



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 12, 2010

C.S. Lewis: Overshadowed but Not Outdone

One of the many stories that grew out of John F. Kennedy's aborted term as President has to do with an idle question put to him by a reporter aboard Air Force One. What would happen, the reporter wondered, if the plane went down, killing all on board?

"Your name will be in the paper," the President assured him, "but it will be in the small print."

Something like that happened to a pair of famous men who died on the same day President Kennedy was assassinated. While the world's attention was focused on Dallas, Texas, and Washington, D.C., few noticed that across the ocean in England two literary giants had also breathed their last. Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, and C.S. Lewis, author of the "Narnia" series of children's stories and numerous books and essays about the Christian faith, both died on November 22, 1963. Their deaths did, within the next couple of days, receive more recognition, and in larger type, than might have been spent on that unknown reporter on Air Force One. But to say their passing was overshadowed by the event in Dallas would be a rather large understatement.



Boston College philosophy professor Peter Kreeft made that interesting historical coincidence the basis of an imaginary conversation among the three men, all of whom arrived within a few hours of each other somewhere *Between Heaven & Hell* — the green room of Eternity, perhaps. It is a lively and imaginative read, but not as fascinating as the imaginary letters from the devil and one of his minions chronicled by Lewis in his enormously popular 1941 tale *The Screwtape Letters*. That book was even mentioned in the announcement of his death. "C.S. LEWIS DEAD; AUTHOR, CRITIC, 64" said the headline in the *New York Times* of November 25, 1963, with the subhead: "Cambridge Professor Wrote 'The Screwtape Letters.'" What made that book, then more than two decades old, so remarkable among the many that Lewis produced? Thomas Howard described it well in *The Achievement of C.S. Lewis*.

"In the early days of World War II, an odd book appeared in England and America. It seemed to be a collection of letters from an old devil to a younger one, telling him how to handle a man who had been assigned to him as his special demonic responsibility," wrote Howard. What was remarkable, both for that day and our own, Howard noted, was the way the book "assumed blithely and unapologetically, that the Devil is real, for heaven's sake. Here was Christian theology, anxiously plucking at coattails of



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the Western world, assuring everyone that we don't for a moment believe in any nonsense about miracles and God-in-the-flesh, and parthenogenesis and so forth, and along comes a book, not by a white-sock stump-preacher from the boondocks, but by a vastly civilized and luminously intelligent don, who obviously believed this awkward stuff."

Yes, Clives Staples Lewis, the eminent and erudite professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University, believed not only in God, but in the literal existence of an evil spirit known as the devil, who is very much at work in the world, luring souls into the abyss of hell and eternal damnation. Lewis' devil, known to millions of readers as "Uncle Screwtape," is much more subtle than he appears in the stereotypical depiction of a demon in red pajamas with a pitchfork. Indeed, as Lewis described him, he might easily pass for a respectable British bureaucrat.

The seduction of the human mind is a subtle business, after all. In our time we tend to think of temptation, if we think of it at all, as a matter primarily of sexual lust. Lewis' Screwtape goes much deeper to manipulate that part of the mind where reason has abdicated, leaving the field to chaos. The book's opening letter from Screwtape to his deputy, Wormwood, gives the reader a clear view of the kind of war being waged for the "hearts and minds" of men.

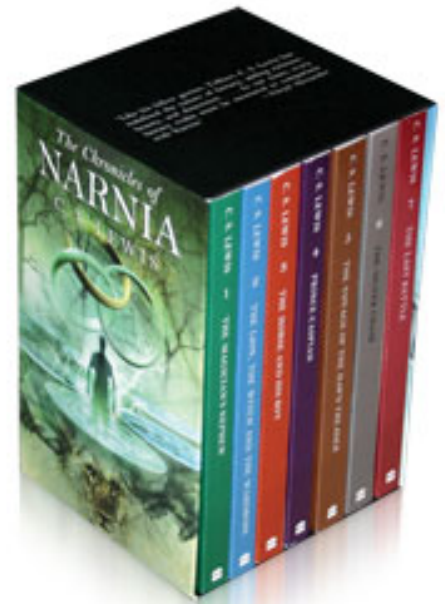
I note what you say about guiding our patient's reading and taking care that he sees a good deal of his materialist friend. But are you not being a trifle naïf? It sounds as if you supposed that argument was the way to keep him out of the Enemy's clutches. That might have been so if he had lived a few centuries earlier. At that time the humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning. But what with the weekly press and other such weapons we have largely altered that. Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false," but as "academic" or "practical," "outworn" or "contemporary," "conventional" or "ruthless." Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong, or stark, or courageous — that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about.

Screwtape's advice to his protégé has proven prophetic. The weekly press and "other such weapons" create many jangling but unheeded contradictions in the mind of man, and the daily press, television, and the cable channels' round-the-clock news and talk programs do a more thorough job. Indeed, unacknowledged contradictions of the mind have made great progress since Lewis' time. Today seemingly intelligent adults are fully capable of saying on Sunday morning they believe in "the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life," and voting on the following Tuesday for someone who solemnly promises to protect the "right" to destroy prenatal human life as a matter of personal "choice." If that doesn't bear out the dark prophecy in Screwtape's letter to Wormwood, it's hard to imagine what would.



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It is doubtful the Oxford don and professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge's Magdalene College ever expected sales of his imaginary little tale of demons at work subverting human minds would soon reach into the millions, with the number still rising nearly 70 years after its initial publication. He lived long enough to see *The Chronicles of Narnia* become classics in children's literature, even as adults also read and praised them for their lively and imaginative portrayal of a moral order in the universe. But he probably never imagined that sales of all his books and essays — including *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Abolition of Man*, *the Weight of Glory*, *A Preface to the Psalms*, *A Grief Observed*, and others — would soar into the neighborhood of 200 million and still be popular nearly half a century after his death. The rigor of his thought, the unrelenting honesty of his pursuit of truth about things that eternally matter, and the graceful clarity of his writing have earned him a lasting place in the hearts, minds, and bookshelves of millions.



His appeal rests in part on his genuine disinterestedness. Though himself a devout Anglican, Lewis made clear, most explicitly in his preface to *Mere Christianity*, that he would not try to convince the reader to become an Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic. He confined his efforts to pointing out the supporting role of reason in affirming the principles common to those and other communions within the Christian faith.

The same was true of what little he had to say about politics. Lewis was surely no partisan. What he resented and argued against was the reduction of persons to things, whether as consumers to be manipulated through the workings of a market economy or as masses to be herded in a collectivist state. He argued, most notably in *The Abolition of Man*, that political efforts at improving the human race lead inevitably to the tyranny of a small group of men over the rest of the populace on the principle, made famous in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, that some "are more equal than others." He argued with eloquent logic against regarding a proposition as true or false, based on whether the idea is new or old. In the unlikely event he was paying attention to America's politics in 1960, he might have laughed at Kennedy's charge, ever pleasing to the cheering crowds, that Nixon's "ideas are as old as McKinley." Lewis might have calmly pointed out that both as an American and a Catholic, Kennedy professed allegiance to a great many ideas that were a good deal older than McKinley.

Lewis was well aware of the dozens or more "incompatible philosophies dancing about together" in the head of 20th-century man and proved extremely capable of meeting and defeating them on their own terms. But he was concerned primarily with eternal truths. And he remained to the end a disciple of "Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today and forever."

That explains, at least in part, the enduring popularity of Lewis' works. He was instinctively suspicious of the Latest Thing in religion as well as politics. He preferred the old wine as well as the old wineskins of the Christian faith.

He accepted his place in a race of "miserable sinners," confident that we yet have a merciful Redeemer. A pop theology of "I'm OK, You're OK," would not have moved him, save perhaps to pity. Today's enthusiasts for "liturgical reform" would find little support for their cause in the writings of C.S. Lewis.



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Yet some of the controversies into which he ventured remain lively today, and his observations are no less insightful now than they were 60 years ago.

Consider, for example, his thought-provoking essay first published in 1948, called “Priestesses in the Church?” Lewis readily conceded that at first glance common sense would suggest that a woman could represent God speaking to humanity as well as a man. But he insisted that first glances and “common sense” can only take us so far and, in this case, not far enough. For the unchanging teaching of the Gospels is that no less an authority than Christ, the eternal Son of God, taught us to call God “Our Father.” Drawing on his lifelong study of literature, Lewis opined that “image and apprehension cleave closer together than common sense here is prepared to admit.” And one of the images central to the New Testament is the relationship of Christ to the Church as that of bridegroom to the bride.

Gender roles have become increasingly interchangeable in offices and factories, Lewis acknowledged. “As the state grows more like a hive or an ant-hill,” he wrote, “it needs an increasing number of workers who can be treated as neuters. This may be inevitable for our secular life. But in our Christian life we must return to reality. There we are not homogeneous units, but different and complementary organs of a mystical body.”

As a Christian, Lewis resisted the notion that the mystical body, the Church, must ever be changing to “keep up with the times.” He believed precisely the reverse: that the timeless message of the Church must be proclaimed against the errors of “the times.” The old truths are not to be discarded like the pages of calendar, he insisted, and error does not become truth simply because today is not yesterday. When challenged on how he could believe in some article of his faith — the existence of a spirit called the devil, for example — “in this day and age,” his response was to coolly ask what the day and age had to do with the question at hand.

Like many of his contemporaries, Lewis abandoned in his teens the (Anglican) faith of his parents and came to regard Christianity as one of many myths concocted over the centuries to explain the world and man’s role in it. As a young boy in his native Northern Ireland, he had developed a fascination with fanciful tales of a spirit world populated by elves, leprechauns, later Norse gods, and other ancient creatures of human imagining. His love of books brought him in contact with poets and philosophers, and as a young man, he had his own bits and pieces of conflicting philosophies “dancing about” in his head at more or less the same time. “I was at this time living, like so many atheists or antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions,” he wrote in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*. “I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was angry with him for creating a world.”

He lacked, apparently, the conceit of many young men who, after a smattering of learning, imagine themselves to be too intelligent, too well educated, too sophisticated to believe in the “simple faith” in which they were raised. He read more widely than most men, and the more he read and thought about what he had read, the more he was drawn back to the faith he had left behind. The writings of George MacDonald made a deep impression; Chesterton “made such an immediate conquest of me,” though he was charmed by the humor so artfully imbedded in Chesterton’s prose before being persuaded by the logic of his thought. Lewis soon began to realize what he was getting into. “A young man who wants to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading,” he later observed. God had outdone old “Screwtape” in setting traps for a truly inquiring mind. “God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous,” Lewis wrote.

Today’s atheists and agnostics, and even many nominal Christians appear, for the most part, in little danger of reading too much or reasoning their way to anything other than a vaguely religious belief in a



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god “or something,” a deity that might be called the great Whatever. Dwight Eisenhower, whose résumé included a stint as president of Columbia University, would later, as President of the United States, encourage a civic religion remarkably free of form and content. “Our government makes no sense,” Eisenhower declared, “unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious belief — and I don’t care what it is.”

Eisenhower may have been partially right (“Our government makes no sense”), but it hardly makes sense to feel deeply about something without caring what it is. Lewis cared deeply about the “what,” the essence and purpose of things. The popular notion that the universe — all of what is called creation — came into being by accident, without any purpose or design, offered to Lewis an example of the kind of contradiction, disguised as thought, that slips so easily into the mind of man, there to take up permanent, unchallenged residence. For if the universe were meaningless, Lewis argued, we would be incapable of discovering that it is meaningless. For we would have no concept of either meaning or meaninglessness — just as, if there were no light, we would have no concept of darkness.

But for Lewis the question of “what” was less important than “who” God is. The discovery that left Lewis “Surprised by Joy” was that not only does God exist, He became one of us, the sinless One who bore the sins of fallen man and Who “ever lives to make intercession” for us. The world can reject Him now, as it did then, but at least the men of His time took Him at His word. They heard His outrageous claims — “The Father and I are one,” “Before Abraham was, I am,” “No one comes to the Father but by me” — and concluded He was a blasphemer, deserving of death. The modern world would kill Him with a condescending and indifferent “kindness.” Lewis would have none of that, as he explained in *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

And neither did C.S. Lewis. His books still pay us the compliment their author paid to the men and women of his time, the compliment of respecting our intelligence and believing that minds adrift on oceans of narcissism, agnosticism, and self-doubt are still capable of being opened by and to old truths — that we are still capable of being “Surprised by Joy.”



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