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# Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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**Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle:  
A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation  
of the Oxford University Socratic Club**

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# **Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club**

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Although the Oxford University Socratic Club is most often identified with its first faculty advisor and president, C. S. Lewis, the club itself grew out of the philosophical and theological curiosities that were felt, in large part, by the undergraduate class of the early 1940s. In a 1985 audio interview [AI] the club's founder, Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle, would recall that the inception for the Socratic Club began at a 'fresher's tea' at the rectory of St. Aldate's toward the end of Michaelmas term of 1941. It was then that a young Somerville woman by the name of Monica Shorten told the newly arrived Aldwinckle that she was "very disappointed in the sermons that the different clergy are preaching," in that they were taking "God's existence and Christ's divinity for granted" (Aldwinckle AI, 8). When Aldwinckle inquired if any of her friends shared her concerns, Shorten's response was an enthusiastic "Oh yes," adding that along with her Christian friends there were "Plenty, plenty, of agnostics and atheists" who were just as interested as she was in discussing religious and philosophical issues (Aldwinckle AI, 8). Inspired by her conversations with Shorten and her friends, Aldwinckle would post an announcement on the Somerville College Junior Common Room bulletin board inviting all parties, including "Atheists, Agnostics come to the discussion," on what she would later refer to in the second *Socratic Digest* [SD] as a

"philosophical approach to religion" (Aldwinckle SD no. 2, 1).

This initial meeting was, as Aldwinckle recalled, "Quite civil," bringing about "good thoughtful questions, and everyone very interested in saying, 'Can't we meet again?' " (Aldwinckle AI, 9). Much to her surprise, the second meeting was "standing room only in the Somerville J. C. R.," giving rise to "a Socratic Club in embryo" (Aldwinckle AI, 9). It was shortly after the second meeting that Aldwinckle would write C. S. Lewis asking him to be president of the Socratic Club. Lewis gladly accepted the position, and with his tutelage and Aldwinckle's fervent drive the club would become an instantaneous and long-lived success. Over the course of twenty-seven years 414 meetings were held, wherewith 306 scholars and guest speakers either delivered or responded to a wide variety of topics (*Socratic Club Papers and Speakers* 1-12). Many of the speakers were the most famous and widely read academics of their day, including: Isiah Berlin, H. H. Price, Gilbert Ryle, Michael Dummett, Fr. Frederick Copelston, Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield, Anthony Kenny, Iris Murdoch, Basil Mitchell, and many others. Likewise, the Socratic Club was a testing ground for the early careers of such notable philosophers as G.E.M. Anscombe, A.J. Ayer, Antony Flew, Peter Geach, Philippa Foot, John Lucas, and Alastair MacIntyre (*Socratic Club Papers and Speakers* 1-12). Added to this weekly

meetings were often very lively, acting as the genesis to several legendary debates that are still spoken and written about today. Such a remarkable output on the part of one of many student organizations, at what is arguably the most famous university in the world, would not have been possible without Chaplain Aldwinckle's passion, dedication, and evangelical conviction. Because of her passion, and the affect that it gave rise to, Aldwinckle's life was one that was 'well-examined', and one that is well worth looking at.

Most of what is known, as well as what has been published, about Aldwinckle's life and work is drawn from three sources. The first and most significant primary resource, is the *Stella Aldwinckle Papers: 1922—1990 (Bulk Dates 1940—1972)* housed at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois. Amongst this collection is the second most significant primary source, Professor Lyle W. Dorsett's July 26, 1985 audio interview with Aldwinckle. Third in line are Iris Murdoch's "Foreword" and Richard Leachman's "Biographical Postscript" to Aldwinckle's 1990 collected works of poetry, *Christ's Shadow in Plato's Cave: A Meditation on the Substance of Love* [CS]. As complementary sources to Aldwinckle's only book length publication, Murdoch and Leachman's insights are amongst the few published reminiscences by her friends and colleagues.

Elia Estelle Aldwinckle was born in Johannesburg, South Africa on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 1907, served as the Oxford Pastorate's Chaplain for Women Students, from 1941 to 1966, and died on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1989. In between the Dorsett interview and the Leachman postscript Aldwinckle's formative years tell the story of a young woman who was raised in what Leachman refers to as a "conventional Anglican middle class family—church was regularly attended, the Lord's Prayer formed a focal point and

was frequently recited, and her father's advice to the family was that the greatest book ever written was St. John's Gospel" (Leachman CS, 79). Leachman continues to tell us that Aldwinckle had a very adventurous youth spent going back to England in 1915 during the war years, so as to be safely educated at Weston-super-Mare grammatical school for girls, and then returning to Brits, South Africa in 1925 to be reunited with her family. Back in South Africa, the eighteen-year-old Aldwinckle, along with her fifteen-year-old brother Aylmer, started a tobacco farm in close proximity of the Crocodile River. Of this particular time, Aldwinckle recalled that on her twenty-first birthday she "went down to the water there and prayed about the future. And the answer was that I wanted to use my life to help people find God" (Aldwinckle AI, 5). The profundity of this anecdote is notable, in that it acts as a reminder that Aldwinckle sincerely felt called to serve God, a point that is often overlooked, dismissed, or (as is most likely the case) simply accepted as a given when her governance of the Socratic Club is put in front of the critical lens. The import of keeping this defining moment in mind is that it affirms that Aldwinckle viewed the Socratic Club as both an integral part of her mission and an evangelical tool. In turn, and albeit by extension, the club would become one of the Oxford Pastorate's most successful means of homilizing to an academic, and quite often skeptical, audience.

Aldwinckle's entry into the ministry began in 1928 with her return to England. Once there she found employment as a nursemaid for a Baptist minister in North London, and it was during this time that she would take correspondence courses in Greek, so as to strengthen her chances with the university entrance exams. Aldwinckle succeeded in gaining a place at Oxford's St. Anne's College where she deliberately chose to read in theology. When asked

about this particular time in her life she would tell Dorsett that:

And, by a miracle, I believe, managed to get into Oxford. I had to go up for an interview and all that kind of thing, and got in to St. Anne's College. And I thought, 'Now what am I going to read?' I thought, 'Well, I suppose what I'd like to do would be to take the existence of God as given, and read theology rather than philosophy.' So, I read theology and one of my tutors was Austin Farrer, who became one of my very, very great friends and helped me with my own philosophical research than anyone could believe possible . . . .  
(Aldwinckle *AI*, 5)

Aldwinckle's deliberate decision to read theology is interesting on two accounts. One, as an aspiring undergraduate she understood then, or came to understand later in her studies, the difference between a philosophical and theological study of religion. Secondly, her choice would put her in contact with Professor Austin Farrer, who would become her advisor and life-long friend. Not only was Farrer one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, he was also a close friend and critical ally of C.S. Lewis. When it came to the hey-days of the Socratic Club, Farrer and Lewis were a force to be reckoned with, with Lewis delivering or responding to twenty-seven papers, and Farrer taking to the lectern twenty-one times.

Returning to Aldwinckle's earlier years, after finishing her studies at St. Anne's, she would teach Divinity at Yorkshire for three years, followed by a position at St. Christopher's College in Blackheath, an affluent London suburb. In 1941 she would reaffirm her calling, and take her commitment to the Anglican Church a step further by choosing a pastoral path over teaching. Richard Leachman offers an insightful summation

of this turning point in Aldwinckle's life when he writes:

... gradually she came to realise that she was not destined to spend her life as a teacher, and that her true calling was pastoral. Stella returned to Oxford and joined the Oxford Pastorate, a team of workers attached to St Aldate's Church, yet independent of it, and whose work was, and still is, focused primarily on the spiritual counselling of the University's undergraduates. Stella had clearly found her niche, and here she remained for twenty six years as Chaplain for Women Students, from 1941 to 1966, exercising what proved to be a powerful and uplifting ministry among generations of students.  
(Leachman *CS*, 79)

The Socratic Club and Aldwinckle's ministry were joined at the hip from the very onset of her new career—a point that is made evident in the 1985 interview when Dorsett and Aldwinckle engage in a quick exchange that precedes the better known story of Monica Shorten's disenchantment with the more liberal Christian sentiments of the day:

DORSETT: . . . your position, then, was helping people spiritually find the way. This was fulfilling this vision you really had on the Crocodile River.

ALDWINKCLE: Yes, yes.

DORSETT: Helping people, helping seekers find God.

ALDWINKCLE: To find God, yes.

DORSETT: Pointing people to God.

ALDWINKCLE: And the philosophical work I've done all the way through, which I *started* in 1945, came as a kind of urge that I got it started.

DORSETT: All right, so by the time—if I understand it

correctly then, the Socratic Club grows out of your ministry, really.

ALDWINKCLE: Oh, yes, directly. (Aldwinckle *AI*, 7-8)

Given this reminiscent, there can be little doubt over Aldwinckle's missionary intent in establishing the Socratic Club. Just as interesting is Aldwinckle's specified mention that her "philosophical work . . . started in 1945," three years after the Socratic Club had been established, and that the same said "philosophical work" was associated with her calling (Aldwinckle *AI*, 8).

Further examination of the 1985 interview, and a corresponding analysis of Aldwinckle's club notes from the early 1940s, suggest that Aldwinckle's undergraduate knowledge of the foundational differences between theology and philosophy were starting to evolve into a personal interpretation of the centuries old conflict of Faith vs. Reason. One of the clearest expressions of this interpretation is found in the early part of the 1985 interview when Aldwinckle explains that her:

... whole research, this whole philosophical effort that I've been making ever since that time, really, it's completely new approach, you see, but it it's ultimately philosophical. But the pastoral nerve of it is to remove the hindrances and misunderstandings which prevent people from becoming Christians . . . it's an ontological argument, really. It is the ontology of the Christian faith, ontology. Not just philosophy, but *ontology*. (Aldwinckle *AI*, 11)

Although the emphasis added to the word *ontology* is on the part of the transcriber, the repetition of the term speaks to the significance that Aldwinckle places on this central philosophical concept. However, a thorough reading of

the Aldwinckle papers make it very clear that her understanding of 'ontology' was much more in step with Austin Farrer and C. S. Lewis's Edwardian view of metaphysics than it was with the then current perspective of ontological analysis—particularly so as it was being re-defined and argued for by logical positivists such as Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer. As Adam Barkman points out, in his 2009 publication *C.S. Lewis & Philosophy as a Way of Life: A Comprehensive Historical Examination of His Philosophical Thoughts*, by the mid-1930s many of Oxford's younger philosophers:

... belonged to one of the early schools of modern analytic philosophy, and their claim was grounded in a radical empiricism and focus on linguistic meaning, asserting that nothing should be believed or accepted without verification; thus, for instance, they claimed metaphysical and theological assertions should not be believed since they cannot be verified in the manner of scientific inquiry.

(Barkman 204-05)

In sum, the battle between the few remaining idealistic philosophers, or traditionalists (C. S. Lewis and Austin Farrer being amongst them) who saw Edwardian theology as being an essential pedagogical component of a refined, classical education, and the progressives (many of them strongly influenced by logical positivism who viewed all matters religious with a skeptical eye) was one of the century's most contentious philosophical disputes.

This was the backdrop by which the Socratic Club came into its own, particularly so in the late 1940s when the trauma of the war began to wane and more students began to return to lecture. In such an exciting time the Oxford philosophers were not only insistent on

being heard, they often came to dominate the stage. Such was the setting for one of the Socratic Club's most exciting years, 1948, wherein such debates as G.E.M. Anscombe's February 2 paper "'Miracles' – a reply to Mr. C.S. Lewis," commented on by C. S. Lewis, Fr. Leslie Walker's February 23, 1948 "Christianity and Plato" fiercely responded to by then professed atheist Anthony Flew, and the bombastic J. B. S Haldane's November 15 work, simply entitled "Atheism," and 'somewhat' reproached by I. M. Crombie all took the stage (*Socratic Club Papers and Speakers* 4-5).

By the mid-1940s the Socratic Club was well-established and quickly becoming one of the most popular and talked about clubs in the university community. Aldwinckle quickly capitalized on the club's success, and realizing that much of the notoriety gained was due to Lewis's growing celebrity she sought to expand her mission by asking Dorothy Sayers and T.S. Eliot's assistance in helping her in establishing a London chapter. Although both Sayers and Eliot expressed an interest and admiration for the Socratic Club, neither could comply with Aldwinckle's request, leaving her seek attention from those in the Oxonian community who were most receptive—a new generation of theologians and philosophers, particularly so younger women fellows and lecturers who were seeking an audience.

The most famous of these young women was Jean Iris Murdoch, an aspiring Somerville and Cambridge educated philosopher who became a fellow of Oxford's St. Anne's College in 1948, and who would eventually become recognized as one of the twentieth century's leading intellectuals and novelists. In her "Foreword" to Aldwinckle's *Christ's Shadow in Plato's Cave*, Murdoch recalls that:

She entered the colleges of Oxford boldly, not always welcome, but as of right, taking her role among us for granted . . . Stella did not appear as a 'converter' in any narrow or doctrinal sense, she taught by what she was, by her presence, her faith and her concern . . . I left Oxford in 1942, just after the Socratic Club was founded, and returned in 1948 to find the club flourishing and indeed famous, and Stella as busy as ever in her 'parish' carrying her faith into all her corners.

(Murdoch CS, 7)

Over the years Murdoch and Aldwinckle would become close friends, and it would be this relationship that would bring Aldwinckle closer to two other women, analytical philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe and ethicist Philippa Foot. Although Aldwinckle was closer to Foot than she was Anscombe the relationship that she had with her was more than passing, and one that has been overlooked by more than one biographer when approaching the circumstances revolving around the famous 1948 debate between Anscombe and Lewis. Just as significant is the fact that all four women delivered papers at Socratic Club meetings during a time when Philosophy and Theology was still overtly masculine, a matter that should not be seen as merely coincidental.

As is the case with most long-lived university organizations, the Socratic Club evolved and changed throughout the years, particularly so following Lewis's departure for Cambridge in the autumn of 1954. It is after Lewis's departure that the club's membership and critical perspective becomes decisively philosophical. While religion remained a going concern, and often dominated the discussions at hand, the works delivered in the 1950s and 60s were much more analytical and contemporary than those seen in the 1940s and early 50s. It was a

gradual shift in both conversation and context that didn't escape Aldwinckle's attention. Early on in the club's history, in sub-section entitled "Women's Work," Aldwinckle would contribute the following comment to *The Oxford Pastorate Fifty-Fourth Report*. July 1949—June 1950 [OP]:

For the intellectuals, on the other hand, the growing ascendancy of analytic method in philosophy is spreading scepticism of the subtlest kind. The Socratic Club is trying to do something to meet this situation by a list of fixtures for the coming academic year planned in collaboration with a group of senior philosophers. (Aldwinckle *OP* 1949-50, 9)

In this account, Aldwinckle's optimistic words fit well with other reports that speak to the popularity and affect that the Socratic Club had during its first twelve years. Although her stewardship of the Socratic Club never faltered, and while her own interests in philosophy grew alongside the club's new-gained interest in analytical discourse, Aldwinckle never gave up her Edwardian root. This point is clearly expressed fourteen years later wherein *The Oxford Pastorate Sixty-Eighth Report*. July 1963—June 1964, she states:

This leads on to the Socratic Club's work. For some time I have become increasingly dissatisfied with this on two counts: (1) We seem to find ourselves imprisoned by the all-powerful linguistic approach to philosophy, and to be drawn into rather arid discussion about religious language and its possible meaningfulness. The problem is how to get beyond this living in a strait-jacket to a style of discussion that relates more directly to a problem of finding a philosophy of life. (2) This arid linguistic

approach means we are not doing enough for those reading P.P.E. or Greats . . . (Aldwinckle *OP* 1963-64, 7)

Even though she would report that "my main work has been in the Socratic Club (which has had a very good year)" in the ensuing year (1965), Aldwinckle's notes of the 1960s show a subtly compromised attitude about club activities and discourse (Aldwinckle *OP* 1964-65, 1). By the mid-1960s club debates and activities had begun to slow down, and in 1966 Aldwinckle would retire on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her service to the Oxford Pastorate.

Even after retirement Aldwinckle continued to attend Socratic Club meetings, remaining active until May 2, 1969 when her notes on those who spoke, and what was said, come to an end. While Chaplain Aldwinckle's passion for her mission might have come across as being a tad bit too evangelical or enthusiastic for some Oxonians, and while her understanding of philosophy was too subjective and theological for contemporary analysis, what is undeniable is that her shepherding of the Socratic Club gave many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most widely read and recognized philosophers and theologians a platform to speak from—and, for those who were in need of spiritual comfort in a contentious world, she was there for them.

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