

## C. S. LEWIS, RELUCTANT CONVERT AND (NOT SO) ORDINARY ANGLICAN

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### **Abstract:**

After some passing considerations on the reception of Lewis in Romania, the present paper discusses the role played by Anglicanism in the late personal commitment of C.S. Lewis to the Christian faith, after years of atheism, scepticism, and agnosticism. It argues that in fact Anglicanism contributed very little to Lewis's (re)conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, the paper agrees with the generally accepted idea that the particular calling that Lewis felt he had, that of being a Christian apologist, made him wary of being associated with the defence of any specific Christian tradition. In virtue of this special calling, Lewis also reacted quite strongly against certain aspects of Anglicanism, like, for instance, the ordination of women to priesthood, which he perceived as an obstacle to ecumenism and, implicitly, to an effective defence of the Christian faith in the public arena. In spite of all this, there is little doubt that Lewis has fully and unreservedly adopted Anglicanism as his preferred version of Christianity. From this particular stance, the life and ministry of C.S. Lewis made a huge public impact in the twentieth century and beyond. In light of the undeniable influence he had on the intellectual and religious scene in the last hundred years, one may ask not so much how Anglican was Lewis, but, rather, 'why isn't Anglicanism more like Lewis'.

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Twenty years ago, while studying theology in London, I was surprised by the frequent references that my dogmatics professor, Graham McFarlane, kept making to the *Narnia* stories in order to illustrate some subtle theological nuances in his lectures. Up to that point, *Narnia* had been, for me "just a book for children" (a translation of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, smuggled into Romania in the late 'seventies during the Communist period, was the first Lewis book I had ever read). Two years before the fall of the Communist regime, a Romanian translation of *Mere Christianity* was published in the United States by Iosif Țon, one of the most prominent Romanian evangelical leaders, and, again, the book (thousands of copies of it) had to be smuggled into the country, since at that time religious literature was regarded by the secret police as fully as dangerous as drugs, arms or pornography. As Christianity was still under siege from the atheist propaganda of the Communist state, this work became for us, young Christian intellectuals who were constantly being pressed

to defend the rationality of our existential option, an invaluable apologetic resource. Later, as postmodernity gained more ground in our culture, I became quite sceptical about the value of evidence-based apologetics. Nevertheless *Mere Christianity* remains a helpful tool for those who are still imbued with the old Enlightenment paradigm and maybe for others as well.

As time went on, I learned to appreciate not only Lewis's fiction, whether written for children or not, but also his pseudo-fictional works, such as *The Screwtape Letters*. In 1993, as editor-in-chief of Logos Publishers, I had the privilege of publishing this book in Romanian for the first time, in a beautiful translation by Mirela Radoi Delong with incredible illustrations by the late Marcel Chirnoagă, one of the most fascinating of Romanian graphic artists. When we commissioned them from him, he said: "You have come to the right person; I am a specialist in demons", and indeed he was, if you have even seen his work. Later Logos also published one volume, *Out of the Silent Planet*, from Lewis's cosmic trilogy. I hope that some day another publisher will endeavour to complete the task.

As time went by, Lewis's essays became for me a constant source of theological and cultural reflection. Lewis himself slowly but steadily became one of my heroes. This is why, every time I visit Oxford, I make a point of stopping off at the "Eagle & Child" pub (or the "Bird & Baby" as the members of the Inklings group called it) to drink a pint of beer in honour of "Master Lewis" and his friends.

Also, about four years ago, when I was confirmed in the Anglican Communion, I became, without any merit of my own, a member of the same ecclesial community as the writer we are commemorating in this symposium. It is precisely C. S. Lewis as an Anglican that I wish to discuss in this short paper. However, before I do so, let me say just a few words about his reception in Romania.

Although until about two decades ago Lewis was only known to a minority of Romanian literary specialists and to some members of the quite small Evangelical community, since then, through the efforts of Humanitas Publishers and with the contribution of a number of extremely gifted translators—among whom I must mention Emanuel Contac, who displayed the extent of his talents in his beautiful rendering into Romanian of *Surprised by Joy*—Lewis has become well known to the wider public in our country.

As we commemorate fifty years since Lewis's passing, I feel compelled to also pay a special tribute to one of our most important Romanian cultural personalities, someone who played a key role in the promotion of this British author in our cultural milieu and who regrets that he cannot be here with us, as he told me in a personal note. About ten years ago, during one of the annual Iași book fairs, I handed Gabriel Liiceanu, the head of Humanitas Publishers, a Romanian translation of *The Abolition of Man* by Rodica Albu, one of the

organizers of this symposium, in the hope that it could be published by Humanitas. As we found out, the work had already been given to a different translator and was published one year later by Humanitas. When I approached him, Liiceanu turned to his friend Andrei Pleșu and asked him if the book was worth considering. From their conversation I realised that Andrei Pleșu was in fact the moving spirit behind the publication of Lewis's works by this major publishing house. So, as I proceed to share with you a few thoughts about C. S. Lewis as an Anglican, I want to thank Andrei Pleșu for his critical role in making the works of this remarkable thinker and writer available to the Romanian readership.

#### LEWIS, THE RELUCTANT CONVERT

The question we are asking in this first part of our presentation is to what extent Anglicanism contributed to C. S. Lewis's conversion.

Clive Staples Lewis was born into an Anglican family and was confirmed as a member of the Anglican community in 1914, at the age of sixteen. However, as Alister McGrath explains, "Lewis submitted to this with the greatest reluctance, and then only for reasons of family loyalty. For by this stage, Lewis had become an atheist, dismissive of religion in general as an outmoded belief system". (*Intellectual World* 151)

In the second chapter of his recent work *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, McGrath discusses Lewis's adherence to the atheistic view of the world that was dominant among Oxford academics in the 'twenties of the past century. Lewis, like many atheists today, believed that God was a fiction of the human mind—he was created, so to say, "in the image and likeness of man", in response to seemingly unexplainable human experiences. In addition, he thought that if God existed the world would have been a much better place. As it was, if he did exist, he did not appear to care, which made things even worse. Lewis was at that time convinced of the truth of "Oxford realism", a philosophical movement founded by J. C. Wilson (1849–1915), Professor of Logic at New College. Wilson argues that knowledge is factual and cannot be defined in terms of beliefs.

However, towards the middle of that decade, Lewis became dissatisfied with the implications of the realist theory of knowledge, particularly in the spheres of ethics and aesthetics. It was at this time that the young academic, who had moved from teaching philosophy to teaching Classical literature, became deeply interested in the cultural role of myths (see chapter 3 of the above-quoted work by McGrath for a discussion of the role of myth in Lewis's literary and religious thinking). Some of his Christian friends in Oxford, including J. R. R. Tolkien, who was also very interested in the role of myth, shared the same doubts as Lewis about the limits of Oxford realism. Yet these intellectual

struggles did not lead Lewis to Christianity or even to theism. He instead adopted a kind of idealism, which proved to be just the first step towards his full embracing of the Christian revelation at the end of that decade; 1929, or more probably 1930, was the year of his conversion to Christianity. This is how Lewis himself describes his struggle in his autobiography:

When I began teaching for the English Faculty, I made two other friends, both Christians (these queer people seemed now to pop up on every side) who were later to give me much help in getting over the last stile. They were H. V. V. Dyson (then of Reading) and J. R. R. Tolkien. Friendship with the latter marked the breakdown of two old prejudices. At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both.

Realism had been abandoned; the New Look was somewhat damaged; and chronological snobbery was seriously shaken. All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves. (Lewis 173)

In these words, applied to Lewis's own pilgrimage towards faith, we can already discern foreshadowings of the terse exchanges between the older devil and Wormwood in *The Screwtape Letters*.

As McGrath explains, "Lewis attributed at least some part of his conversion to books which raised fundamental questions, and planted the seeds of doubt in his mind. 'A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere.'" (McGrath, *Intellectual World* 152). Lewis elaborates further, in self-reflective mood:

Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side. You must not do, you must not even try to do, the will of the Father unless you are prepared to "know of the doctrine." All my acts, desires, and thoughts were to be brought into harmony with universal Spirit. For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion. (Lewis 180–1)

Among the unsettling reading he did at that time, Lewis mentions George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) and G. K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* (1925), and, incidentally, neither of those authors was an Anglican. Yet there were also a small number of Anglican authors who influenced him in this process. Among these, Lewis mentions John Donne (1572–1661), Thomas Browne (1605–1682), and in particular George Herbert (1593–1633). Here is how Lewis explains it:

Now that I was reading more English, the paradox began to be aggravated. I was deeply moved by the *Dream of the Rood*; more deeply still by Langland; intoxicated (for a time) by Donne; deeply and lastingly satisfied by Thomas Browne. But the most alarming of all was George Herbert. Here was a man who seemed to me to excel all the authors I had ever read in conveying the very quality of life as we actually live it from moment to moment; but the wretched fellow, instead of doing it all directly, insisted on mediating it through what I would still have called “the Christian mythology.” (Lewis 171)

What Lewis describes in the words quoted above is a conversion, but as he explains in his autobiography, merely to theism—a belief in the existence of a supreme personal reality which is the source of all reality—but not yet to the Christian faith—a belief in and commitment to the central reality of redemption worked out through the work of Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

Following this experience, Lewis started to pray and to attend church, although, as he acknowledges, a personal commitment to the Christian faith had not yet taken place.

As soon as I became a Theist I started attending my parish church on Sundays and my college chapel on weekdays; not because I believed in Christianity, nor because I thought the difference between it and simple Theism a small one, but because I thought one ought to “fly one's flag” by some unmistakable overt sign... To me, religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters. And then the fussy, time-wasting botheration of it all! the bells, the crowds, the umbrellas, the notices, the bustle, the perpetual arranging and organising... (Lewis 186–7)

At the same time, he confesses that he is not sure that this decision to go to church helped him to move further “in the Christian direction”. He did however have a partner on this road, his friend Bede Griffiths, who was himself struggling with similar concerns. The final chapter of *Surprised by Joy* describes the various options Lewis discarded as he moved closer to faith in Christ, the most important of these being Paganism and Hinduism. Lewis also confesses that as he drew closer to a final decision on Christianity he felt within himself a kind of resistance similar to what he had experienced when he became a theist. He describes his pilgrimage as being “from the Absolute to ‘Spirit’ and from ‘Spirit’ to ‘God’”. And then the inevitable happened.

I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. “Emotional” is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake. (Lewis 189)

And, again, “In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England”. (Lewis 192) Lewis was now a Christian, and from that point onwards this personal experience influenced everything he did, whether in his personal life, in his literary studies, or in his writings as a Christian apologist and lay theologian.

In light of the above, it seems that Anglicanism contributed very little to Lewis’s (re)conversion to Christianity. Other influences, such as that of Tolkien, who was a Catholic, and Owen Barfield, a Theosophist, appear to have played a much more important role. These friends of his may have been disappointed that Lewis became an Anglican, but there was nothing they could do about it. Lewis had decided to reconnect with his roots.

#### LEWIS THE (NOT SO) ORDINARY ANGLICAN

But what about Lewis’s post-conversion work, as a literary critic, as a Christian apologist, and generally as a thinker? To what extent may we say that he was an “Anglican author”? The answer to this question is not as simple as it might seem.

McGrath argues, convincingly we believe, that

Lewis is best seen as a religious writer and apologist who happened to be a member of the Church of England, not someone who intentionally saw himself—or presented himself—as a specifically Anglican religious writer and apologist. (McGrath, *Intellectual World* 147)

Why is this so? McGrath, again, explains:

Lewis’s sense of calling to be an apologist for the Christian faith made him wary of being associated with the public defence of any specific Christian institution. Lewis was more than willing to defend God; he was not, however, prepared to defend the Church of England. (McGrath, *Intellectual World* 150)

This stance is rooted in Lewis’s conviction regarding the special calling he had to be a defender of the faith. As in the case of Dorothy L. Sayers, his contemporary, Lewis thought that any concentration on defending a particular tradition of the Church would limit his freedom and undermine his effectiveness as a Christian apologist, an intuition that proved to be absolutely correct.

Acting consistently with this conviction, when he developed the “Broadcast Talks” that were later to provide the text of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis constantly sought the advice of a group of clergymen from different Christian traditions: Eric Fenn (Presbyterian), Dom Bede Griffiths (Roman Catholic),

Joseph Dowell (Methodist), and a theologian of the Church of England (probably Austin Farrer, then chaplain of Trinity College, Oxford). (McGrath, *Intellectual World* 154)

Furthermore, as an Anglican, Lewis also refused to be categorised as either “low” (evangelical) or “high” (Anglo-Catholic). Yet he is patently not an evangelical but in fact quite close to the sensibilities of “high church” Anglicans. The fact that he was not perceived as representing a particular branch of the Christian faith or a specific strand within Anglicanism has made him extremely influential way beyond the bounds of his own Church. Of particular interest here is the very good reception Lewis has among Catholics and, even more, among Evangelicals, particularly in the United States, where he has a large following.

Of particular importance for the contribution Lewis makes to this latter ecclesial tradition is his approach to the Bible, and Evangelicals would do well to learn from him in this regard. In general, Christians who belong to the evangelical tradition tend to be, more or less consistently, quite literalistic in their interpretation of the Bible. Lewis, however, like most Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox thinkers, sees the Bible as

something that is woven into the fabric of faith by generations of interpreters, and is best studied as it is incorporated into the Christian tradition, rather than in isolation... “Lewis thus tends to read the Bible indirectly, through the interpretative lens of the Christian tradition, often drawing primarily on its imagery and secondarily on its ideas... The Bible, as Lewis remarked, needs to be “read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers.” (McGrath, *Intellectual World* 156)

In addition, because of the priority he gave to the unity of faith, Lewis was at times very critical of certain decisions of the Anglican Communion that he thought would harm its fellowship with the other Christian traditions. One such case was the ground-breaking decision of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong to ordain a woman priest, Li Tim, in 1944 (whereas the Church of England was not to permit the ordination of women until 1992). Not only was Lewis critical of this Hong Kong decision, which made some people call him a misogynist, but he also tried to persuade Dorothy Sayers to lobby against it. She, however, was much more cautious about open opposition, even though she shared his concern about the way the move might damage Anglican relationships with the Catholics and the Orthodox in particular. Indeed, the ordination of women as priests, and also as bishops from 1989 onwards,<sup>1</sup> did create frustrations and ecumenical

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Harris was the first woman to be ordained as a bishop in the Anglican Communion, for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. In July 2014 the Synod of the Church of England has voted to accept women bishops.

setbacks for the Church of England. Yet ecumenism has a way of getting around these contentious matters and is always capable of making comebacks.

This same concern for Church unity may have been the reason why Lewis did not convert to Catholicism, as he regarded some particular doctrines of that church, such as Papal infallibility and the Immaculate Conception, as obstacles to wider Christian consensus. (Berkman 223)

What, we may ask, made Lewis an Anglican, leaving aside family loyalty? McGrath suggests that “his commitment to the Church of England might ultimately reflect its identity as the established church of the English people, rather than its theological beliefs or liturgical practices”. (*Intellectual World* 154) If so, asks the author, would Lewis have been a member of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) if he had been born a Scot, or, we may ask, would he have been an Orthodox had he been born in Romania? Obviously, any response to these questions would be entirely speculative. Yet, reading Lewis’s writings, such options might appear perfectly plausible.

Nowhere is Lewis closer to the spirit of genuine Anglicanism than in his appreciation and embodiment of the ecclesiological principle of the *via media*.<sup>1</sup> As L. W. Gibbs rightly points out, Lewis’s writings attempt to “hold together in dynamic tension principles of truth that are apparently opposed but really complementary.” (Gibbs 119)

As Rowan Williams, the most recent Archbishop of Canterbury<sup>2</sup>, and Alister McGrath both acknowledge, during the time of their university studies C. S. Lewis was regarded with contempt by the academic establishments at Oxford and Cambridge:

...some in the academic world regarded his commercial and popular success as being inconsistent with any claim on his part to be a serious scholar. From 1942 onwards, Lewis struggled to maintain his academic credibility in the light of his more popular works, above all his light-hearted musings on the diabolical world of *Screwtape*. (McGrath, *A Life*, loc.95-96)

Although C. S. Lewis always regarded himself as an “amateur theologian”, yet a theologian he undoubtedly was. For his contribution in this field, in 1946 he received an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from the ancient University of St. Andrews in Scotland. As we learn from McGrath,

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<sup>1</sup> *Via media* – the view that Anglicanism represents the ‘middle way’ between Protestantism and Catholicism (or Protestantism and Orthodoxy, for that matter).

<sup>2</sup> See Melissa Steffan, “Q&A: Why Rowan Williams Loves C.S. Lewis”, *Christianity Today online*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/november-web-only/qa-why-rowan-williams-loves-cs-lewis.html>. Web. 17 Jul. 2014.



at the ceremony, Professor Donald M. Baillie (1887–1954), Dean of the Faculty of Divinity, explained the reason for the faculty’s decision to honour Lewis in this way. Lewis, he declared, had “succeeded in capturing the attention of many who will not readily listen to professional theologians,” and had “arranged a new kind of marriage between theological reflection and poetic imagination.” (*Intellectual World* 163)

In conclusion, we may say that even though Lewis was not a typical Anglican writer and (lay) theologian, Anglicanism is the identity he freely assumed. Yet one may ask: “Was he Anglican enough?”, whatever that may mean. We have found no better way to respond to this question than to say, with McGrath: ‘Paradoxically, the question that a future generation might ask is not “Is Lewis really Anglican?” but “Why isn’t Anglicanism more like Lewis?”’ (*Intellectual World*, 158)

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