

# Lewis on Relations between the Churches

There are three separate themes in Lewis' thought, interestingly all present in the Preface to *Mere Christianity*, which touch upon the relations between the churches, or denominations, of his day and ours. The first is his didactic commitment to a mere Christianity, a presentation of Christianity in which the differences between denominations are not discussed or emphasized, in order to attract unbelievers. The second is his occasional enunciation of Anglican doctrines, and strong self-identification as a layman of the Church of England. The third is made up of comments on the question itself; that is, explicit discussion of the existence of multiple Christian confessions, and what to make of them. This essay is a commentary on Lewis' words in the Preface, and a brief elaboration of each of these three themes.

Lewis' writings are far from holy writ, and since he disclaims even the small authority of a theologian, it may seem perverse or unfair to subject his work to theological analysis, or to unravel the strands that have gone into its creation. However, Lewis often voices opinions which seem to claim some intuitive assent, perhaps because of his somewhat exceptional place as a highly intelligent, educated, deeply pious and religiously-interested but theologically-untutored layman. His unwillingness or inability to educate himself theologically, combined with his strong and intelligent engagement with the same material to which theology looks, make his outsider's observations and opinions worthy of careful consideration.

## Mere Christianity

Lewis' enunciation and emphasis on a mere Christianity has elicited extensive critical comment. While many have cited this idea positively (sometimes referring to it as a 'doctrine'), others have rejected it as implying that everything beyond the shared doctrines of the various denominations (the greatest common denominator, as it were) is optional, or safely negligible. Roman Catholics in particular are wont to claim that their church is in fact mere Christianity, and what separates it from other denominations are not Roman additions but illegitimate, schismatic subtractions.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis defends himself by denying having made a theological claim at all. In his Preface to *Mere Christianity*, he writes: 'Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.' He thought this, he goes on to say, because the differences between denominations involve complex theology, which he is not equipped to understand, let alone explain, and because 'discussion of these disputed points' tends to deter outsiders from exploring Christianity. Underlying these claims is a belief in the importance and necessity of evangelization: Lewis' thoroughly Christian assumptions include that he owed his unbelieving neighbour some service, and that offering his neighbour the Church was the best, and

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<sup>1</sup> cf the personal reflection by I. Ker in this volume.

perhaps only worthwhile service he could perform. His assumptions are also didactic: His intellectual gifts prepare him to offer Christianity in a particular way, but not another. A certain presentation, that without 'disputed points', was more likely to find willing ears than another.

That Lewis chose to quote in part St Vincent of Lérins' famous canon does suggest, however, that he may have thought there was more to the idea of mere Christianity than simple proselytizing, pedagogical applicability. Acknowledging not only that his mind is not made up on certain 'disputed points', he goes so far as to conjecture that perhaps some questions will never be answered (even eschatologically) since they represent distractions from Christ Himself. Furthermore, while Lewis recognizes that mere Christianity could have been nothing more than a 'bloodless H.C.F. [highest common factor]', he claims that it, in fact, is not, and that the differences among Christian denominations are dwarfed by those between them and any non-Christian religion.

Charges of circularity are difficult to avoid here, since it is Lewis who has defined what constitutes Christianity in his book. There are groups such as Mormons who claim to be Christian while the majority of (other) Christians would deny them the label, and people sometimes speak of 'Christian morality' and a 'Christian attitude' while ignoring most of the doctrines Lewis' adduces as mere. Lewis defends his definition by pointing out that 'Christian' is a commonly understood word, and that the latter uses above (Christian morality, etc) are clearly debasements. A further defence could be mounted by considering a mathematical parallel: Imagine the doctrines of all the denominations and religions of the world were plotted on a chart (with thousands of axes). Lewis is arguing that far from a normal distribution in this many-dimensional space, the subvarieties of Christianity would be found clustered together, with similar clusters appearing for each other supervariety (Islam, Hinduism, etc) but with largely unoccupied space in between. Standard deviation could then be used to rule in or out liminal cases, like the LDS.

## Lewis' Anglicanism

In the same Preface to *Mere Christianity* quoted in the previous section, Lewis writes 'About [my own beliefs]... there is no secret. To quote Uncle Toby: "They are written in the Common-Prayer Book"'. Lewis gravitated immediately to Anglicanism upon his conversion to theism.

It is a testament then to Lewis' success at portraying himself in his apologetics as a 'mere Christian' that one routinely reads criticisms of Lewis by long-time readers who have just discovered that in fact some of his practices or usages are not their own. In particular, Roman Catholics, perhaps beginning with J. R. R. Tolkien, have found themselves astonished when Lewis espouses an Anglican doctrine. Humphrey Carpenter quotes from 'The Ulterior Motive', Tolkien's unpublished critique of *Letters to Malcolm*:

*We were coming down the steps of Magdalen Hall...long ago in the days of our unclouded association, before there was anything, as it seemed, that must be withheld or passed over in silence. I said that I had a special devotion to St John. Lewis stiffened, his head went back, and he said in the brusque harsh tones which I was later to hear him use again when dismissing something he disapproved of: 'I can't imagine any two persons more dissimilar'. We stumped along the cloisters,*

*and I followed feeling like a shabby little Catholic caught by the eye of an 'Evangelical clergyman of good family' taking holy water at the door of a church. A door had slammed.*<sup>2</sup>

Tolkien was insulted and hurt when Lewis acted consonantly with his denomination's teachings on the propriety of 'special devotions' to dead Christians. Authors sympathetic to Tolkien are also guilty of this overreaction. Eric Seddon in a discussion of the same work<sup>3</sup> identifies one of the advantages to Lewis of the one-sided dialogue format in the following quotation from *LtM*:

*Apparently I have been myself guilty of introducing another red herring by mentioning devotions to saints. I didn't in the least want to go off into a discussion on that subject. There is clearly a theological defence for it; if you can ask the prayers of the living, why should you not ask for the prayers of the dead. There is clearly also a great danger. In some popular practice we see it leading off into an infinitely silly picture of Heaven as an earthly court where applicants will be wise to pull the right wires, discover the best 'channels', and attach themselves to the most influential pressure groups. But I have nothing to do with all of this. I am not thinking of adopting the practice myself; and who am I to judge the practices of others? I only hope there'll be no scheme for canonisations in the Church of England.*<sup>4</sup>

Seddon notes that although Lewis the character in the work claims to be reluctant to treat a particular issue, Lewis the author has deliberately brought it up. 'This technique of protesting the direction of the discussion just before or after offering an anti-Catholic opinion is one which Lewis maintains throughout the book.' Somehow Lewis' (actually very irenic) presentation of what Anglicans believe has become anti-Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to see why, even in his non-apologetic work, Lewis strove for a mere Christianity, to avoid just this kind of reaction. There are thus relatively few indicators of Lewis' Anglicanism to which one may point. Partially, of course, this is a reflection of Anglicanism itself, which holds relatively few distinctive doctrines (i.e. doctrines which are not shared with another church body, with which they may be more strongly identified). Lewis' refusal to cede the word 'catholic' to the Roman church (using instead 'papist' in many of his writings) certainly reflects Anglican preoccupations, as does Lewis discussion of Protestantism and Catholicism more as diverging tendencies than as separate bodies.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the strongest proof of Lewis' Anglicanism will always be his own affirmations of membership: his opinions on doctrines such as the invocation of the saints are best understood in his Anglican context, but could not be used to derive that context independently of his own open membership in the CoE.

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<sup>2</sup> Carpenter, *Inklings* 51-2

<sup>3</sup> 'Letters to Malcolm and the trouble with Narnia: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and their 1949 crisis' in *Mythlore*, Fall-Winter, 2007

<sup>4</sup> *LtM* 15

<sup>5</sup> Seddon goes on to refer to Lewis' criticism of J. H. Newman as 'a moment of Catholic-baiting', despite having acknowledged that Newman's writings are a critique of Anglicanism. Also in this connection one may note R. J. Neuhaus' review in *First Things* of N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*, and the exchange that followed it.

<sup>6</sup> AoL 323

## Explicit Statements

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There is a subtle but important shift in Lewis' argument in the Preface to *Mere Christianity*, by which he moves from claiming that the mere-ness of the Christianity he offers is caused by his didactic purpose, to arguing that mere Christianity is in fact the common core of differing churches. The beginnings of this were cited above: Emphasis on the gulf that separates Christian denominations from all others works not only to justify his apologetic strategy, but also to minimize the distinctions between Christian groups. Indeed Lewis notes that the common core he has expounded makes 'it clear why we [the denominations] ought to be reunited.'

Since Christian reunion is a desideratum of nearly every church body, this claim is neither outlandish nor surprising. Lewis does, perhaps, surprise with what he says next. He avers that he has faced little criticism of his core from committed non-Anglicans, which suggests that mere Christianity does indeed represent doctrines to which all species of Christian can look with respect. 'Hostility has come more from the borderline people whether within the Church of England or without it: men not exactly obedient to any communion.' It is not the Christians most dedicated to their denomination who have raised objections, but those with the fewest denominational commitments.

This is an extraordinary claim, which can be understood in two ways, dependent upon what Lewis means by 'the borderline people'. In the context of the Church of England, where it has long been the case that the major parties reflect and tend towards the positions of other denominations (High towards Roman Catholicism, Broad towards Unitarianism, and Low towards Methodism / the free churches), 'borderline people' might well refer to those in whom these tendencies were very far advanced, such as Anglicans Papalists.

The other possible interpretation of 'men not exactly obedient to any communion' is that it describes theological liberals, who must reject the traditional authority of their communion through the ages, since their theological programme is in a real and important sense new. This gloss is less straightforward, but I think more likely to be correct, given Lewis' general preoccupations. After all, he wrote in a letter to Sister Penelope Lawson, 'To me the real distinction is not between high and low, but between religion with a real supernaturalism and salvationism on the one hand, and all the watered-down and modernist versions on the other'.<sup>7</sup> By its contents, the letter tells us that Lewis regarded the traditional divisions into high and low as insignificant when compared with those between modernism and traditionalism itself. Attention should be paid also to its recipient, an Anglican nun, a clear candidate for the first definition of 'borderline', whom Lewis nonetheless held in respect and friendship.

One further claim, still more extraordinary, follows in the preface to *Mere Christianity*, and brings us to the third theme of Lewis' thoughts about relations between denominations. Lewis writes: 'It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice'.

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to Sister Penelope Lawson CSMV, 1939; in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), p. 170.

Once again, the reader is left to define the key word of the asseveration: The location of a communion's 'centre' is open to extensive interpretation. Even the type of definition is open to discussion: historical, formal, hierarchical, normative, and many others could be advanced. Consider Lewis' own Church of England. A thoroughly formal definition of the CoE would look to the 39 Articles, and all the other most recent pronouncements of empowered Anglican authorities, and then ask where these were best and most consistently in force. Is this *a priori* more valid however than a normative definition, which claims to discern a uniquely Anglican ethos of compromise and inclusion? Than a hierarchical definition, where the monarch and the Archbishop's practice (whatever that currently may be) is definitive for all? Very different locations of the same denomination's centre are indicated by these various definitions.

Of course, the problem is only compounded when relating different denominations, as Lewis does. Assuming that one, correct definition exists for a denomination, there is still no reason to suppose that the same type of definition will be correct for all, or even any, other denominations. Roman Catholicism could (for example) be happily hierarchical while Lutheranism remained fastidiously formal. Not only could the hearts of different church bodies be found in differing locations, but their 'biology' might be entirely different.

And yet this observation by Lewis is one of those that seem intuitively true, that capture and express hitherto unnoticed perceptions of the reader. Given the difficulties in analysing the statement, perhaps it is better simply to give thought to how it might be true. For example, in a time of widespread indifference to religion, no denomination has exhausted, or even fully tapped, the riches of its own tradition. Problems in Anglicanism may well call for more Anglicanism, problems in Lutheranism for more Lutheranism, and in Eastern Orthodoxy for more Orthodoxy. Lewis, ever the Platonist, would no doubt readily have distinguished between an ideal form of a denomination and its actual (sinful) realization, while acknowledging the latter's duty to draw closer to the former. This obedience to one's tradition, or willingness to be taught and governed by one's denomination, whatever its 'biology' and definition, would constitute the bond linking those at the hearts of various confessions.

For Lewis, who valued submission and obedience to superiority as goods in their own right, this shared good would probably be enough cause for celebration. Significantly, however, Lewis also held that it was in lives of the obedient that God works most readily and effectively. When one considers how individualistic the picture of salvation offered by Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* and *Surprised by Joy* is, one may well wonder if the chief importance of the church for Lewis is not creating a fertile environment for God's radically individual pursuit of every man or woman. Thus, in Lewis' understanding of the world and the Divine economy of grace, it is not at all surprising to find the great Someone at the obedient heart of many strongly differing denominations. He scatters the seed everywhere, but the best soil will always be communities where individuals curb their own wills and allow themselves to be ruled in obedience.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a theological-philosophical examination of the importance of obedience in Lewis' thought, see Judith Tønning, 'C.S. Lewis on Power', *Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*, ed. Robert McSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 174-88.

## Conclusions

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Lewis' concept of a mere Christianity is one of his most famous contributions to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Christian discourse. It is important to bear in mind that it is first and foremost intended as an apologetic stance, a evangelization technique that Lewis thinks aligns with his own abilities and the distaste non-believers feel for doctrinal dispute. This does not have to mean that it has no relevance beyond proselytizing, however, but it must be borne in mind that it originates as an abstract concept which Lewis only defends for its persuasive use.

The use of mere Christianity for apologetics does not prevent Lewis from identifying his own denominational presuppositions. Lewis was an Anglican, and because of Anglicanism's diversity and lack of distinctive doctrines, Lewis' positions on 'disputed points' do not uncomplicatedly reveal his membership in the Church of England. This in turn has led to confusion on the part of some readers, and occasionally offense. Could Lewis have done more to highlight his own position, without detracting from his mere Christian appeal?

Finally, Lewis' comments in the Preface to *Mere Christianity* about the shared presence of Someone at the heart of varying communions, which may well underlie his irenic approach to denominational difference, is best understood as dependent upon his approbation of obedience and his convictions about the individuality of salvation.