

Pillar of Western Culture

A reluctant yet reasonable convert to Christianity, C.S. Lewis became a master apologist and champion of the Western tradition.

by Thomas R. Eddlem

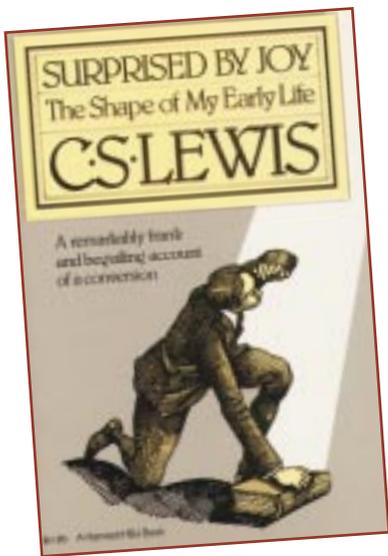
One of C.S. Lewis' most popular and enduring works is *The Screwtape Letters*. This witty and insightful satire explores the problems of the world from the perspective of devils in Hell and outlines the means by which they go about tempting souls and pulling "patients" (people) away from God. The serialized newspaper columns (later published as a book) centered around a senior fiend, Screwtape, who advised his nephew Wormwood, an apprentice tempter, on how to tempt his human "patient" away from Christianity. But not all readers of this literary work recognized the satire, which was intended to warn of the many subtle techniques Satan employs in leading people to damnation. *The Guardian* informed C.S. Lewis that one not-too-observant clergyman had canceled his newspaper subscription because "much of the advice given in these letters seemed to him not only erroneous but positively diabolical." That clergyman would not have said the same about any of C.S. Lewis' many other works of Christian apologetics, which — together with his vast literary works and social commentary — make him a pillar of the Western cultural tradition.

Yet if one looks at his early life, the Belfast-born Lewis can only be considered an unlikely Christian, let alone a hero of Western Civilization. Clive Staples Lewis was born in 1898. He disliked his birth name so much that from childhood he insisted upon being called "Jack" by his family and friends. Though he was baptized into the Anglican Church of Ireland as an infant, his resentment over the death of his mother when he was nine caused Lewis to become a staunch atheist at a young age. Still, an important element in Lewis' early life was an emphasis on learning. This originated in part with his relatively erudite parents but also from within the young scholar himself, as the many books that cluttered the family home continually piqued his curiosity. He

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recalled in his 1955 autobiographical book, *Surprised by Joy*, that “My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents’ interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass.”

Lewis’ father soon sent the brilliant young man to England, where he was tutored in the classics by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a fervent atheist. Lewis went on to teach for most of his adult life at the two most establishmentarian of British universities: Oxford and Cambridge. “Looking back on my life now,” Lewis recounted, “I am astonished that I did not progress into the opposite orthodoxy ... a Leftist, Atheist, satiric Intellectual of the type we all know so well. All the conditions seem



“Reluctant convert”: The remarkable story of C.S. Lewis’ conversion to Christianity is told in his autobiography.



Prodigal son returns: Oxford’s Magdalen College, where C.S. Lewis admitted that “God was God.”

to be present. I hated my public school. I hated whatever I knew or imagined of the British Empire. And though I took very little notice of Morris’ socialism (there were too many things in him that interested me far more), continual reading of Shaw had brought it about that such embryonic political opinions as I had were vaguely socialistic.”

“He never attacked religion in my presence,” Lewis later observed of Kirkpatrick, although from Kirkpatrick he regularly received atheism “indirectly from the tone of his mind or independently from reading his books.” Kirkpatrick — or as Lewis and his family came to call him, “the Great Knock” — nevertheless implanted the seed that led to his eventual religious conversion to Christianity. “[T]here was one really wholesome element” in Kirkpatrick’s teaching, Lewis recalled. “The Absolute was ‘there.’” Kirkpatrick did instill a desire for an absolute and transcendent truth, even if he never concluded that truth involves God.

The “Great Knock” had set Lewis’ reason to work, and his academic studies compelled him to reconsider the logic of his atheism. Soon Lewis found that “All the books were beginning to turn against me.... George McDonald had done more to me than any other writer; of course it was a pity he had that bee in his bonnet about Christianity. He was good *in spite of it*. Chesterton had more sense than all the other moderns put together; bating, of course, his Christianity. Johnson was one of the few authors I felt I could trust utterly; curiously enough, he had the same kink. Spenser

and Milton by a strange coincidence had it too.” Finally, Lewis “read Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man* and for the first time saw the whole Christian outline of history set out in a form that seemed to me to make sense.” But despite the overwhelming logic of the God of the Scriptures, Lewis was still determined to retain his atheism — or at the least not adopt the Christianity he had rejected in his youth. “Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully,” Lewis later admitted. “Dangers lie in wait for him on every side.” But the unrelenting logic of McDonald and Chesterton left Lewis with a painful choice: abandon logic and truth altogether; or conclude that what he had been told — and rejected — in the nursery was right all along. “The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet,” Lewis wrote, in contrast to his own conversion whereby he “was brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting [my] eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.” The Professor of English Language and Literature at Magdalen College (at Oxford University) wrote: “You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I had greatly feared had at last come upon me. 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’ theistic view of an omnipotent and semi-personal God was still a long

way from the God of the Christian Bible. But his reading and discussions with friends on the subject continued. After a long talk in September 1931 with his friends and fellow Oxford instructors, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings* series and a devout Christian), Lewis wrote, "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ." Lewis soon became a regular communicant in the Church of England. Two years later Tolkien, Dyson, and Lewis began meeting regularly with a group of friends from Oxford, and attendees at these meetings called themselves the "Inklings." Other Inklings members included Lewis' only brother Warren ("Warnie"), Robert Havard, Charles Williams, Neville Coghill, and Lewis' close friend Owen Barfield. The Inklings met in Lewis' rooms at Oxford's Magdalen College or at a local pub called The Eagle and Child, where they discussed religion, philosophy, literature, mythology, and other subjects. The meetings continued regularly until 1949, and one can only guess the influence of the meetings on Lewis' writings.

Those who did guess at what influenced his writing during Lewis' lifetime did so at their own peril, however. Lewis was often stung by absurd reviews of his works which devoted little space to his actual work and multitudinous space to "imaginary histories of the process by which you wrote it." He went on to conclude that "My impression is that in the whole of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100 per cent failure. You would expect that by mere chance they would hit as often as they miss. But it is my impression that they do no such thing. I can't remember a single hit."

Nevertheless, it is worth a try for a first hit. Lewis had to be at least indirectly influenced to write his seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia* by Tolkien's immensely popular 1936 book *The Hobbit* and its sequels. Tolkien was working on them throughout the time of the Inklings meetings, and soon after the

meetings ended Lewis came out with his first Narnia book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950). It may be Lewis' best known and most read book. An instant international success, it has enthralled millions of readers, young and old, since its introduction. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is an allegorical story of the life, death, sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ in the mythical land of Narnia. Like Lewis' science fiction "space trilogy" before it and the six other Narnia books after it, Lewis employed fiction in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as a means of teaching various tenets of Christian and Western principles.

Though highly respected as a literary critic, Lewis' theological works were sometimes dismissed by other Oxford academicians. It is true that in the area of theology, his educational background made him — technically speaking — an amateur. He hadn't studied theology; he had studied literature. But Lewis made no pretense to being a professional theologian. Nevertheless, Lewis was England's most capable amateur. He wielded his literary cudgel with devastating efficiency against the forces of liberalism within his own church. Among his prime targets was the modern tendency to view the miracles of the Bible as allegories — mere stories for teaching lessons — rather than historical record. He warned his church that advocating and teaching such a theology — one that "denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia," will likely drive the uneducated believer to atheism or drive him to a church (he specifically cited the Roman Catholic) that still maintains that historicity.

In criticizing allegorical Christianity, Lewis could speak as a true literary expert. "[W]hatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading." Lewis explained that the Bible doesn't

"The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet," Lewis wrote, in contrast to his own conversion whereby he "was brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting [my] eyes in every direction for a chance to escape."

read like a fairy tale or legendary story. "Either this is reportage ... [o]r else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read." He concluded, in what was a rather prophetic remark regarding church attendance in England: "Once a layman was anxious to hide the fact that he believed so much less than the Vicar: now he tends to hide the fact that he believes so much more. Missionary to the priests of one's own church is an embarrassing role; though I have a horrid feeling that if such mission work is not soon undertaken the future history of the Church of England is likely to be short." Lewis was also generally skeptical of the grand discoveries claimed by many modern liberal "scholars," exclaiming that "all theology of the liberal type involves at some point — and often involves throughout — the claim that the real behaviour and purpose of the teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood and misrepresented by His followers, and has been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars."

Not unexpectedly, considering the rational nature of his conversion, Lewis fervently defended the complete congruity of faith and reason. Most of his works at least touch on that subject. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the arch-fiend Screwtape advises the apprentice tempter to employ propaganda and to avoid reason when-

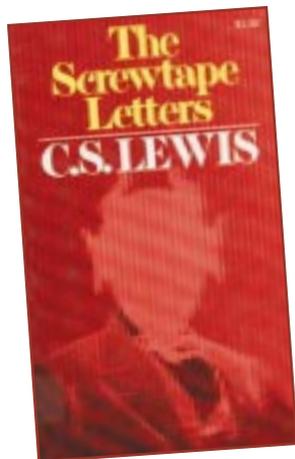
“I am doubtful whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently.”

— C.S. Lewis

ever possible. “Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping [the patient] from the Church.... The trouble with argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy’s own ground.... By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient’s reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream.” Clearly one cannot foresee the result of a reason awakened, to which the life of C.S. Lewis himself — once a young atheist — serves as evidence.

Attention to the “stream of immediate sense experiences” mentioned by *Screwtape* is being heartily advocated by the mass media and the educational systems in America today. In *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, a follow-up to his original *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis goes even so far as to have *Screwtape* suggest: “Every dictator or even demagogue — almost every film star or crooner — can now draw tens of thousands of the human sheep with him.... There may come a time when we shall have no need to bother about individual temptation at all, except a few. Catch the bellwether, and his whole flock comes after him.” Lewis arrayed his brilliant pen against the modern bellwethers leading Western culture in the direction of nihilism and totalitarian government, and the replacement of the education of youth with the conditioning of youth in the schools.

Among the features of Lewis’ hellish bureaucracy in *Screwtape* are a rigorously enforced official party line (a.k.a., “political correctness”), backbiting, and fear of exposure. The Christian worldview contends that God does not cast anyone into Hell, but that the damned cast themselves into Hell because of their own actions. Lewis brilliantly portrays this politically correct, hellish bureaucracy reflecting this reality through a pathetic inability to understand the concept of love, the prime plank in the platform of Hell. *Screwtape* advises Wormwood: “The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another



Mere masterpiece: Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* cleverly describes a demonic bureaucracy in an attempt to warn of Satan’s cunning.

thing.... My good is my good, and your good is yours. What one gains another loses.” And in a zero sum reality, the party line of Hell becomes one in which love — where we give ourselves back to God and yet remain distinct and individual beings — is mathematically impossible: “We know that He [God] cannot really love: nobody can; it doesn’t make sense. If only we could find out what He is *really* up to! Hypothesis after hypothesis has been tried, and still we can’t find out. Yet we must never lose hope; more and more complicated theories, fuller and fuller collections of data, richer rewards for researchers who make progress, more and more terrible punishments for those who fail — all this, pursued and acceler-

ated to the very end of time, cannot, surely, fail to succeed.” The depiction of diabolical bureaucrats insanelly obsessed with their rebellion against God, and laboring to the end of time to solve the nonexistent riddle of love, is but one example of Lewis’ brilliant ability to express the Christian worldview with simple, credible pictures.

Nowhere does Lewis paint these simple pictures of complex issues better than in *Mere Christianity*, a book which began as a series of wartime BBC radio broadcasts on the basic philosophical tenets of Christianity. Lewis also chases the quacks of pseudo-psychoanalysis and the flakes of pseudo-science back to their legitimate domains in *Mere Christianity*. While respecting both psychology and science as worthwhile and valuable pursuits, Lewis tried to put matters about the origin of man and the earth outside the realm of science (whether it be evolutionism or creationism). “You can not find out which view is the right one by science in the ordinary sense. Science works by experiments. It watches how things behave. Every scientific statement in the long run, however complicated it looks, really means something like, ‘I pointed the telescope to such and such a part of the sky at 2:20 AM on January 15th and saw so-and-so,’ or ‘I put some of this stuff in a pot and heated it to such-and-such a temperature and it did so-and-so.’” But “None of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Armada. None of us could prove them by pure logic as you prove a thing in mathematics.” Lewis concludes that science is an inadequate foundation upon which to build beliefs about the past.

Lewis also takes up his cudgel against Freud’s attempt to explain the whole world in terms of psychological phenomena, while acknowledging the need to distinguish “between the actual medical theories and technique of the psychoanalysts, and the general philosophical view of the world which Freud and some others have gone on to add to this. The second thing — the philosophy of Freud — is in direct contradiction to Christianity.” Lewis essentially argued

that once a subject — for instance, sexual morality — is discussed or thought about openly and freely, the decision or conclusion can hardly be dismissed as the result of subconscious or repressed feelings. Once a person is cured of irrational fears and feelings, “it is just then that the psychoanalytical problem is over and the moral problem begins.” Lewis explained: “what psychoanalysis undertakes to do is to remove the abnormal feelings, that is, to give the man better raw material for his acts of choice; morality is concerned with the acts of choice themselves.” Lewis observed that “when Freud is talking about how to cure neurotics he is speaking as a specialist in his own subject, but when he goes on to talk general philosophy he is speaking as an amateur. It is therefore quite sensible to attend to him with respect in the one case and not in the other — and that is what I do. I am all the reader to do it because I have found that when he is talking off his own subject and on a subject I do know something about (namely, languages) he is very ignorant.”

Lewis also did his best to destroy the evil of collectivism. As weapons against collectivism, Lewis used the classroom lectionary as well as the pen. One of Lewis’ leftist students in the late 1930s, John Lawlor, wrote of Lewis’ effectiveness in dispelling Lawlor’s collectivism after Lawlor entered Oxford’s Magdalen College. “It was the time of the Spanish Civil War, and those on the political Left (though few in Magdalen) were busy organising lunches for refugee funds, collecting money by point-blank asking, and getting up meetings and demonstrations in support of the [Soviet-allied] Spanish Government. I must have been the last man Lewis wanted to see.” Yet Lewis displayed “increasing goodwill” toward Lawlor in their weekly tutorial. “I was allowed the initiative on every occasion; Lewis gave me the choice of ground and of weapons and of course beat me every time.” By his third year of Lewis’ tutoring at Magdalen College, Lawlor had found that for him the “attractions of

Marxism had faded.”

Despite his undermining of Marxism in the classroom and general warnings about totalitarian societies in his books, C.S. Lewis never got involved in political issues directly. Most of his effort went into constantly girding the Western moral infrastructure for political battle. Lewis viewed politics as only one element of a broader cultural war. For example, he exploded a popular fetish among many Americans who fancy themselves well

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Teaching against tyranny: An excellent teacher, Lewis’ lectures dispelled the fallacies of collectivism and totalitarianism.

educated — that there should be a divorce of religious values from politics — in his classic philosophical essay, *The Abolition of Man*. “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery,” Lewis wrote. “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains.... Either we are rational spirits obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the [will of God], or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own ‘natural’ impulses.” Lewis concludes that “I am doubtful whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional

morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently. I am inclined to think that the Conditioners will hate the conditioned.” Lewis warned that this conditioning process, which, “if not checked, will abolish Man, goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists. The methods may (at first) differ in brutality.”

In social society, Lewis warned of the social conditioners who invoke the word “democracy” to bring traditional values down to the lowest common denominator. “You are to use it purely as an incantation; if you like, purely for its selling power. It is a name they venerate,” says Lewis’ Screwtape. “*Democracy* is the word with which you must lead them by the nose.” Under the democratic and more tolerant values of the social conditioners, a girl who wishes to be “normal” will increasingly find that what she is really wishing is: “Make me a minx, a moron, and a parasite.” Lewis felt that the “greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.” Thus it is not surprising that in *The Screwtape Letters* the “symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state.” Lewis quipped that he did not depict a hell with all of the time-worn images of devils with horns and bat wings, because he likes “bats much better than bureaucrats.” In fact, Lewis’ depiction of the bureaucracy of Hell is starkly reminiscent of the American political scene today. Specifically, it is “a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment.”

Clearly, Western culture needs C.S. Lewis now more than ever. ■