

# HOW HEATHEN IS BRITAIN?

*A Revised and Enlarged Edition*

*by*

B. G. SANDHURST

COLLINS

14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

1948

---

FIRST IMPRESSION JUNE, 1946  
SECOND " AUGUST, 1946  
THIRD " JANUARY, 1947  
NEW EDITION MARCH, 1948

---

## DEDICATION

*To my kind hosts, the members of the Public School Chaplains' Conference, in recognition of the great work they are doing under difficulties, and in gratitude for their hospitality and charity to a critic.*

---

## CONTENTS

Preface by C. S. Lewis	[p9]
Introduction to Second Edition	[p17]
Part I: The Facts	
Chapter 1 How Heathen Is Britain?	[p19]
Chapter 2 The Failure of the Schools	[p32]
Chapter 3 The Failure of the Parents	[p42]
Chapter 4 The Customers' Verdicts	[p47]
Part II: First Aid	
Discussion 1 Creator and Creature: The Proof from Existence	[p86]
Discussion 2 The Nature of Man	[p93]
Discussion 3 Eternal Standards	[p105]
Discussion 4 Authority for Eternal Standards	[p111]
Discussion 5 The Title Deeds of the Faith	[p135]
Discussion 6 The Purpose and Destiny of Man	[p148]
Conclusion	[p156]

## NOTE ON THIS DIGITAL EDITION

*Page numbers of the revised edition (1948) are here given in square brackets: [p9], [p10] etc. Absolutely nothing else has been added to the original text. All footnotes are the author's.*

## PREFACE

C. S. LEWIS

During the war we turn with quickened interest from the newspaper accounts of the fighting to the report of any man who has just returned from taking part in it himself. The manuscript of this little book when it was first put into my hands gave me a similar excitement. Discussions on education and on religious education are admirable things; but here we have something different – a first-hand record of the results which the existing system is actually producing while we discuss. Its value is enhanced by the fact that the author is not a minister of education, nor a headmaster, nor a clergyman, nor even a professional teacher. The facts he records are facts against which he ran his head unexpectedly, almost (you might say) accidentally, while doing a particular war-time job.

There are, of course, other things beside this in the book. But I emphasize its purely documentary value because that seems to me to be far the most important thing about it – the thing on which public attention ought to be focused. The abstracts of the author's lectures – or rather openings of discussions – are indeed full of interest, and many will wish to comment on them. They are the part of the book which it is easiest to discuss. But I insist that to concentrate on that part is an evasion.

When every allowance has been made for the possibility (delightfully unsuspected by himself) that the author has unusual talents as a teacher, two facts still emerge from his record unshaken. Firstly, that the content of, and the case for, Christianity, are not put before most schoolboys under the present system; and secondly, that when they [p10] are so put a majority find them acceptable. The importance of these two facts is that between them they blow away a whole fog of "reasons for the decline of religion" which are often advanced and often believed. If we had noticed that the young men of the present day found it harder and harder to get the right answers to sums, we should consider that this had been adequately explained the moment we discovered that schools had for some years ceased to teach arithmetic. After that discovery we should turn a deaf ear to people who offered explanations of a vaguer and larger kind – people who said that the influence of Einstein had sapped the ancestral belief in fixed numerical relations, or that gangster films had undermined the desire to get right answers, or that the evolution of consciousness was now entering on its post-arithmetical phase. Where a clear and simple explanation completely covers the facts no other explanation is in court. If the younger generation have never been told what the Christians say and never heard any arguments in defence of it, then their agnosticism or indifference is fully explained. There is no need to look any further: no need to talk about the general intellectual climate of the age, the influence of mechanistic civilization on the character of urban life. And having discovered that the cause of their ignorance is lack of instruction, we have also discovered the remedy. There is nothing in the nature of the younger generation which incapacitates them for receiving Christianity. If any one is prepared to tell them, they are apparently ready to hear.

I allow, of course, that the explanation which our author has discovered merely puts the problem a generation further back. The young people today are un-Christian because their teachers have been either unwilling or unable to transmit Christianity to them. For the impotence or unbelief of their teachers, larger and, no doubt, vaguer explanations are to be sought. But that, [p11] be it noted, is a historical problem. The schoolmasters of today are, for the most part, the undergraduates of twenty years ago – the products of the "post-war" period. It is the mental climate of the Twenties that now dominates the from room class. In other words, the sources of unbelief among young people today do not lie in those young people. The outlook which they have – until they are taught better – is a backwash from an earlier period. It is nothing intrinsic to themselves which holds them back from the Faith.

This very obvious fact – that each generation is taught by an earlier generation – must be kept very firmly in mind. The beliefs which boys fresh from school now hold are largely the beliefs of the Twenties. The beliefs which boys from school will hold in the Sixties will be largely those of the undergraduates of today. The moment we forget this we begin to talk

nonsense about education. We talk of the views of contemporary adolescence as if some peculiarity in contemporary adolescence had produced them out of itself. In reality, they are usually a delayed result – for the mental world also has its time-bombs – of obsolete adolescence, now middle-aged and dominating its form room. Hence the futility of many schemes for education. None can give to another what he does not possess himself. No generation can bequeath to its successor what it has not got. You may frame the syllabus as you please. But when you have planned and reported *ad nauseam*, if we are sceptical we shall teach only scepticism to our pupils, if fools only folly, if vulgar only vulgarity, if saints sanctity, if heroes heroism. Education is only the most fully conscious of the channels whereby each generation influences the next. It is not a closed system. Nothing which was not in the teachers can flow from them into the pupils. We shall all admit that a man who knows no Greek himself cannot teach Greek to his form: but it is equally certain that a man whose mind was formed in a [p12] period of cynicism and disillusion, cannot teach hope or fortitude.

A society which is predominantly Christian will propagate Christianity through its schools: one which is not, will not. All the ministries of education in the world cannot alter this law. We have, in the long run, little either to hope or fear from government.

The State may take education more and more firmly under its wing. I do not doubt that by so doing it can foster conformity, perhaps even servility, up to a point; the power of the State to deliberalize a profession is undoubtedly very great. But all the teaching must still be done by concrete human individuals. The State has to use the men who exist. Nay, as long as we remain a democracy, it is men who give the State its powers. And over these men, until all freedom is extinguished, the free winds of opinion blow. Their minds are formed by influences which government cannot control. And as they come to be, so will they teach. Let the abstract scheme of education be what it will: its actual operation will be what the men make it. No doubt, there will be in each generation of teachers a percentage, perhaps even a majority, of government tools. But I do not think it is they who will determine the actual character of the education. The boy – and perhaps especially the English boy – has a sound instinct. The teaching of one true man will carry further and print deeper than that of a dozen white Babus. A minister of education (going back, unless I am mistaken, as far as Julian the Apostate for his precedent) may banish Christian clergy from the schools. But if the wind of opinion is blowing in the Christian direction, it will make no difference. It may even do us good; and the minister will have been unknowingly “the goddess boteler”.

We are often told that education is a key position. That is very false in one sense and very true in another. If it [p13] means that you can do any great thing by interfering with existing schools, altering curricula and the like, it is very false. As the teachers are, so they will teach. Your “reform” may incommode and overwork them, but it will not radically alter the total effect of their teaching. Planning has no magic whereby it can elicit figs from thistles or choke-pears from vines. The rich, sappy, fruit-laden tree will bear sweetness and strength and spiritual health: the dry, prickly, withered tree will teach hate, jealousy, suspicion, and inferiority complex- whatever you *tell* it to teach. They will do it unknowingly and all day long. But if we mean that to make adult Christians now and even beyond that circle, to spread the immediately sub-Christian perceptions and virtues, the rich Platonic or Virgilian *penumbra* of the Faith, and thus to alter the type who will be teachers in the future- if we mean that to do this is to perform the greatest of all services for our descendants, then it is very true.

So at least it seems to me: I do not know how far the author would agree with me. He has exposed the actual workings of modern education. To blame the schoolmasters of the last ten years for it would be ridiculous. The majority of them failed to hand on Christianity because they had it not: will you blame a eunuch because he gets no children or a stone because it yields no blood? The minority, isolated in a hostile environment, have probably done all they could, have perhaps done wonders: but little was in their power. Our author has also shown that the ignorance and incredulity of the pupils are very often removable – their roots far shallower than we had feared. I do not draw from this moral that it is now our business to “get our teeth into the schools”. For one thing, I do not think we shall be allowed to. It is unlikely that in the next forty years England will have a government which would encourage or even tolerate any radically Christian elements in its State system of education. [p14] Where the tide flows towards

increasing State control, Christianity, with its claims in one way personal and in the other way ecumenical and both ways antithetical to omniscient government, must always in fact (though not for a long time yet in words) be treated as an enemy. Like learning, like the family, like any ancient and liberal profession, like the common law, it gives the individual a standing ground against the State. Hence Rousseau, the father of the totalitarians, said wisely enough, from his own point of view, of Christianity, *Je ne connais rien de plus contraire à l'esprit social*. In the second place, even if we were permitted to force a Christian curriculum on the existing schools with the existing teachers we should only be making masters hypocrites and hardening thereby the pupils' hearts.

I am speaking, of course, of large schools on which a secular character is already stamped. If any man, in some little corner out of the reach of the omniscient, can make, or preserve a really Christian school, that is another matter. His duty is plain.

I do not, therefore, think that our hope of re-baptizing England lies in trying to "get at" the schools. Education is not in that sense a key position. To convert one's adult neighbour and one's adolescent neighbour (just free from school) is the practical thing. The cadet, the undergraduate, the young worker in the C.W.U. are obvious targets: but any one and every one is a target. If you make the adults of today Christian, the children of tomorrow will receive a Christian education. What a society has, that, be sure, and nothing else, it will hand on to its young. The work is urgent, for men perish around us. But there is no need to be uneasy about the ultimate event. As long as Christians have children and non-Christians do not, one need have no anxiety for the next century. 'Those who worship the Life-Force do not do much about transmitting it: those whose hopes are all based on the [p15] terrestrial future do not entrust much to it. If these processes continue, the final issue can hardly be in doubt.

These, you must remember, are merely my own reflections. To other readers this book will doubtless suggest very different reflections. But all of us, whatever our party, need to know the facts. Here they stand; and stated, if I mistake not, with that freshness and attraction which always come to a plain man who has something to tell and is thinking of his story, not himself.

C. S. LEWIS.

Note. – Throughout this preface *boys* means *boys and girls*, and *schoolmasters* includes *schoolmistresses*. There is lots to be said for political or economic equality of the sexes: but the claim for grammatical equality of genders is an unmitigated nuisance which should be resisted wherever it is met.