

# Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

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Volume 10 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Tenth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 64

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6-5-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Wendling, Susan (2016) "Henry More and C. S. Lewis: Cambridge Platonism and its Influence on Lewis's Life and Thought," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 10 , Article 64. Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol10/iss1/64](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol10/iss1/64)

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## **Henry More and C.S. Lewis: Cambridge Platonism and its Influence on Lewis's Life and Thought**

by Susan Wendling

Susan Wendling, a long-term member of the New York C.S. Lewis Society, has presented several papers on Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis at both the Society and at Taylor University's C.S. Lewis & Friends Colloquium. She has also presented papers on J.R.R. Tolkien at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

While scholars commonly acknowledge that C.S. Lewis is a “Neo-Platonist Christian” (Barkman 5), and readers of the *Chronicles of Narnia* are familiar with the quotation “It’s all in Plato” (Lewis “The Last Battle” 170), very few scholars have unpacked just how deep this influence runs. The recently published reappraisal of the Inklings entitled *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams* mentions that Lewis read a biography of the life of Henry More as well as More’s own writings. However, the authors fail to mention that Jack Lewis began on January 1, 1924, to “read through the philosophical works of Henry More and to make an abstract of them” (Lewis, *All My Road* 280). Even Walter Hooper, the editor of this diary of Lewis from the year 1922 to 1927, merely notes that at this time Jack was hoping to write on him for a D. Phil. degree and was also applying for his first job. Significantly, at this time in Jack’s life, he was moving from Atheism to Idealism but was not yet a committed Christian.

Hooper states that Jack “had chosen Henry More because of his own interest in ethics,” adding that in March of 1924, Jack read a paper to the Philosophical Society called “The Promethean Fallacy in Ethics” (*All My Road* 280). However, Adam Barkman, a Canadian scholar who published *C.S. Lewis & Philosophy as a Way of Life* in 2009, takes issue with Hooper, saying that the notes that Lewis made when he was reading through More “do not reveal any interest in ethics; rather, they suggest an interest in More’s Platonic metaphysics, to which Lewis was increasingly drawn” (Barkman 41). Barkman strengthens this assessment by his footnote documenting that Lewis was also re-reading Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and discussing his *Philebus*, at the time (41). This interest in “Platonic metaphysics,” combined with

the fact that Jack was a trained philosopher whose first job was as a Philosophy Tutor, suggests that scholars should make a more careful investigation into Platonic and Neoplatonic influences. The Glossary in P.H. Brazier's *C.S. Lewis—An Annotated Bibliography and Resource* (2012), encourages such an investigation:

Platonism is a type of philosophy that he [Lewis] not only subscribed to but which characterized his work throughout his life. . . . Many Protestant, Reformed, or Evangelical supporters of Lewis's work today object strongly to his Platonism, not realizing that it is fundamental to Lewis's interpretation of the gospel and is at the heart of his understanding of revelation. As a young don Lewis was profoundly influenced by Henry More (1614-87) who was one of the most prominent of seventeenth-century British philosophers. More's parents were both Calvinists; however, the severity of their faith was eschewed as More moved towards Anglicanism. . . . However, he devoted himself to the study of philosophy. In his youth he espoused skeptical philosophy, until he became absorbed by the study of Plato and Neo-Platonism. More was a leading member of the Cambridge Platonists emphasizing mystical and philosophical theology. (Brazier 156)

With the additional literary knowledge that More was exposed to Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* at an early age, and that Lewis himself re-read the first book of *The Faerie Queene* in late January of 1924, writing that "I think I never before saw how much real beauty there is in the religious parts" (*All My Road* 286), the question arises: Why is there so little attention given to the fact that Jack Lewis drank deeply and admiringly at the fountain of Henry More's Cambridge Platonism during his formative years of age 24 to 26, the precise time period when he was finishing his formal education and preparing for his first job as a Philosophy Tutor?

A cursory review of the indices in the Hooper/Green biography as well as those in the biographies by George Sayer, A.N. Wilson, Alan Jacobs and most recently, Alister McGrath, fail to turn up any listing of Henry More! The most recent biography, written in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of C.S. Lewis's death, seems quite at a loss to explain Jack's utter lack of interest in the "Irish Troubles" in 1924—the most violent in 100 years—failing to note that this is precisely when Jack is absorbed in the life and writings of Henry More, who instructs those who would live their lives ethically and morally in the knowledge of God to avoid political entanglements! Since Jack was "mentored" by More (Barkman 133-4) and admired his holiness up

to the end of his own life (*Collected Letters 2*: 613), would this not be a reason for Lewis to avoid politics and concentrate on his spiritual philosophical studies?

By 1924 and 1925, Jack Lewis was a trained philosopher whose first job was as a Philosophy Tutor. Further, at least part of what drew Lewis's attention to both *The Faerie Queene* and the writings of Henry More was their Neoplatonic focus on Truth, Goodness and Beauty—the famous Platonic linked triad of spiritual values. Already Lewis was seeing and admiring the beauty of holiness in Spenser, even though he was at this phase of his life an idealist rather than a fully committed Christian. By the time Jack was working as a Philosophy and Literature Tutor at Magdalen College in Oxford, he was well on his way to being a lifelong Spenserian and Neoplatonist in the mold of his mentor from 1924, Henry More. George Sayer, author of the biography *Jack: The Life of C.S. Lewis*, tells how in 1926 or 1927 Jack wrote a character sketch of the senior fellow at Magdalen, Paul Victor Mendelssohn Benecke.

This sketch shows Benecke's "deep love of animals" and "an unusual insight into holiness." Benecke "lived the life of an ascetic, got up early in the morning, and fasted on Fridays. He wore old and ragged clothes and spent his leisure in charitable work." Sayer goes so far as to write that "except for the fact that Benecke drank nothing alcoholic, "a description of his habits resembles Jack's own ten or twenty years later" (Sayer 188). Indeed, looking ahead to 1958, in a letter to Corbin Scott Carnell, Lewis cites the *Theologia Germanica* as a spiritual influence. In an editorial citation, Walter Hooper identifies this work as an "anonymous fourteenth-century German spiritual treatise counselling radical poverty of spirit and renunciation of zeal as a way of union with God" and specifies that the edition used by Lewis was originally published in 1874 but was in a new edition in 1924 — the precise time when Lewis was reading More deeply and widely and learning of this mystical spiritual treatise from him (*Collected Letters 3*: 978). Robert Crocker, More's recent biographer, quotes More's Cambridge tutor, Robert Gell, as saying that More was particularly inspired [in his teenaged years as a student at Christ's College, Cambridge] by the *Theologia Germanica* with its practical emphasis on extinguishing the human will in order to live only by and through the divine (Crocker 1).

All of the foregoing exempla serve as an introductory foundation for the larger thrust of this essay. Moving from the biographical facts of Lewis's personal and professional life at the beginning of his career, this essay will first describe the writings of Henry More which we

know Lewis read. Besides their main ideas, some characteristics of More's personal "habits of mind and life" will be noted. To provide some additional theological background, the "mystical Platonic strand" of Anglicanism will be discussed. Finally, I suggest that these Neoplatonic/Christian mystical ideals, seen as an explanatory template, help account for certain anomalies present in Jack Lewis's life but hitherto not adequately accounted for in the biographies and secondary literature available over the past fifty years.

### WRITINGS OF HENRY MORE READ BY C.S. LEWIS

The first letter in which Jack Lewis mentions Henry More is dated March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1924, and is written to his father. After defending his expenses and pleading for his father to continue to help him financially, he states that he has not been idle but has started to work "experimentally on Dr. Henry More—a 17<sup>th</sup> Century theologian—with the idea of 'doing' him for a D. Phil." He says that he enjoyed this work and learned a great many curious facts in natural history. He continues: "He was a very holy man, this More: his contemporary biographer tells us that his body 'at the putting off of his clothes, exhaled sweet herbaceous smells, and his urine had the natural savour of violets'" (*Collected Letters* 1:623). As this is the first mention of Henry More in *The Collected Letters*, Walter Hooper, the editor, provides readers with a critical footnote:

Henry More (1614-87), Cambridge Platonist, was educated at Christ's College, Cambridge, became a Fellow of the College in 1639, and remained there for the rest of his life. Those works of his which Lewis was reading included *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660) and *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659). In them More sought to vindicate theism against the materialism represented by Thomas Hobbes. He did this particularly by emphasizing the instinctive reasonableness of divine truth (1: 623 note 7).

The biography read by Lewis is by Richard Ward, entitled *The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More, Late Fellow of Christ's College in Cambridge* (1710).

Another letter, written in 1955 to Vera Gebbert, endeavors to help her with translating some Latin phrases she had asked him about. While unpacking *Amor Dei, lux animae* ("The love of God is the light of the soul"), he tells her: "I did a good deal of work on

Henry More once: a beautiful man of whom it was said ‘He was often so drunk with happiness that he had much ado to keep himself from falling down & kissing the very stones on the path.’ He is also one of the earliest people to mention kindness to animals as a duty” (*Collected Letters* 3: 613 note 176). Walter Hooper again references More’s biographer, Richard Ward: “He was transported . . . with Wonder as well as Pleasure, even in the Contemplation of those things that are here below. And he was so enamoured . . . with the Wisdom of God in the Contrivance of things; that he had been heard to say, A good man could be sometimes ready, in his own private Reflections, to kiss the very Stones of the Street” (*Collected Letters* 3: 613).

Returning to the life of Henry More, we note that in addition to his holy living and his general sacramental appreciation for God’s good creation, his General Preface outlines his inner conflicts, his studies of the Greek Fathers and his conversion to Christian Platonism. Written at a time of the English Civil War, More’s successive publications are often in direct opposition to the “Atheism,” “Enthusiasm” and “Superstition” of his age. According to Robert Crocker, More’s intellectual system was “part mystical Platonism and part rational Cartesian physics” (Crocker 3). The young More, as well as certain other British intellectuals and “natural philosophers,” rejected the dogmatism of contemporary Calvinist theology, and had sought for peace in a millenarian vision of intellectual and spiritual expansion. Crocker summarizes More’s writings as being “hierarchic in structure, the argument moving from mystical theology to rational metaphysics, to examples from nature or experience. This can be seen to some extent in all of More’s writings, and derives directly from his Neoplatonism” (4).

According to Richard Popkin’s essay on More in *Great Thinkers of the Western World*, More’s Neoplatonic construction “developed out of the ideas of Plato, Philo, Plotinus, Proclus and the Renaissance Florentine Platonists,” offering a “very Latitudinarian (broad-minded) version of Christianity, often stated in Platonic terms” (203). A key point to realize about More, according to Popkin, is that unlike the medieval Scholastics, More did not oppose “the new science” because “he believed that the basic picture of a mathematically explicable material world was entirely compatible with his dynamic spiritualistic metaphysics and with his Platonic reading of Christianity” (203).

Further, he “tried to make people see that not only was modern science compatible with the Bible but that it was actually, when properly understood, part of the ancient wisdom of the Hebrews as revealed

by the cabala” (Popkin 203). This confluence of ideas—including opposition to scholastic hair-splitting, a belief in a “mathematically explicable material world,” the centrality of the real substance of Scripture seen from the moral and personal life, as well as a belief in ancient wisdom—depends upon “a truly universal conception of the Logos itself” (Cassirer 19).

In his work dealing with theology specifically, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, More attacks at some length the most influential figures amongst the sectarian enthusiasts, the purpose being apologetic. More wished to persuade the “godly” to accept a minimum number of essential doctrines, and in this way to remain loyal to the Anglican Church. However, because he had applied the metaphysical ideas he had worked out in his natural theology, More got into some trouble and was attacked as a “heretic” (Crocker 7).

In spite of these political and religious attacks against the “Latitudinarians” in Cambridge, More’s most recent biographer Robert Crocker sums up that Henry More was regarded as something of a saint by a number of his younger acquaintances. He states “there can be little doubt regarding More’s life-long commitment to the mystical goal of ‘deification’ or union with God” (10). This lifelong quest for sanctity and illumination undoubtedly influenced Lewis’s life.

## MYSTICAL PLATONISM IN ANGLICAN THEOLOGY

Having briefly outlined the major ideas of More’s Christian Platonism, particularly its insistence that man can rationally know God and grow in godliness through embodying the virtues (or deification), and that the Platonic theory of the universe best fits with the findings of modern science), let us at this point try to reconcile this strand of mystical Platonism with More’s before-mentioned “loyalty to the Anglican Church.” Since his 1660 work *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* discusses the dangers of Atheism, Calvinism, Enthusiasm and Roman Catholicism, the reader may wonder “what else is there?” The mystical Platonic stream of Anglicanism has indeed been present down through the centuries but is more hidden. As Brazier’s *C.S. Lewis—An Annotated Bibliography and Resource* noted, Lewis’s Christian Platonism is often given short shrift, if indeed it is even noticed at all by Protestants who are more Reformed and/or Evangelical. Since Roman Catholics generally follow the heavily authoritarian hierarchy of a Church historically wed

to Aquinas's dogmatizing of Aristotelian epistemology, they, too, fail to acknowledge the underground mystical Platonic stream of a more philosophical theology.

This "third element" in Lewis's Anglican Church is described by that classic author on mysticism, William Inge, as follows:

My contention is that besides the combative Catholic and Protestant elements in the Churches, there has always been a third element, with very honourable traditions, which came to life again at the Renaissance, but really reaches back to the Greek Fathers, to St. Paul and St. John, and further back still. The characteristics of this type of Christianity are—a spiritual religion based on a firm belief in absolute and eternal values as the most real things in the universe—a confidence that these values are knowable by man—a belief that they can nevertheless be known only by whole-hearted consecration of the intellect, will, and affections to the great quest—an entirely open mind towards the discoveries of science—a reverent and receptive attitude to the beauty, sublimity, and wisdom of the creation, as a revelation of the mind and character of the Creator—a complete indifference to the current valuations of the worldling (33).

Since Lewis mentioned in a letter written to his childhood friend Arthur Greeves in June of 1931 that he was reading Inge's *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* (1924) and deemed it to be "one of the best books of the kind I have yet struck" (*Collected Letters* 3: 904), it is fair to assume that he had probably also read Inge's 1926 volume on the Platonic tradition in English religious thought, especially since he had been fascinated by Platonic metaphysics since 1924 and had read widely and deeply in the Cambridge Platonists.

### **HENRY MORE'S CHRISTIAN PLATONISM AS A TEMPLATE FOR C.S. LEWIS**

Highlighting how deeply Lewis studied the life and writings of Henry More, and taking note of the key characteristics of this mystical, rational and "latitudinarian" branch of Christianity, this essay can now conclude by noting the similarities in the personal lives and characters of More and Lewis. Such comparisons will demonstrate the "depth of influence" of the life and philosophy of More on the spiritual development of Lewis.

In the Introduction certain characteristics of Henry More's attention to holy living were noted. First of all, he patiently waited

two years to receive his Fellowship at Cambridge, where he then remained for the rest of his life. Jack Lewis waited about that long, taking a third “First” in English Literature and a part-time job as a Philosophy Lecturer before gaining his appointment as a Tutor in English Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford. More was noted for his contentment in his life and did not seek worldly preferment, even turning down a promotion. Lewis, too, was content to do what God wanted him to do and always turned aside from worldly praise of his apologetics, saying that he was “not a trained or professional theologian.” Second, More advised “the godly” to seek to become more and more divine by imitating Christ and by putting on charity and humility. This action of choosing to embody the virtues and putting to death vices and “the self” is known doctrinally as “divinization” or “theosis.” This doctrine is official dogma in the Eastern Church but is less familiar in the churches of the West. Third, and perhaps a corollary to the idea of dying to self and putting on Christ and His virtues is the fact that such a focus on Christ means less attention paid to what we today might call one’s “image.” Not only did Lewis defend the senior fellow at Magdalen in 1926 when others would mock his shabby clothing, Lewis himself famously paid little attention to his own clothes or his home environment, giving a “general impression of grand decrepitude,” as Alister McGrath puts it (McGrath 165).

While Lewis certainly did not live a life of monkish asceticism, he strove to be holy in his inner life. This leads us to a fourth similarity between More and Lewis: their sacramentalism. Like the ancient Platonic philosophers and like the ancient Fathers of the Church, both More and Lewis saw every form in Nature or Creation as participating in the life of God and therefore sacred. All creatures are given life and therefore require humans to treat them with respect and love. In the letter already quoted, we see that Lewis was impressed by More’s love of animals and loved animals himself. Besides seeing sacramental significance in animals and trees, Lewis, like Henry More, loved the sacred symbols in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and was a life-long Spenserian.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of Henry More’s life, according to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article by John Passmore, is that he “quite failed in what he conceived as his main task—to halt the advance of the mechanical world view” (389). Lewis, too, upheld the ancient Platonic cosmology of the Cosmos being arranged hierarchically with “all the angels and archangels” extending from God to humanity in a living universe. According to Lewis’s Preface

to the Second Edition of *The Screwtape Letters*, he had held that view for his entire life and had no reason from science or his experience to not believe in angels, fallen angels (demons) and a living cosmos. The only author I have come across to connect Lewis's sacramentalism to his almost lifelong crusade against the modernist, mechanistic world view is, not surprisingly, Kallistos Ware, a titular metropolitan bishop of the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate and former Spalding Lecturer of Eastern Orthodox Studies at the University of Oxford. It is not surprising because the Eastern Church tends to embrace a more mystical philosophy and is less given to the dangerous extremes of the Western church which, according to Henry More, are "Calvinism and Roman Catholicism."

Ware says that Lewis was attracted to the teaching of Henry More, "who—in a manner that recalls Maximus the Confessor—looked on reason, *logos*, as a vital and energizing principle active throughout the universe". In this connection Lewis recalls with a certain nostalgia the period in the distant past when trees and plants, springs and rivers, were all regarded as living beings. Underlying this seemingly outdated mythology, so Lewis believes, there is to be discerned an all-important truth: that nature is not dead matter but living energy, vibrant with the immanence of God. As Ware writes:

The process whereby man has come to know the universe is from one point of view extremely complicated; from another it is alarmingly simple. We observe a single one-way progression. At the outset the universe appears packed with will, intelligence, life and positive qualities; every tree is a nymph and every planet a god. Man himself is akin to the gods. The advance of knowledge gradually empties this rich and genial universe: first of its gods, then of its colours, smells, sounds and tastes, finally of solidity itself. . . . In his imaginative writing Lewis seeks to reverse this 'one-way progression' and to reaffirm the personal, sacramental, 'elf-patterned' character of the world (46-47).

## CONCLUSION

Although this essay has merely scratched the surface of the possible influences of the life and teachings of Henry More, scholars can certainly delve further into these links in order to more fully grasp the life-long growth of Lewis's Christian character. Perhaps More's mystical yet rational Platonic Christianity, hidden through the

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centuries in the Anglican Church beloved by Jack Lewis, provides “an explanation of the grand mystery of Lewis’s own godliness” which was given to rational apologetics, was evangelistic yet not reformed, and which was deeply sacramentalist and personally devout yet not Roman Catholic. Perhaps, even after realizing the depth of Henry More’s influence, we could today transcend More’s carefully delineated boundary markers and simply identify C.S. Lewis as “Saint Jack,” a humble servant of the Lord.

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