive and definitive form of evangelism. Inter-faith dialogue and 'bridge-building' is a prime example of the new post-modern approach to the Christian religion (Brooke 1998:36). It would seem to be the case, that, as scholar Dennis McCallum states (1996:13), Christian theology, having been denied its native objectivity by post-modern epistemology, now faces an identity crisis.

The scholar and Christian writer Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) wrote quite extensively on many different topics (Literary criticism, poetry, science fiction, fantasy, as well as a number of children's stories) in his lifetime. It is however in his specifically Christian writings, that I am convinced, much benefit for Christian apologetics may yet be discovered. Lewis, an Anglican layman, who admittedly was never systematic in his presentation of the Christian message (Sayer 1997:xxii), approached the communication of the gospel message with a robust rationality. He utilised the same instruments (inference, induction, and syllogistic deduction), and applied the very same frames of logical reference to the spiritual realm that he did to objects in the physical realm. It may be suggested that Lewis, a product of his own modernist times, has nothing truly contributory to share on the epistemological issue that is fundamental to the entire post-modern challenge to Christian evangelical thinking. I believe however, that he has. Underlining and supporting every page that Lewis ever wrote on the subject of Christianity, there is a foundational assumption, an epistemology. This epistemology, when it is pointed out, is able to better explain the texture, rhythm and structure of Lewis' methodology in his approach to apologetics. It is my intention in this dissertation to *extract* from the many C. S. Lewis Christian writings, the epistemology that underlies and motivates his apologetic work. My intended extraction will by no means be of an exhaustive nature, but will hopefully serve the purpose of the present project adequately and effectively. It is truly fascinating to read how Lewis consistently and rationally bases all of his apologetic contentions upon this epistemological foundation. As far as I am

aware, my own particular approach to the works of C. S. Lewis in this thesis is unprecedented. The second part of this dissertation will address the post-modern epistemology as it is applied to Christian theology. With the use of Lewis' model that I have extracted from his works, I will then engage the post-modern theological epistemology in a dialogue where, hopefully, support for the rational and objective approach to theology may be vindicated, or at very least, given credence. It may be necessary at this stage, to make very clear to my reader the humble objective behind this dissertation. By no stretch of the imagination do I consider the writings of C. S. Lewis to have been written as *proof* for the truth of the Christian message. I think that Lewis understood perfectly well (as I think I do) that the Gospel may only be grasped by the Divinely ordained instrumentality of *saving faith*. I have therefore approached this presentation with the desired intention of merely presenting to the evangelical academic world, a single possible solution to the dilemma that has been stirred up by the post-modern epistemological challenge.

Before I proceed further into this topic, I am aware that it should never be taken for granted that my reader automatically and correctly understands my particular use of terminology. This, as I have found, is one of the major problems that I personally have encountered in my reading of many academic papers, the comprehension of terminology is so often assumed by the writer. It is therefore essential that I strive to ensure as much verbal lucidity as possible at the very onset of my dissertation. The term *epistemology* perhaps, is a case in point. My

definition of *epistemology* is as follows. The term itself is derived from the Greek *episteme*, (i.e. knowledge, understanding), and the Greek word *logos* (i.e. conception), hence the word means, the science of knowing. It is this uncomplicated way that I use this word here. Epistemology is the particular branch of philosophical inquiry that asks the questions that are absolutely fundamental to any science whatsoever - the inquiry into the very act of comprehension itself. Epistemology is always therefore introspective in nature - it is the study of the student - the examination of the examiner (Urmson 1983:92). The Standard Oxford Dictionary definition of the term is as follows (1964:408), 'Theory of the method or grounds of knowledge.' *Post-modern* epistemology, is, in the light of this definition, simply the term used in order to describe the approach to human understanding that is resulting from, and utilised by, that particular school of philosophical approach. A more complete definition will hopefully help establish a firm foundation for the dissertation's dialogue that will take place in part three of this work. J. O. Urmson, in his, *Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (1983:92) writes,

There is a wide-ranging, loosely knit set of problems concerning such notions as those of knowing, perceiving, feeling sure, guessing, being mistaken, remembering, finding out, proving, inferring, establishing, corroborating, wondering, reflecting, imagining, dreaming and so on. This part of philosophy is often called the Theory of Knowledge, or Epistemology - the latter word deriving from the Greek *Episteme* = knowledge or science. Some of the problems revolve around the notion of a science, in the sense in which we take astronomy to be a science, but astrology not. A fairly typical problem of this kind is the problem why in pure mathematics there are conclusive proofs of theorems, when no such demonstrable certainties can be found or even looked for in, for example, history or

medicine. It would be absurd for a mathematician to rest content with mere plausible conjectures or even with highly probable hypothesis. Scientists of other sorts seem not to be in a position to aspire higher than high probabilities. We incline to say that a body of truth ranks as a real science only when these are conclusively established; and then we find ourselves forced to say that, judged by this rigorous standard, even physics and chemistry are not really sciences; and this conclusion conflicts badly with our ordinary ideas.

Perhaps Donald Palmer gives an even more encapsulated definition of the term in his college textbook on philosophy entitled, *Does the Centre Hold?* (1995:38).

Epistemology is theory of knowledge. These are the big questions on epistemology: What is knowledge? What is the difference between opinion and knowledge? Does knowledge require certainty? What are the limits of knowledge? Is knowledge in fact possible? The word knowledge perhaps seems a bit highfalutin. Still, we are familiar with it, and we certainly use the verb, 'to know' many times throughout any day.

* Do you know what time it is?

* I used to know that word in French, but now I've forgotten it.

* She knew all the material on the test.

* We didn't know we would arrive today.

In ordinary discourse, what do we mean by 'know' when we say things like this? I take it that when we say that someone knows something, we mean more or less that he or she could come up with a right answer on demand. But justifiably or unjustifiably, philosophers have not been satisfied with this account of the meaning of 'knowledge.'

Hence the existence of the branch of philosophy termed, epistemology. Apart from the possibility of a reader misunderstanding my use of the term

epistemology, I have no other words that I think at this stage, need to be explained. The use of technical *academise*, I have endeavored to avoid in the writing of this thesis. It will hopefully be clearly evident that my subject (not necessarily my work!) is of such grave importance that I believe it is wrong to cloud the issues here discussed in murky and ambiguous language. Lewis himself had something to say on this subject of incomprehensible and terminology laden academic language. In an address to preachers of the Christian message he says (*Timeless at Heart* 1987:25),

To conclude - you must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome and it means that you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thought into uneducated language, then your thoughts were very confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning. A passage from some theological work for translation into the vernacular ought to be a compulsory paper in every ordination examination.

In spite of the fact that I intend to write as clearly as possible, I do however make the assumption that my reader is familiar with the theoretical context and has a fair grounding in the theoretical paradigm in which I am writing. It will be noted that I do not spend a great deal of time defining terminology or explaining my chain of reasoning in any great detail. I assume that the reader will be adequately aware of the present dilemma that is facing the evangelical school of thought in the twenty-first century, and is able to follow the structure of my argument.

The structure of this work consists of three parts:

- a) Part one will deal with the epistemology of C. S. Lewis. In this section I will extract from all of his Christian writings (although certainly not exhaustively!), the epistemological presuppositions that support his apologetic approach. Lewis bases his entire apologetics approach upon the assumption that human consciousness is able to comprehend in a rational manner, a reality that exists beyond the natural realm - the supernatural.
- b) Part two will discuss the particular effect that post-modern epistemology is having on the Western world at the turn of the twenty-first century and in particular, the impact that this mind-set is having upon evangelical Christianity. Also in this section, in order to prepare the reader for the formulated debate in part three on the dissertation, I will supply a description of post-modern epistemological fundamentals that will be adequate for a sound comprehension of the debate in part three.
- c) Part three will contain a dialogue between five epistemological assumptions of post-modernism that are directly impacting upon evangelical Christianity today. These are, the denial of objective truth, reason as construct, the post-modern linguistic prison of semantics and syntax, the post-modern taboo of religious dogmatism, and the equal validity of all religions as social constructs. In this section of the

dissertation, these points will be raised and critically evaluated in the light of the extracted epistemological approach to apologetics in the writings of C. S. Lewis.