CS Lewis: the ‘most reluctant convert’ in all England

CS Lewis’ Christianity, which was both ecumenical and practical, appealed to a broad spectrum of Christians and enabled him to reach out to those beyond the Church. Dorothy Lee profiles ‘a friend for life.’

C live Staples Lewis (nicknamed ‘Jack’) was born into an Anglican home in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1898, the younger son of Flora and Albert. Flora died of cancer when Jack was ten, and soon after he and his brother, Warnie, were sent off to boarding school in England.

The death of his mother had a significant effect on Lewis. Through his loss, he developed the capacity to escape into imaginary worlds; he found a love of all things ‘Northern’—music, Norse mythology and legend. In his mid teens, however, Lewis decided to abandon the Christian faith in which he had grown up.

At the age of eighteen, Lewis won a scholarship to Oxford University, but instead of pursuing his studies he joined the British army in World War I. He was wounded in action in 1918 where his closest friend, Paddy Moore, was killed.

Lewis resumed his studies at Oxford after the War and, during the summer months, lived with Paddy’s mother, Janie Moore, and her daughter. In 1930, he and his brother bought a house in Oxford, ‘The Kilns’, with the Moores. During this time, Lewis served as tutor in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford.

In 1929, Lewis came to the decision that God must, after all, exist. His full conversion to Christian faith, however, did not occur till two years later, following a long walk and conversation with J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson. Lewis says of this event that, when they began the walk, he did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but that by the end of it, he did. He returned to the Church of England.

Tolkien was a Roman Catholic and was to have a major influence on Lewis’ life. In 1933, with Tolkien and others, the group known as the ‘Inklings’ was formed, meeting weekly first in Lewis’ rooms at Magdalen and later in the pub, the ‘Eagle and Child’ (known as the ‘Bird and Baby’). For sixteen years, this group continued to meet, reading their work together, and, through mutual influence and support, publishing some of the most significant literature of the period.

As well as publishing in his own academic field—that of Mediaeval literature—Lewis also began to write on matters of Christian faith. His first publication, in 1933, was ‘The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism’. He began his adult trilogy with the publication of the novel ‘Out of the Silent Planet’, in 1938, which was soon followed by ‘The Problem of Pain’ (1940), ‘The Screwtape Letters’ (1941), and ‘The Great Divorce’ (1945).
By this stage, Lewis had begun to give radio talks, becoming a public spokesman in the United Kingdom and beyond for Christian faith. Eventually these talks were gathered together to become ‘Mere Christianity’. As a consequence of his public speaking, as well as his writings on questions of faith, the University of Edinburgh awarded him a Doctor of Divinity in 1946. The following year he published his book on ‘Miracles’.

During the period 1950 to 1956, Lewis wrote the ‘Narnia Chronicles’, seven children’s novels about an imaginary world beyond our own; some of these have in recent years become movies. He also published his little-known novel, ‘Till We Have Faces’ (1956) and, before that, the autobiography of his early life, ‘Surprised by Joy’.

In 1954, Lewis accepted the Chair of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and left Oxford.

During this time, Lewis met Joy Davidman. She was a North American divorcée, who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, partly through his books. She was in England to escape a violent and unfaithful husband. In order to secure her residency in England, Lewis agreed to marry her in a civil ceremony in 1956. Joy was seriously ill, with bone cancer, and the marriage took place beside her hospital bed.

Joy experienced a temporary reprieve from the cancer and, in the following year, Lewis, who had by now fallen in love with her, married her in a religious ceremony. In the meantime, he kept writing, publishing his ‘Reflections on the Psalms’ in 1958 and soon after, ‘The Four Loves’.

Tragically, Joy’s cancer returned and she died in 1960. One year later Lewis published ‘A Grief Observed’, initially under a pseudonym, in which he reflected on the anguish of grief from the perspective of faith.

In 1963 Lewis resigned his Chair at Cambridge and retired to ‘The Kilns’ in Oxford, due to failing health—heart and kidney problems. He died on November 22nd of that year and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Headington Quarry, Oxford.

**His theology**

At no time did C.S. Lewis see himself as an academic theologian. His writing and speaking on Christian faith were, in his own view, popular rather than scholarly (unlike his work on English literature). Nor was he a particular advocate for Anglicanism as against other denominations. While contended as an Anglican, he saw himself as representing ordinary faith and, because he had himself been an atheist, he felt also a calling to address those outside the church.

Lewis’ public profile as a Christian was both ecumenical and practical. While he was capable of addressing profoundly theological questions—there is a reason he was awarded his Doctor of Divinity!—he nonetheless wrote from the perspective of daily Christian living, both spiritual and ethical.

It is not easy to characterise Lewis’ theology. From his point of view it was mainstream. He represented the ordinary Christian. What is remarkable is how many Christians, across the spectrum, have been able to connect to his writings and, in some sense, to ‘claim’ him. Evangelicals, within and without Anglicanism, Anglo-Catholics, Roman Catholics: across these traditions many believe that C.S. Lewis speaks their faith. Although ecumenism wasn’t the force it was to become in later decades, Lewis was an unconscious ecumenist (despite the tensions between him and the pre-Vatican II faith of Tolkien).

So, on the one hand, Lewis was somewhat evangelical in his Anglicanism. He gave central place to the Bible. His focus on Christ, and on a deeply spiritual relationship with Christ, was the abiding centre of his faith. Nowhere is this seen more plainly than in the Narnia books, where Aslan, the Lion, who appears in all seven novels, is a clear type of Christ. Although he resisted allegory, Lewis made this point explicit.

On the other hand, Lewis had an affinity to aspects of the Catholic side of Anglicanism. He believed in personal confession, and placed strong emphasis on the church and the sacraments. Once again, the Narnia stories reflect such a view, with Narnia itself signifying the life of the church.

Perhaps the very capacity to speak to Christians across boundaries, without being easily categorised or pigeon-holed, constituted C.S. Lewis’ Anglicanism. It was certainly the kind of Christianity Elizabeth I had in mind: a church that would include everyone, gathering in Catholic and Protestant alike.

CS Lewis was a man of orthodox Christian faith. He accepted the centrality of Scripture and the Creeds. He was well versed in biblical faith. He also believed in human experience and its capacity, when fairly tested, to teach wisdom to the open heart of faith.

Lewis was also a conservative. His philosophical outlook was deeply influenced by Plato: ‘If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world’, he says in ‘Mere Christianity’. At the heart of his Christian vision lay the notion of the inconsolable longing. This sense of holy desire is an echo of the famous words of Augustine (another Platonist) at the beginning of his ‘Confessions’: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.’
One of his many pieces of advice was to recommend the amateur theological reader always to read an old book after reading a new. This is the perspective of a conservative (though it is also good advice). His views on women, outlined particularly in the last of his adult trilogies, ‘That Hideous Strength’, seem rather quaint and dated these days (perhaps a reason that the trilogy has not maintained its popularity), with its focus on wifely obedience and submission.

At the same time, the ‘apostolic’ figures of his Narnia books are two boys and two girls, and the novels throughout maintain the balance even when the characters change: always a boy and girl at the centre of the action. In this area, as in so many others, Lewis was an enigmatic figure, for all his joviality and bluntness of character.

**His influence on me**

I began reading C.S. Lewis as a child. The Narnia books were favourites in our household and we read and re-read them. They were like mother’s milk to us.

As a young adult, I began reading the adult fiction and non-fiction books. They sustained my faith, drawing me out of the narrow Calvinism of childhood into a wider and warmer stream. Without Lewis I might easily have lost my way. He appealed to the longing for God, and to the truth of human experience when tested by faith. He kept before me the beauty and splendour of Christ.

For some years thereafter, I felt as if I had left C.S. Lewis behind, apart from reading the Narnia Chronicles to my children. I ‘moved on’, I read other theology and other spiritual writers—but I never discovered anyone quite like him. I went back to reading him. I re-read the novel ‘Till We Have Faces’, and it seems as fresh and deep as ever. I re-read ‘The Screwtape Letters’ and others of Lewis’ works and, in a way, re-discovered him, finding that he could still speak to me in the changing circumstances of my life.

The Narnia novels remain my favourites. I enjoy them as sheer story—Lewis is a great storyteller, with a simple, clear, and engaging style. I also enjoy their spiritual message: the sense of both divine absence and presence, the struggle and hardships of Christian living, the ups and downs of the life in the church, the eschatological promise which brings all things to joyful fulfilment.

When my father nearly died of a heart attack four years ago, I went to visit him in hospital soon after his surgery. I asked him if he’d like something to read. ‘Yes,’ he replied without a pause, ‘the Narnia books, please’.

I have found C.S. Lewis a friend for life. I don’t agree with everything he writes, I don’t always share his vision of things, and I think some of his books are better than others. But I will always return to him as a close companion along the way: his storytelling, his love of Christ, his wisdom.

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*CS Lewis: he has been a ‘friend for life’ for Dorothy Lee.*