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C.S. Lewis and Christian Scholarship

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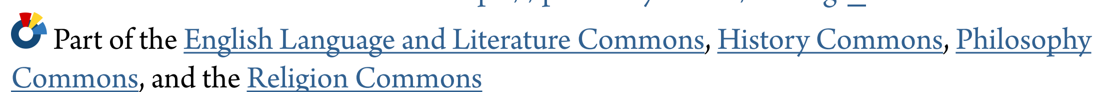
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A Collection of Essays Presented at

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C. S. Lewis: Public Christian and Scholar

by Bruce L. Edwards

All our merely natural activities will be accepted if they are offered to God, even the humblest, and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not.

—C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War Time"

Ardent readers of C. S. Lewis's fiction and apologetics often find themselves reflecting upon an elusive quality they detect in his texts across all eras of his life, a feature they grope to label and to explain to amiable agnostics by such terms as wholeness or symmetry, guilelessness or unpretentiousness. The effect of reading his work, they would testify, is the sensation of entering into a new order of experience or level of insight, whatever the genre—and yet an effect achieved without apparent contrivance or arduous effort on either the writer's or the reader's part. It is a winsomeness that draws one into a journey with a companion or into a conversation with a gracious host whose salutary presence by turns instructs, delights, challenges, and, always, intrigues.

This is the Lewis who created Narnia, Malacandra, and Glome, who defended the credibility of New Testament miracles, articulated the essence of Mere Christianity, and took us on a tour of Heaven and Hell. But I would also like to suggest to those who are not as familiar with him, that this is also the "other Lewis," the writer of learned treatises on Medieval and Renaissance topics and the vagaries of literary history, theory, and practice.

The same experiences as await enthusiasts of his fiction and apologetics await the student of his scholarly books. They can be anticipated not only in his imaginative and theological works, but also in his literary scholarship in general.

Naming the phenomenon

Two men well acquainted with Lewis's life and work, one who knew him intimately all of his adult life, the other immersed in the gritty details of his texts and biography for more than four decades, can help articulate this phenomenon I seek to name.

Owen Barfield, Lewis's longtime friend and lifetime intellectual combatant, once declared that "Somehow what Lewis thought

about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything." Likewise, Walter Hooper, the principal bibliographer and well-known expositor of Lewis, has referred to him as the "most thoroughly converted man I have ever known."

What then might we call this pervasive quality most of his intimates and many mere readers of Lewis have experienced in their encounters with him? I would put it this way: in Lewis we find a profound sense of integration: an imagination baptized and married to reason and transformed by the revelation of the person of Christ.

My reflection on Lewis's literary career, and my submersion in his literary scholarship, reveal to me a man who refused to compartmentalize his faith or his vocation. Lewis's devotion to Christ and his full embrace of the supernaturalism of Biblical faith leaks out into his prose whether he is writing children's fantasy, or etymologies of obscure Norse words, or framing the cultural milieu of allegory in the fourteenth century.

The scholarly Lewis is also the Christian apologist who gives blithe radio talks explaining the Trinity; the philologist Lewis is also the science- fiction writer who resituates the plot of Genesis on a planet far, far away; the brilliant social critic and urbane essayist is also the scrupulously kind and indefatigable correspondent who answers any and all inquiries from the high and the lowly.

And yet the point I wish to stress is that Lewis's Christian witness is not a "value-added" aspect of his scholarly work. It is not ladled on artificially and sanctimoniously like thick gravy on gristle to cover its tastelessness, nor is it not an isolatable "component" of his work.

It is something naturally imbued and discovered as indigenous within every text he crafted. This "thoroughly converted man" offered the academic and the Christian world a scholarship that incarnates the ancient faith in the most disarming yet natural ways.

Moving the World

Indeed, Lewis's consummate rhetorical skill, requisite boldness, perspicacious grasp of time and culture, prodigious memory, bracing wit and humor, these are all present in equal doses without calculation or hidden agenda in every genre of prose and poetry he attempted. Between "the Christian World of C. S. Lewis" and "the Scholarly World of C. S. Lewis," there can be no distinction.

Both were undergirded by diligent prayer and devotion daily by encounter with the word of God. In short, the ethos that Lewis, as Christian scholar, presented in his texts, all his texts, is that of a confident but unassuming man who, in Archimedean terms, has found a place to stand, a man who is ready, albeit with all due deference to his readers' own aspirations and circumstances, to move the world closer to the truth.

To elucidate Lewis's integrative faith and scholarship is to discover what animated him at his very being; we who wish to emulate him as a Christian academic or lay learner must discover, as he did, that revealed truth is central to fruitful scholarly inquiry. By "scholarship" I refer to that endeavor within the academic vocation in which the inquirer marshals evidence in the pursuit of hypotheses or theses and expresses her or his discoveries in the forums of their peers in their disciplines.

Such inquiry is predicated on the effective use of those tools, verbal or instrumental, available to the scholar; shaped by the perspectives and values he or she consciously

or unconsciously brings to the task; and judged by the cogency of its argument and its impact on both the practitioners of the discipline and wider commerce of ideas in the culture at large.

By these standards, Lewis indeed is a towering scholarly figure in the world of 20th Century letters, that is, the world of literary criticism and history, and thus an apt choice for such an investigation. Between 1931 and 1961, he published an astonishing number of scholarly works, countless articles and more than five major, seminal works of influence and provocation in literary studies—beginning with the early book that was arguably his magnum opus, The Allegory of Love, published in 1936, whose sweeping and meticulous account of the social, cultural, literary, and linguistic milieu of Chaucer and Spenser's Europe remains today a work of impeccable grace and continuing explanatory power.

Public and Private Lewis

How is it that this Lewis, who in addition to this literary scholarship mastered the imaginative and theological genres with which we more naturally associate him, could accomplish these multiple achievements and honors? My simple answer to the question is that the public Lewis was the private Lewis; the believing Lewis was the scholarly Lewis and vice-versa.

For, in Lewis's mind, what is true can never be essentially or only the product of private contemplation and certainly can never be relegated to the merely personal; rather, truth is derived as conviction specifically from participation in the public square, the dynamism of a public world where men and women may meet and can legitimately share, debate, and apprehend the truth.

"Under Pontius Pilate he suffered": the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a public, historical event, and reports of it must be believed or doubted on the basis of rational, historical grounds. Lewis could not conscientiously conduct his scholarship on a different basis from that which informed his fiction or his apologetics. Truth is one, and Lewis's preparation, conviction, and determination equipped him to speak authoritatively and faithfully whether he was writing literary history, commenting on trends in British education, or championing the virtues of a pagan poet.

The epigraph to this essay well exemplifies Lewis's personal take on the scholarly vocation and its role in the discipleship of a believer. Drawn from a sermon Lewis preached in October, 1939, in the dark, earliest days of World War II, "Learning in War Time," these remarks address the question, "with the world falling down about me, why should I even think about engaging further in an education or any scholarly pursuit?"

In effect, Lewis's answer is an extended homily on St. Paul's exhortation to the Colossians, "Whatever ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." Whatever one has been gifted to do, even if it is skulking about old libraries and illuminating the forgotten world views of Anglo-Saxons and their kin, this too could bring glory to God—if done with proper humility and with full-hearted effort. For God is the Author of the World's story and in it there are no miscellaneous facts, minor characters, or unresolved plot lines.

Lewis continued in that address to amplify how the life of the Christian scholar can and should unfold under the discipleship of Christ,

and herein one finds Lewis's most sustained statement of the value and nobility of the vocation of scholar. In it he articulates three characteristic features of his scholarship: (1) allegiance to a transcendent order that shapes our witness to the discovery of truth; (2) recognition of opposing propositions and an anticipation of engagement with its clashing viewpoints; (3) evocation of historical perspective whose panoptic vistas save one from local errors:

> There is no question of a compromise between the claims of God and the claims of culture, or politics, or anything else. God's claim is infinite and inexorable. There is no middle way. Yet in spite of this it is clear that Christianity does not exclude any of the ordinary human activities. . . . There is no essential quarrel between the spiritual life and human activities as such. Thus the omnipresence of obedience to God in a Christian's life is, in a way, analogous to the omnipresence of God in space. . . .
>
> To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen,"

Lewis continued,

> Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. . . . Most of all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times, and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.

Thus, Lewis the public scholar was equipped by Lewis the Christian scholar to face the paradigms of literary study illuminated by his vast historical perspective, his intimate acquaintance with the thought forms of the present and its vocabulary, and his knowledge of eternity. As one can tell, he saw nothing limiting in his vocation that would prevent him from speaking the truth in love as a practicing Christian.

Indeed, he found something quite liberating in being able to speak about the faith from the vantage point of the scholar who "knew his stuff." Who can forget the great lines published in his 1959 address on "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," wherein Lewis, defending the historicity of the New Testament accounts of Christ's miracles, critiques the [M]an who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of NT texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experiences of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general. [Such a man] is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious things

about them. If he tells me that something in a gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that gospel.

This is the declaration of a man whose principled scholarship allows him both the courage and the freedom to speak directly and unapologetically to a topic in which he is an expert, though it was outside his professional discipline. As a lover of the truth, he could have no qualms about letting the integration of heart and mind, soul and spirit, work and faith manifest itself in this, and indeed any occasion.

How far we are from sharing Lewis's notions or motives—or St. Paul's for that matter—is revealed in the punch line of a recent political joke captures well the challenge, perhaps ambivalence most of us face of living out our Christian convictions in the public square of academic scholarship: Have you heard about the politician whose morals were so private he didn't even impose them on himself?

Yes, that embodies it: in fin-de-siecle Western culture, convictions of any sort, especially about religion, may be held but not openly practiced, alluded to but not nakedly declared; for any hint of actual commitment to real principle implies some sort of standard and where standards are, expectations--and measuring rods--follow. The private world of "values" must not impinge the public world of "facts."

Better to avoid the charge of imposing values on others, keeping faith meek and mild, properly private, if you will, than to publicly champion one's belief and risk the inevitable charge of hypocrisy, or, worse, hegemony.

The Impotent West

The Church's intellectual schizophrenia at the end of the 20th Century, well explored by writers such as Mark Noll and George Marsden, makes even more prescient Lewis's mid-century prophecy of the coming impotence of the West to speak meaningfully of universals, as does the Lewis who wrote *The Abolition of Man.*

Lewis would not be surprised that Christians would be increasingly relegated to the sphere of the private and the personal, a sphere that seems to shrink daily and by default prohibit as bad taste any public, meaningful expression of faith, especially in one's vocational setting. Many North American, Christians and non-Christians alike, in fact, appear quite nervous about any sort of public faith, about any open alignment of one's scholarship with conviction, purpose, destiny, that would draw attention to themselves.

Pulled, pushed, and pressured on all sides, we learn too well that we are expected to hide, disguise, or confine our faith to more and more private settings. And even then the Church itself is expected somehow to tone down its voice and remain placid and tranquil in the midst of attack and disenfranchisement.

In short, we become accustomed to accommodation, to seeking a place where our faith may rest or fit comfortably—where, perhaps, it will neither disturb others nor risk embarrassing questions for ourselves. Lewis saw the chief casualty of the destruction of objective value as the death of the public, that realm in which men and women of good will might indeed investigate, probe, and debate the foundations of what was once called the good life or "civilization."

What was most indispensable about the Western tradition for Lewis was its evocation of a public ground for the training of the young and the managing of responsible

cultural change in a society of equals. Through its invention and promotion of alphabetic literacy, the West had given birth to a public world where texts may serve as the landscape where we can objectively wrestle with and resolve matters of mutual importance. The public world, a world available, present, negotiable by human beings, is assumed in the literature Lewis loved best.

The Role of Civilization

In his criticism as in his imaginative fiction and apologetics, Lewis vehemently denied that facts and values could rest on personal epistemology, an autistic world of ethno-gender specific truths. The role of civilization in general, and Christian civilization in particular, he would tell us, is to help make public men of private persons. It is to lift men and women out of their provinciality and narrowness into a more expansive realm of transchronological persons, ideas, and ideals, into an arena in which character is built, affirmed, and celebrated as a public good which promotes the health of the society at large. Everywhere he abhors coercive ideology, the inner ring, the occultic creed—the making private of the public, or the imposing of the private upon the public while keeping it private.

Thus, one of the greatest things Lewis has to teach us as we enter a new millennium thus these credo:

> To know the truth I need not be part of an elite or intelligentsia, I need only to be human. In the West the foundation of all free thought and inquiry is the unique personhood and humanity of man: I am human, therefore I may know the truth.

Access to truth, to the real world, as opposed to the shadows, is the birthright of all. To resist this dilemma, we must follow Lewis in refusing to divorce our personal faith from our public behavior. We must live the faith in and out of our cloisters. We must not retreat from the public square.

While the privatization of faith is something that Lewis, perhaps our century's greatest convert from unbelief, would find antithetical to true faith, one doubts that he would cower or cringe at our new century's challenges to Biblical orthodoxy. Rather, Lewis would see opportunity —opportunity for Christians to serve, as he put it, as both "specimens," and as antidotes to chaos, that these times provide.

If we agree that Lewis's life and career exemplify the virtue of rejecting the split between the sacred and the secular, the public and the private that haunts and inhibits so many of us, we can then find courage in sharing his obedience to St. Paul's admonition to "be not conformed to this age, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:1, 2). Lewis pointed his listeners and his readers, his students and his friends, to a stance that integrates faith and life, vocation and confession.

Life before Pilate

If I were to describe Lewis myself in a single phrase, it would be this: Lewis was a man who lived his life before Pilate. That is to say, I believe Lewis carried out his daily tasks as teacher, citizen, and believer as one who knew he was always before a skeptical inquisitor, one who too often hides from the truth and masks his fear of knowing the truth behind indifference or the pretense of being on the search—as Pilate in the presence of Our

Lord revealed (John 18:37).

This being the case, Lewis looms as a model for us in any walk of life who must find integration and application of our faith in concrete terms. Lewis tried neither to hide nor foreground his faith in his work, yet whatever else Lewis was, he was a man of faith willing to pay the price for his public confession that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. Deplored and despised by colleagues jealous of his scholarly prowess and shamed by his open association with popular literature and "mere" Christianity, Lewis was denied a professorship at Oxford at the peak of his literary scholarship.

As Christopher Derrick, a former pupil and friend of Lewis, has judiciously observed, Lewis was a man willing to "challenge the entrenched priesthood of the intelligentsia." And to do so from within the cloister, at the cost of being thought a traitor by many of his peers, one finds in Lewis an uncommonly valiant and articulate skeptic of the modern era, one forthrightly opposed to the "chronological snobbery" of our times that assumes truth is a function of the calendar and that the latest word is the truest one.

Those who try to read through the entire Lewis corpus confess that they receive an education in history, philology, sociology, philosophy, and theology so extensive and exhilarating that others seem thin and frivolous in comparison. While Lewis caricatured himself as a dinosaur, the last of the Old Western Men, many today see him as a forerunner of what may still be the triumph of men and women of Biblical faith in an age that derides the pursuit of truth and righteousness.

In the year of his centennial, we can offer him no better tribute than to try to walk in the steps of one who earnestly followed the steps of his Lord.

The quotes from C.S. Lewis are taken from Lewis's "Learning in War Time" in The Weight of Glory, *edited by Walter Hooper (Macmillan, 1965) and "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in* Christian Reflections, *edited by Walter Hooper (Eerdmans, 1967).*