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The New British Christianity of C.S. Lewis

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THE NEW BRITISH CHRISTIANITY OF C.S. LEWIS

A Thesis

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Thomas Kemp
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Abstract

The emergence of C.S. Lewis as a popular author known for Christian content during the second half of the twentieth century provides an ideal case study for the transformation of religiosity within Britain. As religious behavior shifted from institutional adherence to private experience, Lewis became a ‘popular theologian’ who represented Christianity both for Christians – who looked to him for spiritual inspiration– and for non-Christians – who treated his views as representative of contemporary Christianity. By analyzing the reception, representation, and use of Lewis (his figure and his work) throughout the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first, it becomes clear that Lewis’s promotion of Anglican orthodoxy in a common vernacular, often through vivid and memorable storytelling, has endured as a readily recognizable Christian idiom in the religious culture of Britain.

Introduction

How did a tweed-clad Oxbridge don with no official appointment within the Anglican Church become known as a major representative for Christianity in Britain? Many historians and sociologists maintain that at a particular point between the late-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, “Christian Britain” – the predominant religious culture of Christianity within Britain – ceased to exist or declined to the point of non-influence. Furthermore, during the same period Britain’s religious culture became less institutionalized and more focused on individual spiritual experiences. Into a new spiritual and cultural environment, C.S. Lewis emerged as a popular Christian theologian because of his profoundly simple theology and imaginatively evocative prose. Examination of British newspapers and literary journals from Lewis’s initial emergence as a popular writer in the 1940s up through the present day demonstrates how Lewis helped foster religious belief for a great many individuals and that his reputation as an explicitly Christian writer rose throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. British commentators regularly adopted his explicitly Christian language or used his explicitly Christian reputation to appeal to a British public who trusted him and were familiar enough with his brand of Christianity to understand either society or their own experiences via Lewis’s unique Christian idiom. Since Lewis’s initial emergence as a popular theologian, or even famous Christian author, within Britain during the 1940s and 1950s he has been a representative for Christianity in the decades since, both for Christians, who look to him for inspiration, and non-Christians, who employ Lewis’s language and theological schema to understand contemporary Christianity and represent it on its own ‘Lewisean’ terms. In this way, Lewis illustrates how religiosity, particularly Christian religiosity, has continued to influence both Christianity within Britain as well as British popular culture.

The Secularization Thesis & C.S. Lewis

In order to understand the role Lewis has played within British religious history, it is crucial to trace how historians initially incorporated, subsequently rejected, and ultimately co-opted secularity and the secularization thesis into a contemporary understanding of religiosity in Britain. For the purposes of this study, I will use J.C.D. Clark's definition of religiosity as "people's disposition to respond to intuitions that they have, over time, termed religious."¹ Additionally, within religiosity I place 'secularity' as a disposition to develop narratives of purpose — whether in response to specific events or existence itself — without recourse to the supernatural. Woven throughout the spiritual and secular dispositions is the secularization thesis, which proposes that the documented decline in institutional religious activity can be traced to a decline in religious belief, a phenomenon concomitant with 'modernization,' defined as "the whole package of economic, political, cultural, and social changes that come with an increasing reliance on inanimate rather than animate sources of power."² Currently, religious historians largely reject the secularization thesis as an explanation for decline and instead focus on describing changes in contemporary religiosity, both secular and religious, as compared to past manifestations of institutional Christianity.

The secularization thesis was initially incorporated into modern British religious historiography by E.R. Wickham in his 1957 study *Church and People in an Industrial City*. Wickham, however, was not a professional historian but rather an Anglican priest seeking to

¹ J.C.D. Clark, "Secularisation and Modernisation: The Failure of a 'Grand Narrative'," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 180.

² Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3; *Religion in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127.

rationalize the Anglican Church's perceived lack of effectiveness in ministering to the working class; his argument was that the emergence of industrial towns in the eighteenth century met the needs of the working class in such a way that rendered the church obsolete for them.³ Alan Gilbert, a professional historian who worked within this Anglican tradition, traced this process back much further in *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (1980), in which he proposed that "the secularization process itself can be traced back to the formative stages of modern western culture: to that critical period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and beyond it to the origins of the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself."⁴ Because the Judaeo-Christian tradition inherently fosters a dichotomy between sacred and profane, because the Renaissance ushered in an irreligious epistemology based on material knowledge, and because the Enlightenment and Reformation created a crisis of authority leading to a plurality of beliefs, according to Gilbert, urbanization and industrialization were simply the catalysts of a much longer process of secularization. Within this framework Hugh McLeod published his work *Religion and the Working Class in the Nineteenth Century* in 1984, in which he argued that the skepticism among the upper classes and a feeling of betrayal toward the church among the working classes, especially in industrial cities, led to a decline in religiosity in Britain.⁵

This particular understanding of religious decline, as governed by secularizing forces, has recently come into question. Robin Gill cites the secularization thesis, defined as "the gradual loss

³ Jeremy Morris, "Secularisation and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 198.

⁴ Alan Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (New York: Longman, 1980), 17.

⁵ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 17.

of belief...resulting from the development of scientific and rational thought in the nineteenth century, and enhanced by war and technology in the twentieth century,” as the “single key myth that must first be questioned if further analysis is to proceed.”⁶ The unmasking of the secularization thesis as myth has indeed been the most important development in recent religious history. Callum Brown most succinctly identifies the key problem with the thesis, writing,

Secularisation as a concept (the decline of religion) has to be problematised as linked to the meta-narrative ‘theory of secularisation’ which emerged from the Enlightenment and modernity...We can now see that secularisation is a concept of Christian modernity, wholly produced to bolster the power of the salvation industry in the new rational intellectual economy thrown up by the Enlightenment...⁷

The problem with the secularization thesis, according to Brown and Simon Green, is that the notion of a secularizing process has its origins within the very history it governs, thus limiting that theory to “inadequately describing what was in reality a historically complex and often geographically various process of religious change occurring in British society during those years.”⁸ The assumption of a continued decline in religiosity, influenced by the societal changes ushered in by modernity, must be rejected if religiosity is to be properly understood both in the distant and recent past. While specifically Christian manifestations of religiosity – seen through behaviors such as church attendance or even traditionally orthodox Christian beliefs – may have declined within Britain, it is far less tenable to argue that a human urge toward religiosity has declined as well.

⁶ Robin Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (Chatham: SPCK Publishing, 1993), 13.

⁷ Callum Brown, “The Secularisation Decade: What the 1960s Have Done to the Study of Religious History,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-40.

⁸ S.J.D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.

In the wake of these developments, a new paradigm for understanding the decline of institutional religion in Britain has emerged. Instead of focusing on secularization as a process, historians have recapitulated secularization as an event. Furthermore, instead of focusing on the decline of religiosity, specifically Christian beliefs, historians have instead described the decline of Christendom, defined by McLeod as “a society where there are close ties between leaders of the church and secular elites; where the laws purport to be based on Christian principles; where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, everyone is assumed to be Christian; and where Christianity provides a common language, shared alike by the devout and by the religiously lukewarm.”⁹ Brown’s radical thesis in *The Death of Christian Britain* argues that the cultural revolution of the long 1960s heralded the end of ‘discursive Christianity’, which he defines as “people’s subscription to protocols of personal identity which they derive from Christian expectations, or discourses, evident in their own time and place.”¹⁰ Within discursive Christianity, Christian religiosity is the standard against which all discourse, behavior, beliefs, and culture is measured, and the long 1960s witnessed the displacement of discursive Christianity by a different, humanistic discourse. According to Brown, “...if the 1960s changed British religion, that culture-event has also changed the way in which religion and the religious past (before 1960) are comprehended in the British imagination...” such that changes in religiosity — including the nature of belief itself, the actions manifested through those beliefs, and narratives of renewal and

⁹ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁰ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

decline — can be properly analyzed without recourse to the narrative of decline required by the secularization thesis.¹¹

In light of these developments, Jeremy Morris recently welcomed the “the reconfiguration of British religious history with the teleological assumptions built into secularization theory taken out,” a reconfiguration that analyzes “variations in religious practice over time, but seek[s] to include these into a broader account of the development of British religion than is conventionally assumed.”¹² This broader account has included secularity as an object of study alongside religious beliefs and within the wider scope of religiosity. Thus, according to David Nash, “What emerges is not a story primarily of ‘process’, ‘of onset’, ‘decline’ or ‘primacy’ but instead a picture that shows significant elements of continuity. Religious stories and narratives have had compelling power and use to individuals and institutions whether these be secular or Christian.”¹³ Understanding how the human impulse toward religiosity has and continues to manifest itself is the task of the modern religious historian. Clark concludes that “Religious practice changed greatly in the twentieth century, as it has changed in every century, and these changes are historically important,” while maintaining that “it is highly problematic to argue from that evidence to an underlying change in religiosity.”¹⁴ If religious practice has changed but the impulse toward religiosity has not, it is imperative to understand new manifestations of religiosity, and the

¹¹ Brown, “Secularisation Decade,” 30.

¹² Morris, “Secularisation and Religious Experience,” 209.

¹³ David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 184.

¹⁴ Clark, “Secularisation and Modernisation,” 182.

response and reception of Lewis and his work within Britain is an optimal example of new manifestations of Christian religiosity.

For example, in *The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America*, Stephanie Derrick describes both the historical origins and popular influence of Lewis's public persona. Derrick argues that an increase in education among the middle class in Britain as well the coinciding of Lewis's publishing with the rise of mass print media are the two key historical factors explaining his wide appeal.¹⁵ Lewis wrote primarily for a largely middle-class, popular audience whose literary appetite was increasing rapidly due to expanded access to higher education. Derrick concludes, however, that Lewis's popularity within Britain has fluctuated or even decline since his initial popularity because of the conflict between Lewis's overt Christianity and the far more secular nature of recent British culture.

My research, however, suggests that Lewis's reputation as a trusted voice on personal, spiritual matters has increased precisely due to the conflict between his ideas concerning Christianity and the secular culture he confronted. Though Lewis was indeed trusted and admired as a steady source of solid literature, both fiction and non-fiction, the primary identifier attached to his name was 'Christian writer'. Derrick argues that "recent interest in Lewis in Britain, beyond his biography or identification as the author of the Chronicles, demonstrates that fifty years after his death perceptions of the man are still in flux."¹⁶ The 'flux' surrounding Lewis that Derrick mentions is the focus of this study. Since recent developments in the historiography of religion concerning Britain have created a need to study new manifestations of religiosity among a people

¹⁵ Stephanie Derrick, *The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 189-90.

¹⁶ Derrick, *Fame of C.S. Lewis*, 199.

previously described as having largely thrown off religion (in this case, Christianity) completely or at the very least were in the process of doing so, Lewis, as a controversial figure, is an excellent example to demonstrate certain changes in religiosity in Britain.

Biography of Lewis

C.S. Lewis centered his life around stories. Not only did Lewis write stories and teach about stories for a living, but he sensed an abiding power within stories to inspire a deep sense of longing for the supernatural. The idea of Christianity as the culmination of all the myths that inspired deep feelings of sublimity within him is ultimately what convinced him to accept Christianity, and afterward, he sought to embed Christianity not only in his life but also in the stories he told. A professor of medieval English literature at both Oxford and Cambridge for almost forty years, Lewis held no official position within the Anglican Church to which he belonged, and he became popular within Britain not due to academic prestige but rather for the Christian apologetics and fiction he wrote for a popular audience.

Roughly two-thirds of C.S. Lewis's autobiography is devoted to his first fifteen or so years, as several experiences during that period echoed throughout his life. Lewis was born in Belfast, North Ireland on November 29, 1898 to Albert and Flora Lewis, and as a young boy began writing stories as "an attempt to combine my two chief literary pleasures – 'dressed animals' and 'knights in armor'."¹⁷ Here is a glimpse of the imagination that would later produce the Narnia stories, but more importantly for Lewis himself were the stabs of wonder and emotion he felt during these early years. During one instance, upon reading Longfellow, Lewis came across the verse

*I heard a voice that cried,
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead –*

which prompted in the feeling of "huge regions of northern sky," desiring intensely something "cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote."¹⁸ This feeling, not of the thing desired but rather the

¹⁷ Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Mariner, 2012), 13.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 17.

desiring itself, later came to be identified by Lewis as ‘Joy’. While Lewis was nine years old, however, Flora’s death from cancer prompted a profound emotional and spiritual crisis for him. He later wrote that “all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security.”¹⁹ Disregarding this moment as what led to his disbelief in Christianity, Lewis nonetheless concluded that his disappointment when no miracle brought his mother back to health demonstrated to him the hollowness of his own beliefs.

Several years later, Lewis was a young boy at Public School who consciously chose to abandon the religious devotion of his youth as well as any belief in the supernatural. One cause of his disbelief was experiential; he believed that prayers could only be true if they were accompanied by intense affection. When he never felt the affection, not only his prayers but also praying itself became an “unconscious motive for wishing to shuffle off the Christian faith.”²⁰ Lewis also cites two intellectual motives for abandoning belief. First was his dissatisfaction that “no one ever attempted to show in what sense Christianity fulfilled Paganism or Paganism prefigured Christianity.”²¹ Second was a “pessimism” that convinced him that “the universe was, in the main, a rather regrettable institution.”²² Additionally, throughout these years Lewis attended several schools, one of which was Malvern College, which gave Lewis an eternal distaste for anything resembling a clique and a desire to avoid making himself fashionable to belong to any particular group. Regarding his experience at Malvern, he writes, “Spiritually speaking, the deadly thing was

¹⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

that school life was a life almost wholly dominated by the social struggle; to get on, to arrive, or, having reached the top, to remain there, was the absorbing preoccupation.”²³ After leaving Malvern, Lewis was privately tutored by William Kirkpatrick, a man of logical rigidity who ruthlessly analyzed nearly anything said in his presence. For Lewis, this approach to life was “red beef and strong beer,” and Kirkpatrick imparted on Lewis a deep desire to argue passionately yet logically while holding firm one’s position. After abandoning the religion of his youth, Lewis developed a logically-based antipathy toward Christianity as well as any other theistic belief.

Thus, Lewis’s conversion came in fits and starts. Upon recognizing the “ludicrous contradiction between my theory of life and my actual experiences as a reader,” Lewis began considering why his favorite authors and poets – those who inspired Joy within him – were all Christians. Eventually, Lewis acknowledged the existence of God, though not yet embracing Christianity. Vividly describing his experiences on the night he became a theist, Lewis wrote, “You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet...In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”²⁴ By 1931, though, Lewis had still not embraced Christianity, although his view began to change after a late-night walk with his friends J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson. Tolkien convinced Lewis that since the imagination of every human originates with God, the myth-making of mankind cannot but communicate bits and pieces of God’s existence and elements of the truth regarding God. According to Tolkien, “Had he not shown how pagan myths were, in fact, God

²³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 228-29.

expressing himself through the minds of poets, and using the images of their ‘mythopoeia’ to express fragments of his eternal truth? Well then, Christianity (he said) is exactly the same thing – with the enormous difference that the poet who invented it was God Himself, and the images He used were real men and actual history.”²⁵ Within a few months, Lewis took his final step toward embracing Christianity while riding in the sidecar of his brother’s motorcycle on a trip to the zoo. According to Lewis, “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought...It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.”²⁶ On Christmas day 1931, Lewis received communion at the Anglican church in Headington, where he lived.²⁷ Now ‘awake’, Lewis chose not to imaginatively reinterpret doctrine according to his understanding of the world; rather, he used his imaginative and logical skill to defend the traditional doctrines of the Anglican church, especially the elements of historicity and supernaturalism. According to biographer Humphrey Carpenter, “For [Lewis], the real distinction lay...between religious belief that was orthodox and supernatural on the one hand, and ‘liberal’ and ‘demythologised’ on the other.”²⁸

Lewis wrote the bulk of his literature after his conversion to Christianity. Beginning with *The Pilgrim’s Regress* in 1933, a semi-autobiographical re-telling of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Lewis began writing straightforward Christian apologetics as well as fiction tinged with

²⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 43-4.

²⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 237.

²⁷ George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 135.

²⁸ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 51.

the story of Christianity, as part of his Mythopoeia – a literary genre meant to include elements of Christian supernaturalism into fantastic, mythical settings. After spending years writing poetry, Lewis relished in the writing of prose, composing his work quickly yet carefully, for he wrote nearly all his popular work in one draft and without many revisions.²⁹ Much of his work was influenced by an informal group of literary scholars and personal friends known as the Inklings, which included Lewis and other authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams. The group often read aloud first drafts of their work, such that it was the first audience for stories like Lewis's Space Trilogy and Narnia series as well as Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. By the late 1930s Lewis began writing rapidly for a popular audience with works such as the Space Trilogy, which cast the spiritual struggle between God and Satan into the cosmic realm and whose main protagonist, Dr. Elwin Ransom, was a Christ figure. He found further acclaim for the immediate best-seller *The Problem of Pain*, an attempt to reconcile the problem of evil, which was first published in 1940 and reprinted several times in the following years.³⁰ *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional correspondence between two demons attempting to lead an Englishman astray from God, was published in 1942 and was even more popular, with eight reprints that same year.³¹ Altogether, Lewis's wartime literary production cemented him as a popular Christian author within England.

Lewis found additional appeal due to his wartime radio addresses on the British Broadcasting Corporation. First established by Royal Charter in 1927, the BBC had emerged by the 1930s as Britain's only radio station – the BBC had a monopoly on radio broadcasts in Britain

²⁹ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 47.

³⁰ Sayer, *Jack*, 162

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

until 1974 – and its status as a nationalized broadcasting center carried with it a responsibility for the culturing of Britain.³² Impressed with *The Problem of Pain*, Dr. James Welch, the BBC’s Religious Broadcasting Director, asked Lewis to give some talks regarding Christianity; Lewis chose to address the idea of natural law, or an objective standard of right and wrong as rooted in Christianity.³³ His first addresses were broadcast in August 1941, and his success prompted three more series of talks, the last of which was broadcast in April 1944.³⁴ Through these talks Lewis became well-known as a Christian speaker, such that he began receiving large quantities of letters from his audience, asking for advice or thanking him for his books or broadcasts, and Lewis always “replied virtually by return of post, writing briefly and to the point but with limitless sympathy and patience.”³⁵ Additionally, many people wrote asking for Lewis to give more radio talks, but Lewis refused due to his belief that he had exhausted material relevant to a radio audience as well as his belief that he could not possibly answer an increased quantity of mail.³⁶

Narnia was initially inspired by a group of London children who sheltered at the Kilns (Lewis’s home) during the Battle of Britain; one girl asked Lewis if she could climb in a wardrobe to see if anything lay behind it.³⁷ Years later, Lewis published in 1947 what would become his last serious work of popular theology, *Miracles*. After Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe

³² “History of the BBC – 1920s,” BBC, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/timelines/zxqc4wx>

³³ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 183.

³⁴ Sayer, *Jack*, 169.

³⁵ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 183.

³⁶ Sayer, *Jack*, 170.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

(rather successfully) challenged Lewis’s conception of human reason as formulated in the book, Lewis did not write another work of apologetics for ten years, instead turning toward children’s literature.³⁸ Lewis did not attempt to shoehorn a premeditated theological schematic into the books; rather he simply enjoyed writing stories and sought to answer the question, “What might Christ have been like if there really were a world like Narnia and he chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as he actually has done in ours?”³⁹ Lewis wrote all seven books between 1949 and 1953, and they quickly became bestsellers, with the final book, *The Last Battle*, receiving the Carnegie Medal in 1956. Up through the present day, *The Chronicles of Narnia* has sold over 100 million copies in multiple languages.⁴⁰ Narnia best represents Lewis’s focus on story as a vehicle for truth, whether implicit or explicit. Concerning the relevance of fairy stories in the modern world, Lewis wrote,

Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ?...supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.⁴¹

Though he certainly could not avoid incorporating aspects of his theology into his fiction, Lewis focused mostly on crafting compelling stories complete with impressive imagery that would inspire his readers long after they first came to his writing.

³⁸ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 217.

³⁹ Sayer, *Jack*, 192; Carpenter, *Inklings*, 217.

⁴⁰ Tom Peterkin, “CS Lewis, Chronicles of Narnia author, honoured in Poets’ corner,” *Telegraph* (London, England), 22 November 2012.

⁴¹ C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 18, 1956

For many years, Lewis lived at the Kilns with Mrs. Janie Moore, the mother of his WWI bunkmate. Not even his closest friends were certain of the nature of their relationship (Lewis referred to her as “mother”), but once she died in 1951, Lewis became open to the idea of marriage.⁴² Joy Gresham, an American poet and recent convert to Christianity who enjoyed Lewis’s writing, began sending an ongoing correspondence with him in 1950. After some initial visits to England, Joy moved to Headington in 1953, and Joy and Lewis were married in December 1956 with the expiration of her immigration status looming in the background.⁴³ Although they married ostensibly to allow Joy to remain in England, they loved each other deeply. Joy had been diagnosed with cancer early in 1956, and she died, tragically though not unexpectedly, in July 1960.⁴⁴ Her death triggered a crisis of faith for Lewis, who kept a journal of his thoughts and prayers during the time that would eventually be published in 1961 as *A Grief Observed*, one of his most beloved works. From this point, his own health slowly declined, although he did continue writing as he always had, and on November 22, 1963, Lewis died of kidney disease.

Ultimately, then, Lewis found Joy in two senses – his marriage to Gresham as well as his conversion to Christianity. Both came about due to his love of story – Gresham as his muse and Christianity as the culmination of the myths that brought about deep longings within him. Because of the extent to which imaginative stories inspired Joy within him and his belief that the fulfillment of his longings only came through Christianity, Lewis dedicated his life to telling stories he believed would similarly inspire others.

⁴² Sayer, *Jack*, 211.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 232

Lewis As Public Theologian

The changing nature of religion within Britain made the emergence of Lewis in his capacity as public theologian possible. McLeod explains that “the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth saw the rise in most parts of Europe of a popular Protestantism that spread through open-air evangelism. The great appeal of this form of Christianity...lay in its combination of the disciplines of a new morality, some of the magic of older folk religions, and a gripping emotionalism.”⁴⁵ The three categories laid out by McLeod — morality, mysticism, and emotion — indicate a change in the perceived nature of religious belief from institutional loyalty to private experience. Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Steve Bruce estimated that these changes had progressed such that “the present proportion of the adult population of the United Kingdom which ‘belongs’ to the Christian churches as about 14 percent, or 6.7 million people.”⁴⁶ Lewis first emerged as a popular author of spiritual fiction and non-fiction in the middle of the twentieth century, and because of the decline in institutional adherence, the aforementioned changes in religiosity created conditions in which Lewis, by the end of the century, could function as a public Christian theologian for those within and without the church. What, then, makes a public theologian and what makes Lewis one?

Even if religiosity, including Christian belief, has largely become confined to the domain of private experience, such a change does not preclude the existence, or the necessity, of extra-institutional authorities who develop guidelines by which a religious community can measure itself. This is the realm of public theology, which E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr. argues “is most closely

⁴⁵ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe, 1789-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.

⁴⁶ Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, 35.

related to what is often called public or social ethics; that is, Christian public theology is more like Christian public or social ethics.”⁴⁷ Thus, if religiosity has become defined by the individual’s pursuit of a morality based on some element of mysticism for the purpose of achieving positive emotion, such religiosity demands certain individuals to describe the changing nature of ‘Christian public or social ethics’ in the public sphere. The public theologian, then, is “someone who—from the perspective of a particular religion—analyzes, discusses, or proposes solutions for issues, conditions, and questions that are of concern and import to those within his or her religious tradition, as well as to the general public, and does so in ways that can be understood and evaluated by, and possibly be persuasive to, society at large.”⁴⁸ When people of faith cease identification with large-scale religious institutions but retain a private belief focused on inner experiences, the public theologian provides the authority by which individuals make decisions and process their own experiences, religious or otherwise. For those outside a particular faith, in this case Christianity, the public theologian also functions as a representative through which those individuals understand and define that particular religiosity.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and up to the present day, C.S. Lewis has functioned in Britain as a public Christian theologian who aided the sustenance of a still-sizable Christian population within Britain. Individual religious experiences, while nearly impossible to quantify, can be demonstrated historically through Lewis’s influence on individuals. Through examination of particular examples from his popular fiction and non-fiction works, it becomes clear that Lewis, as a public theologian, intended to foster a particularly conservative Christian

⁴⁷ E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr., “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2003), 62.

⁴⁸ Breitenberg, “Real Public Theology,” 66.

spirituality among his audience. Furthermore, the use of Lewis in print news and literary journals as well as the growing popular attachment to his person and work throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day demonstrate his enduring influence as a Christian spiritual authority — both to the believer and the skeptic.

Popular Elements in Lewis's Work

What made Lewis's Christian spirituality so popular? In his popular writing, Lewis emphasized (1) the worth of every individual soul according to God, (2) the necessity of reason to embrace Christianity, and (3) the spiritual significance of painful moments. Lewis avoided writing 'church theology,' as he believed the definition of orthodoxy was a task best left to the clergy. Instead, he communicated his beliefs via shared life experiences and imaginative fiction in order to reach a popular rather than scholarly audience. While it is certainly impossible to explore every aspect of Lewis's theology in a compact manner, it is necessary to detail a few examples from his most famous works of the popular elements mentioned above.

Lewis constantly conveyed the supernatural significance of any given individual's existence, actions, and experiences in an attempt to combat the disenchantment of modernity. For example, in *The Problem of Pain* he writes,

The mold in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key: and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it — made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand.⁴⁹

Lewis uses everyday examples to explain theology to laypeople; moreover, Lewis also insists here that God cares deeply enough about any particular person to design him or her with a unique soul that can be equally a part of God's existence in heaven as any other person's. Similarly, in *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first novel of his Space Trilogy, Lewis communicates his distaste for a love of humanity without a love for every individual who comprises humanity via the character of Weston, the main antagonist, who is willing to murder sentient beings to secure a future for

⁴⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 640.

humanity. Oyarsa, the angelic guardian of Mars, serves as Lewis's mouthpiece: "'Strange!' said Oyarsa. 'You do not love any one of your race — you would have let me kill Ransom. You do not love the mind of your race, nor the body...It seems to me, Thick One, that what you really love is no completed creature but the very seed itself...'"⁵⁰ Thus, according to Lewis, each person has eternal, supernatural significance, although that significance is not necessarily inherent to that person.

While each individual was of the utmost worth, both naturally and supernaturally, that worth was tied to God, master of the universe. Thus, in *Perelandra*, the second volume of the trilogy, Oyarsa addresses Elwin Ransom, the protagonist, after he defeats Weston: "It is no doing of yours. You are not great, though you could have prevented a thing so great that Deep Heaven sees it with amazement. Be comforted, small one, in your smallness. He lays no merit on you. Receive and be glad. Have no fear, lest your shoulders be bearing this world. Look! it is beneath your head and carries you."⁵¹ Individuals have eternal significance because God, master of the universe, granted to each person that significance.

Divine significance also encompasses human history. Lewis placed contemporary events, even those understood to have been manufactured by groups or individuals, into the realm of the supernatural. For example, in the 1961 preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote,

The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid "dens of crime" that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices. Hence,

⁵⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 138.

⁵¹ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 197.

naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern.⁵²

For Lewis, the struggle against Nazi Germany or any other modern evil was not simply a battle against human forces but also a supernatural struggle against evil entities who manifested their will through the ostensible actions of people in the material world. One of Lewis's primary critiques of modernity was that such evil occurred in a way that negated the consequences of harming an individual, each of whom, again, according to Lewis, possessed equal eternal value.

The second main point of Lewis's popular theology was the importance of reason. Lewis encouraged his readers not simply to feel a certain way toward God or religion but rather to come to those feelings by way of reasoning. Simply thinking, however, was not enough; according to Lewis, one had to think the right way about the right things in order to come to a right understanding. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the first of the Narnia series according to its internal chronology, Lewis, as narrator, writes, "For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are."⁵³ In order to see and hear the right things, then, one must adopt the proper perspective and be the sort of person willing to suspend disbelief concerning spiritual matters. In *The Last Battle*, the final volume within the series' internal chronology, a group of dwarves refuse to be rescued from a fire because they are not willing to believe that Aslan, the Christ figure of the series, exists. According to Aslan, "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."⁵⁴

⁵² C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters: The Annotated Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), xxxvii.

⁵³ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 136.

⁵⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 169.

For Lewis, reason does not preclude faith in Christianity; rather, if a person truly opens his mind and applies reason to understand the world, God will find him or her. As Screwtape, Lewis again reiterates this idea, writing, “It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.”⁵⁵ Lewis used his writing as a means to subtly get ‘things’ into the minds of his readers, particularly those who refused to go looking for Christianity.

Lewis would not stand for the unexamined life, especially when a person adopted a casual atheism or agnosticism, and even more especially when that occurred for the sake of convenience.

Again as Screwtape he writes,

Man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having 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.⁵⁶

Lewis was indeed a contrarian, for here he contends that popular, modern philosophies untested by experience or time are rooted in the aforementioned supernatural struggle against good by evil, spiritual entities. For Lewis, if a person would only seek the truth with an open mind, he was assured that he or she would grab hold of God, even if slightly.

The third main theme that Lewis emphasized as a public theologian was the importance of a moment-by-moment experiential spiritual life that could carry a person through even his or her darkest hour. As Screwtape he writes, “Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 195.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”⁵⁷ This type of devotion to God, remaining faithful throughout hardship because of previous or hoped-for deliverance, is the Christianity Lewis presented to his audiences. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis’s journals detailing his bereavement upon the death of his wife, he writes, “God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn’t. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down.”⁵⁸ Lewis realizes that his own suffering is meant to point him to something greater, and God is present in both the suffering and the salvation as his hope. Speaking of hope, Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁵⁹ For Lewis, the world in itself is inherently unsatisfying apart from God and that exact dissatisfaction is designed to point those who feel it toward what will ultimately satisfy them — life with God in a greater, different world.

This sort of earthy spirituality, based neither on rote religion nor modern philosophy, is how Lewis urged his audience to approach Christianity. Even in his fiction, Lewis sought to emphasize the purpose inherent within hardship. In *Till We Have Faces*, a version of the Cupid and Psyche myth from the perspective of Psyche’s sister Orual, the (pagan) Priest offers a theory of suffering, saying, “Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words,

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Signature Classics*, 208.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 678.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.”⁶⁰ According to Lewis, real wisdom is discovered through life experience, and the cost for attaining such wisdom — spiritual wisdom — is often pain comparable to shedding one’s own blood. For those readers who had experienced such pain, the words of a man who took part in that pain with them could not but have made his writing appealing.

⁶⁰ Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 57.

Lewis in the Papers & Journals

1942-1963

C.S. Lewis first became known by Britain as a writer of popular apologetics and fiction during the ‘long fifties’ (1945-63). The long fifties remain fascinating to historians of British religion due to two contradictory trends. On the one hand, Britain was still a ‘Christendom’ such that “there were close links between religious and secular elites, that most children were socialized into membership of a Christian society, and that the church had a large presence in fields such as education and welfare, and a major influence on law and morality.”⁶¹ On the other hand, however, the long fifties witnessed no widespread, sustainable revival in Christian belonging, behaving, or believing, such that this period is “perhaps still best understood in the context of a progressive and protracted secularization of the role of religion in British life, a process which had already started before that decade and which continued long afterwards.”⁶² Altogether, Christianity remained an entrenched cultural force within a Britain that was simultaneously losing its traditional Christian majority.

Meanwhile, British Christianity was changing while religiosity was manifesting itself in new ways. In the aftermath of WWII, many Christians sought to reinfuse Christianity into British society, and as a result, “Welfarism and conversionism became bedfellows in a joint crusade to refashion the British nation.”⁶³ For example, the postwar British welfare state was greatly

⁶¹ McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 31.

⁶² Clive D. Field, *Britain’s Last Religious Revival? Quantifying Belonging, Behaving, and Believing in the Long 1950s*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 110.

⁶³ Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2006), 188.

influenced by the Beveridge Report, which framed societal ills in Victorian terms (squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease), and the 1944 Education Act reintroduced Christianity into state-funded schools through activities such as mandatory prayer. This strategy, however, had no discernible effect in increasing orthodox Christian patterns of believing. As Clive Field explains,

The availability of opinion polls means that, for the first time in the 1950s, it is possible to probe popular beliefs in a quantitatively representative rather than anecdotal fashion...A trio of Gallup polls in Britain indicated some decline in belief in God throughout the long 1950s, from 84 per cent in December 1947 to 78 per cent in February 1957 to 71 per cent in March-April 1963, with a subset of belief in a personal God falling from 45 to 41 to 38 per cent (the remainder believing in some sort of spirit or vital force that controlled life).⁶⁴

These figures noticeably reflect a longer-term characteristic of British religiosity – Christian, though now religious, pluralism. As David Hempton explains, the Anglican Church and state religious policies actually created the conditions for a thriving religious pluralism beginning in the nineteenth century through “the mass dissemination of basic Christian knowledge, the maintenance of a *de facto* religious toleration and the proclamation of a supernaturalist view of the world.”⁶⁵ These conditions created the environment for the rise of someone like Lewis, who “combined a rationally acute but uncompromising faith with scholarship, imaginative creativity and a natural social conservatism in a way very satisfying to many a young searcher after wisdom” such that “In the field of religion no other writer of the mid-century is comparable to Lewis.”⁶⁶ Thus, C.S. Lewis’s initial rise in popularity is best understood in the context of a sizeable

⁶⁴ Field, *Britain’s Last Religious Revival?*, 74-5.

⁶⁵ David Hempton, “Established churches and the growth of religious pluralism: a case study of christianisation and secularisation in England since 1700,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 93.

⁶⁶ Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity: 1920-2000*, (London: SCM Press, 2001), 493.

population of Britons who were open to innovative ways of talking about God and especially Christianity.

During the ‘long fifties’, Lewis emerged onto the British literary scene as a purveyor of witty yet profound prose, and his reputation became that of prolific author from whom written wizardry could be regularly expected. His reputation, however, transcended questions of religious allegiance and covered both popular fiction and academic works. After the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942, one reviewer commented that despite the explicitly Christian material of the book, non-Christian audiences would not be able to resist enjoying the work, writing, “it is so delightfully and wittily presented that our moderns, who shy at even the cover of a spiritual book, will chuckle their way through the entire contents of this unusual postbag.”⁶⁷ A common theme regarding Lewis’s audience is expectation; his sublime prose acquired for him an audience who expected brilliant style. For example, even though one reviewer lamented the conversion narrative woven into Lewis’s autobiography *Surprised By Joy*, he still praised Lewis’s mastery of the illuminating style his audience had come to expect, writing, “This is a ‘conversion story,’ but incidental riches continue to drop (before our now accustomed eyes) from Mr. Lewis’s pockets.”⁶⁸ Even Lewis’s less successful works were deemed unsuccessful only in comparison to the high standard of his body of work as a whole. Jackson Campbell, reviewing one of Lewis’s academic endeavors, wrote, “Brilliant and learned as C.S. Lewis is, he can sometimes be very disappointing. The fault is ours, perhaps, for admiration built up over the past thirty years may have led us to

⁶⁷ D. O’S, “Reviewed Work: *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 31, no. 123 (Sep. 1942), 401.

⁶⁸ Peter Connolly, “Reviewed Work: *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis,” *The Furrow* 6, no. 12 (December 1955), 778.

expect too much.”⁶⁹ Moreover, even those who disagreed with Lewis acknowledged both his “spirited prose style and clarity and conciseness of his analytical powers.”⁷⁰ The sentiment of respect despite disagreement seems common, as another reviewer argued, “Even those contemporaries who find the subject distasteful should be surprised by the power of memory which these pages disclose, and particularly by the brilliant light which they throw upon the splendors and miseries of childhood.”⁷¹ Altogether, then, Lewis developed a reputation from the 1940s until his death in 1963 as a masterful Christian author both among Christian and non-Christian audiences, and this reputation as a primarily Christian writer would be the one most often tied to Lewis.

Within this same period, Lewis emerged as a popular Christian theologian, famous not only as a prolific author but also as “an acute critic of the modern pagan universe.”⁷² His was a voice capable of addressing the non-religious on behalf of Christendom. In 1945, one reviewer suggested that Lewis’s influence within the church was greater than that of the clergy precisely because he spoke both to the church and unchurched, writing, “in translating [esoteric language of theology] into everyday language he has few equals; he is the envy of the clergyman’s Saturday night.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Jackson J. Campbell, “Reviewed Work: *Studies in Words* by C.S. Lewis,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 61, no. 1 (January 1962), 144.

⁷⁰ R.L. Brett, “Reviewed Work: *An Experiment in Criticism* by C.S. Lewis,” *The Review of English Studies* 14, no. 53 (February 1963), 97.

⁷¹ David Lloyd James, “Reviewed Work: *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis,” *Blackfriars* 36, no. 429 (December 1955), 498.

⁷² Peter Quennell, “Arabian days,” *Daily Mail* (London, England), Sep. 1, 1945.

⁷³ D. O’S, “Reviewed Works: *Broadcast Talks* by C.S. Lewis; *Christian Behaviour* by C.S. Lewis; *Beyond Personality* by C.S. Lewis,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 34, no. 135 (September 1945), 412.

One contemporary scholar argues that Lewis's roles expanded during this period, writing, "Until the late 1930s C.S. Lewis, Oxford don and converted atheist, was known to persons interested in literature chiefly as the author of a much-admired work of medieval scholarship entitled *The Allegory of Love*...In the late 1930s and 1940s...[he] appeared in new and unexpected roles: as a Christian propagandist who lectured on the radio, at military camps, and in churches; as a serious theologian; and as a prolific writer of creative fiction."⁷⁴ Lewis's introduction given by *The Sunday Telegraph* for an article he wrote in 1962 sums up his reputation quite nicely — "Critic, teacher, children's author and expounder of Christian themes."⁷⁵ He was, then, one of a select few contemporary religious writers who was known both within and without the Church.

It is in the context of Lewis's established reputation both as a respected author and scholar and also as one of the most popular voices of Christianity that people first began adopting Lewis's language and using his fictional characters to comment on current affairs. Such commentary assumed Lewis's authority as a trusted author; moreover, Lewis's demonstrably Christian themes were considered a crucial aspect of that trust. For example, Arnold Toynbee penned an op-ed in 1958 to discuss the notion of progress and considered Lewis's definition most apt to communicate to the British public. Toynbee opened his article by quoting Lewis's essay "Willing Slaves of the Welfare State," in which Lewis had recapitulated the Christian doctrine of total depravity to argue that human progress is impossible. Toynbee adopted this explicitly theological language to connect with his audience, writing, "Progress means movement in a desired direction.' That is C.S.

⁷⁴ Wayne Shumaker, "The Cosmic Trilogy of C.S. Lewis," *The Hudson Review* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1955), 240.

⁷⁵ C.S. Lewis, "Boswell's Bugbear," *Sunday Telegraph* (London, England), April 1, 1962.

Lewis's definition of the word...I [find] the word 'desired' full of illuminating implications."⁷⁶ In another example, when John Grigg, Lord Altrincham, considered differing views on the ethical treatment of animals, he adopted Lewis as the spokesman for a Christian ethic that diverged from traditional Anglican doctrine. Altrincham wrote, "There is some evidence, however, that English Christians are embarrassed by a doctrine of apartheid which excludes dumb friends from the means of grace and the hope of glory. Mr C.S. Lewis wrestles with this difficulty in chapter IX of 'the Problem of Pain.'"⁷⁷ The equation of "English Christians" with "Mr. Lewis" demonstrates that Lewis was becoming representative of a popular "English Christianity" distinct from official "church" Christianity. Lewis's emergence as the voice of a new Christianity is demonstrated clearly when *The Telegraph* invited his opinion in 1962 on the "crisis in morals" that was sex in popular culture, specifically literature. Rather than turning to a priest or professional theologian, *The Telegraph* "invited Dr. C.S. Lewis as a critic, novelist, and a Christian apologist to give us his views."⁷⁸ Lewis was asked to comment not only as a critic and novelist — two capacities in which he had done so regularly — but also as a Christian apologist. In the years before his death, then, Lewis' popular Christianity had already begun to be seen as an alternative to institutional Christianity, and his language was used in that capacity to comment on current affairs from a Christian perspective.

1963-2000

Britain's culture, especially concerning religiosity, changed drastically in the 1960s. According to Callum Brown, the 1960s witnessed a cultural revolution in two parts. The first came

⁷⁶ Arnold Toynbee, "Our Tormenting Dilemma," *Observer* (London, England), Aug. 10 1958.

⁷⁷ Lord Altrincham, "Pets and decadence," *Guardian* (London, England), Jan. 11, 1962.

⁷⁸ C.S. Lewis, "Sex in literature," *Sunday Telegraph* (London, England), Sep. 30, 1962.

around 1963, when moments such as the Sexual Revolution, the cultural hegemony of the Beatles, and John Robinson's *Honest to God* displayed the cracks in British Christendom. The second part arrived in 1967, when "British society as a whole – including the government and the churches – became *aware* of secularization as an intense cultural and ecclesiastical revolution" as statistics concerning the changes earlier in the decade first came out.⁷⁹ The effects of the 1960s on British religiosity was twofold. First, the decline of Christianity as a majority cultural influence began to decline, because "as sixties' youth grew older, their values became slowly dominant as the drift from the traditional Christian churches continued and as the new age developed as a more embedded element in secular culture."⁸⁰ Second, the decline of Christianity did not lead to a subsequent decline in British religiosity; rather, access to non-institutionalized forms of Christianity as well as a range of non-Christian belief systems during the 1960s prefigured the major religious trend of the 1980s and 1990s, spiritual eclecticism.⁸¹

Despite the rise of pluralism and decline of cultural Christendom, however, Christianity did not recede into oblivion during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. On the contrary, "the Christian churches continued to have an important role. At a time when many other voluntary organizations had also suffered serious decline, they remained the largest in numbers of active members, and the widest-ranging in social influence."⁸² Most importantly, Christianity adapted within the new majority pluralistic culture. For example, the rise of the charismatic movement within Christianity signaled new interest in blending individual, mystical, and emotional

⁷⁹ Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 224-5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁸¹ McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 1-2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 256.

experiences with orthodox Christian doctrine. This was not a transformation of British society, but rather an internal adaptation of Christianity, as charismatic “converts seemed to be numbered at most in the tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands, and seemed more a transformation of existing active Christians than a conversion of the previously unchurched and uncommitted.”⁸³ A different, more combative trend in Christianity also emerged, one which saw Christians “assuming the role of the assertive cultural underground” in order to become “challengers to what they saw as a dominant secularism and its immoral values.”⁸⁴ Adrian Hastings explains that the core elements of Lewis’s theology – rigid orthodoxy, personal moral duty, and a lack of interest in the High Church, for example – encompass “almost exactly the traditional theological package of the conservative Evangelical.”⁸⁵ Elements from the writing of C.S. Lewis appealed to both the individual mystic and the combater of culture, and the continued popularity of his writing among Christians, specifically Evangelical Christians, during the latter years of the twentieth century is indicative of these transformations within Christianity.

Lewis died on 22 November 1963, the year some historians have indicated as heralding the death of Christendom, or cultural Christian hegemony, in Britain. Nevertheless, the obituaries for Lewis featured in four of Britain’s major national newspapers specifically highlight his Christianity as the most important aspect of his life and influence. *The Sunday Telegraph* headline names him “C.S. Lewis, Writer On Religion” and the obituary focuses on the religious aspect of his life story, noting that “in 1928 he said he had converted from atheism to religion by an ‘intellectual’ process. He later became one of the most prolific Christian writers and lay

⁸³ Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 300.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸⁵ Hastings, *English Christianity*, 494.

theologians of the century.”⁸⁶ Similarly, the *Daily Mail* headline connects Lewis with his most popular work, a work of Christian lay theology, noting that “‘Screwtape’ Lewis dies,” and the obituary claims that what made Lewis notable was not his Oxbridge professorships or successful children’s literature but rather his emergence as a popular Christian theologian, stating “Dr. Lewis, 64, was well known for his work as a Christian apologist.”⁸⁷ *The Guardian* headline continues the trend, naming him “C.S. Lewis, Christian apologist.” The obituary remembers Lewis fondly, writing, “Dr. Clive Staples Lewis, who was 64, was well-known for his work as a Christian apologist...he could not have written with such deep understanding of the moral and religious literature of the past if he had not seen his own life as something of a spiritual pilgrimage.”⁸⁸ Lastly, the *Times* most fully reveals the extent of Britain’s contemporary perception of Lewis as a popular theologian, as the obituary stated,

But it is on his writings that his real fame rests. Christian apologist, literary historian, scholar, critic, writer of science fiction and children’s books, he was one of the more prolific authors of his time. As a Christian writer his influence was marked; he caught and held the attention of those usually apathetic to religion, of lapsed churchgoers and of people who liked to think themselves agnostics; with J.B. Phillips he made religious books bestsellers and, in a nice sense, fashionable.⁸⁹

Clearly, by the time of his death in 1963, Lewis had become an influential religious author who appealed to both Christians and non-Christians, and it is this perception of Lewis that has endured in respect to his cultural influence within Britain.

⁸⁶ “C.S. Lewis, Writer on Religion,” *Sunday Telegraph* (London, England), Nov. 24, 1963.

⁸⁷ “‘Screwtape’ Lewis dies,” *Daily Mail* (London, England), Nov. 25, 1963.

⁸⁸ “C.S. Lewis, Christian apologist,” *Guardian* (London, England), Nov. 25, 1963.

⁸⁹ “Prof. C.S. Lewis.” *Times* (London, England), Nov. 25 1963.

After his death, Lewis was not dismissed as a quaint peddler of an outdated religiosity; rather, Lewis became mythologized as a legend of Christianity whose voice continued to speak to both Christians and non-Christians. Within three years of Lewis's death, for example, Oxford Professor of English Literature W.W. Robson asked, "Is he [Lewis] to be judged by high standards, or regarded as merely a parochial reputation which is already beginning to fade?" In answer to his own question, Robson argued that Lewis is "a representative in recent English civilization of the Academy at its most brilliant" while maintaining that "the writings with which Lewis reached perhaps his largest adult public may be called homiletic."⁹⁰ Lewis's reputation for brilliant prose and thoughtful Christianity had begun to be intertwined. Journalist Ruth Pitter first suggested the "mythical" Lewis in 1964, writing that "with many authors, one sometimes feels an obscure comfort in the idea that they might be wrong; but with Lewis, the idea that he might be wrong can be intimidating, for on many of us the magic of his style operates at times an hypnotic spell."⁹¹ Pitter insinuated that with the average author, the reader engages in an internal dialogue, often debate, as to whether one agrees with the content of the work. Lewis's readers, however, are so taken in by the "magic of his style" that the idea of his content being wrong is discomfoting.

This content, of course, was explicitly Christian, yet even in the secular Sixties Lewis's reputation continued to grow. Journalist Anthony Curtis wrote in 1966 that "the persuasive power of C.S. Lewis's talk and writing is legendary." It is crucial to note that the legendary talk and writing for which Lewis was known at this point was what Robson described as "homiletic," that is, designed to communicate Christian belief. Curtis went on to observe that "the very name [Lewis] is one to rouse very different emotions in very different people, from almost uncritical

⁹⁰ W.W. Robson, "C.S. Lewis," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1965-66), 252.

⁹¹ Ruth Pitter, "New Light On An Old Question," *Telegraph* (London, England), Jan 26. 1964.

devotion to passionate hostility.”⁹² Despite religious affiliation and across a wide spectrum of familiarity with Christianity, from passionate to lukewarm to distant, Lewis was known to such an extent that he and his work provoked an emotional response from both fans and critics, despite his death and despite the marked decline in institutional religious affiliation in Britain from the 1960s and onward.

In fact, as the century continued, Lewis’s reputation grew, and one journalist in 1980 captures Lewis’s growing influence perfectly. John Ezard writes,

C.S. Lewis — the greatest English scholar in Europe, the most trenchant and widely read prose and fiction writer of his time — was almost wiped out of the obituaries by dying (like Aldous Huxley) on the same November day in 1963 as President Kennedy. For years afterwards, it seemed that those arbiters who wanted to wipe out his reputation as well had seized their chance and succeeded beyond their hopes. Yet nearly all his works are still in print, quietly and steadily selling two millions copies a year. And here — in this book from a younger generation, the latest of an increasing number of studies about him — his shade comes back again, looking as if it might have founded a bit of a dynasty after all.”⁹³

Ezard considered Lewis not only the greatest scholar but also the most popular author of his time. Martin Wroe made a similar point over a decade later. According to Wroe, writing in 1993, Lewis’s popularity was higher at that time than any during Lewis’s own life. He asked his audience, “Where were you when C.S. Lewis died?” He continued, “If you are old enough, you probably *do* know. The author died 30 years ago last Monday — on the day President Kennedy was shot. But if JFK’s reputation has waned in the intervening years, the fame and influence of Lewis, Oxford don, Christian apologist and creator of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is greater than ever it was in his

⁹² Anthony Curtis, “Screwtape and After,” *Sunday Telegraph* (London, England), April 17, 1966.

⁹³ John Ezard, “Legacy of a scholar,” *Guardian* (London, England), Aug. 21, 1980.

lifetime.”⁹⁴ In Wroe’s view not only Lewis’s fame but also his influence had increased in the British popular mind. Thus, the same elements that made Lewis popular both in his lifetime and in the years immediately following his death were still prevalent thirty years after his death.

Additionally, the adoption of Lewis’s Christian language by individuals to comment not only on current affairs but also to understand their own experiences is indicative of how Lewis has become a representative of Christianity within Britain, both as inspiration for the Christian and symbol for the non-Christian. One example that indicates the rise and longevity of Lewis’s popular Christianity within Britain is the use of Lewis’s language by Anglican clergy to connect with laypeople. In 1996 the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, used C.S. Lewis’s personal conversion story to frame the resurrection of Christ for the British public; that they might be as familiar with Lewis’s story than Jesus’s is telling. Sion Midgley used Carey’s reference to Lewis to frame his own article with the assumption that Lewis would grab a reader’s attention more than another aspect of Carey’s sermon. Midgley writes, “The Resurrection’s message of eternal hope is not just for the committed churchgoer but for everyone, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, said yesterday. ‘If we open our hearts to the Resurrection message, we too shall find ourselves surprised by joy,’ he said, referring to CS Lewis’s book *Surprised by Joy*.”⁹⁵ The necessity of Lewis for the clergy to connect with its congregation (and those outside its congregation) reflects a growing trend recognized by columnist Michael Frederick Green, who adopted Lewis’s Wormwood character to advise a junior tempter on how to keep the British from belief. As Wormwood, Green writes, “Make sure that the Church itself grows increasingly apart

⁹⁴ Martin Wroe, “You’ve read the books — now for St Lewis, the film,” *Observer* (London, England), Nov. 28, 1993.

⁹⁵ Sion Midgley, “Resurrection brings message of hope to all, says Carey,” *Telegraph* (London, England), April 8, 1996.

from the people it is supposed to ‘serve’.”⁹⁶ Ironically, the adoption of Lewis’s language here reflects that exact trend in that Lewis’s popular Christianity is more readily received than official Church doctrine. Anglican priest Digby Anderson recognized this trend as well, lamenting that both laymen and the clergy have settled for something other than Anglican tradition. Ironically, he too uses Lewis to frame his narrative, writing, “CS Lewis once drew a difference between ‘real Christianity’ and ‘Christianity-with-water’...while we can’t know what goes on in people’s minds and souls, some of the actions of both ordinary Christians and their hierarchies display little of the ‘real’ thing.”⁹⁷ Clearly, Lewis possessed a spiritual authority that Anglican clergy used to connect with the populace, to comment on its own politics, and to comment on the apathy of its own flock.

Outside the Church, other public figures — politicians, musicians, authors — used their appreciation for Lewis to connect with others as well as comment on their own lives. Lewis provides an overtly spiritual language that people adopt to give a deeper meaning to life’s circumstances. For example, when longtime MP Jonathan Aitken publicly addressed his 1999 conviction for perjury, he reflected that Lewis provided him with a framework for coming clean. Aitken wrote, “[Lewis’s] talk *The Perfect Penitent* struck a special chord with me: ‘It needs a good man to repent. And here comes the catch. Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are, the more you need it and the less you can do it’. *I was such a worst case myself.*”⁹⁸ [emphasis added] Aitken adopted Lewis’s conception of Christianity in order to understand his own spirituality and to garner sympathy among his constituency, who

⁹⁶ Wormwood, “Getting on with the devil of a job,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Aug. 25, 1990.

⁹⁷ Digby Anderson, “Real Christianity is 70 per cent proof,” *Telegraph* (London, England), April 3, 1999.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Aitken, “I’ve been vilified but I deserved it, admits Aitken,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Jun. 10, 1999.

likely would have been familiar with Lewis's work and theology. Similarly, when popular author and photographer Charlotte Cory lost a beloved dog, she found comfort in Lewis. She writes, "I sought the only text I knew of that might help: C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*...I found consolation in *A Grief Observed*. Someone had been there before me. My misery was a known phenomenon. I was not going mad."⁹⁹ Cory used Lewis's experience of bereavement upon the loss of his wife, in which he uses explicitly Christian language to grieve, to understand her own experience and share that experience with others who could relate both to her loss and connection with Lewis. In a very different example, Stuart Baillie explored Lewis's influence in contemporary rock music. For example, Queen almost named themselves *The Great Dance*, a reference to Lewis's conception of the Trinity, while Bono's Macphisto persona was adapted from Lewis's description of *Screwtape*.¹⁰⁰ As Queen formed in the early 1970s and Bono portrayed Macphisto in the early 1990s, Lewis's spiritual influence was clearly tangible for the soon-to-be-famous as well as those already with worldwide fame.

A growing trend during this resurgence of Lewis's influence was the reformulation of his unmistakably Christian language as political axiom. Social commentators and ordinary people alike used Lewis as a framing device to set up arguments such that Lewis — the popular theologian of Britain — could comment decisively on pressing issues. For example, Margot Lawrence adopted Lewis's *Screwtape* persona (much like Mr. Green) to argue how the British Peace Movement of the 1980s could easily misrepresent what she believed to be the orthodox Christian doctrine of protecting one's neighbor and the institutions of God. As *Screwtape*, she advised

⁹⁹ Charlotte Cory, "Farewell to a friend," *Daily Mail* (London, England), Jan. 3, 1998.

¹⁰⁰ Stuart Baillie, "Rock on, CS Lewis," *Belfast Telegraph* (Belfast, Northern Ireland), Dec. 9, 2005.

Wormwood that “it seems clear that the Galilean imposed on his followers a difficult double standard: to forgive each his personal enemy, but to use force when needed to defend The Enemy’s name and sanctuary and genuine devotees, and, by extension, those societies dedicated to the Enemy’s service.”¹⁰¹ In doing so, of course, she was using Lewis to argue that the ideology of the peace movement was fundamentally flawed and that war is necessary for Christians to support at times. Similarly, Michael Saward, an Anglican priest who survived a vicious attack in which his daughter was raped, argued for *lex talionis*, referencing Lewis as one reason why the public should agree with him. He wrote, “Let me explain. I am not alone in believing in the need to exercise retributive justice. The Rt Rev Graham Leonard, the Bishop of London, the writer C.S. Lewis, and Oswald Clark, for years one of the most respected lay chairmen of the General Synod, have agreed with me.”¹⁰² Such a policy change would be radical, but Saward believed that Lewis’s name might be able to convince the public of its necessity. According to journalist Lynda Lee-Potter, since Lewis once wrote that “Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world,” the pain inflicted by child-murderer Myra Hindley should not be forgotten by the British public, who apparently had become more sympathetic toward Hindley after her self-proclaimed reformation.¹⁰³ Again, Lewis provides the spiritual authority and motivation for specific action, in this case, a legal decision to continue Hindley’s imprisonment.

Additionally, Lewis’s Christian writing began to influence opinions on contemporary scientific developments. Roman Catholic Cardinal Thomas Winning addressed then-Prime

¹⁰¹ Margot Lawrence, “How to go to the Devil,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Feb. 19, 1983.

¹⁰² Michael Saward, “An eye for an eye — the only true justice,” *Daily Mail* (London, England), Jan. 31, 1991.

¹⁰³ Lynda Lee-Potter, “Why we must never forget these children,” *Daily Mail* (London, England), Oct. 25, 1989.

Minister Tony Blair in an op-ed entitled “Be warned, Mr Blair: cloning is killing,” in which Winning used Lewis to argue against the legalization of human cloning. Winning wrote, “the most prophetic words come not from a scientist or academic, but from a long-dead author,” Lewis, who wrote that “the softest road to hell is the gradual one.”¹⁰⁴ Instead of appealing to a scientific or legal argument, Winning used the spiritual language of Lewis both to increase the weight of the issue. But Winning was not appealing to Mr. Blair; rather, he was writing in a popular newspaper for the British audience in an attempt to win them over to his view. Much like the other examples, Winning either uses or adopts Lewis’s overtly Christian language to comment on current affairs in such a way as to affect both attitude and action, and he would not have done so had there not been an audience who readily heard and responded to such language.

Some writers employed Lewis with banality to comment on an array of “unimportant” topics. As public theologian, Lewis is deployed as an authority not only in spiritual or political matters, but also to give meaning to the commonplace. For example, Mary Killen, author of a regular series offering conventional advice to common folk, used the example of C.S. Lewis to encourage her readers to plant miniature gardens in their biscuit tins — simply because Lewis had done so, Killen implies others should as well.¹⁰⁵ Again, journalist Bel Mooney believed that Lewis, who wrote that “bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love,” would have empathized with Roger Franklin, who built a forty-three foot tall obelisk to commemorate his deceased wife.¹⁰⁶ Apparently, Mooney thought such a quotation would be

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Winning, “Be warned, Mr Blair: cloning is killing,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Aug. 20, 2000.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Killen, “Child friendly,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Nov. 28, 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Bel Mooney, “Strange rituals of death that become us,” *Telegraph* (London, England), July 25, 2000.

helpful for his audience to relate to a man displaying rather odd behavior. At any rate, Lewis is used as a spiritual authority to give meaning to the seemingly meaningless. Lastly, one concerned citizen in a letter-to-the-editor quotes Lewis's idea that a strategy of the Devil was to "make the whole universe a noise in the end" in order to protest the constant presence of helicopters near his home on the border of Snowdonia National Park.¹⁰⁷ Again, one wonders what Lewis's commentary on a strategy of the devil to distract Christians might have to do with noise during peak ski season, but the important development is that Lewis's spiritual voice — his popular theology — has transcended spiritual matters and began to cover even the mundane matters of life.

2000-Present

The most important question concerning contemporary studies of British religiosity, particularly Christian religiosity, is whether to work within a framework of decline or transformation. Narratives of decline typically focus on majority culture and explain how Christian influences have weakened, while narratives of transformation focus on Christianity's adaptation and continued areas of influence within a pluralistic culture. Instead of studying Christianity in Britain according to a standard of 'British Christianity' at the height of that institution's discursive, political, and religious power, a more explanatory approach would be to discuss how particularly 'British Christianity' has "introduced new cultural and religious materials into the Christian story and is therefore, just like any other variety of Christianity, syncretistic."¹⁰⁸ The manner and extent

¹⁰⁷ W H Williams, "Satanic racket," *Telegraph* (London, England), Jun. 3, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Werner Ustorf, "A missiological postscript," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 224.

to which C.S. Lewis contributed to a distinctly ‘British Christianity’ must be included in such an investigation due to the level of his influence on Christians within Britain.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, roughly sixty percent of British respondents to a poll conducted by the European Values Study indicated a belief in God.¹⁰⁹ By the end of 2018, a *Times of London* poll found that number to have decreased to roughly thirty percent.¹¹⁰ In the face of demonstrable decline in belief in God, it nevertheless remains problematic to characterize Britain as a ‘secular’ society, because to do so means to “gloss over the variations in the extent to which religious or secular forces have influenced different sections of society or areas of life.”¹¹¹ In fact, as recently as 2007, a group of religious scholars argued that religion, specifically Christianity, has functioned as “an active agent or unacknowledged foil for many of the structural changes and cultural shifts in Britain since World War Two.”¹¹² In many ways, C.S. Lewis has continued to be both active agent for the preservation of Christian culture as well as an acknowledged and unacknowledged foil for secularity within Britain. Within this role, Lewis demonstrates how the “cultural strength of religion must be separated from its institutional strength,” regardless of the specific religiosity.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Yves Lambert, “New Christianity, indifference and diffused spirituality,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71.

¹¹⁰ Field, Clive D. “A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources,” *Counting Religion in Britain* no. 39 (Dec. 2018), 1.

¹¹¹ McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 263.

¹¹² Jane Garnet et al., *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 7-8.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 290.

Lewis's popularity as a spiritual writer has endured and even increased in the twenty-first century. Sam Leith powerfully communicates both his own experience with Lewis as well as the cultural force of Lewis's work, writing,

'Aslan is on the move.' That phrase, three decades after I first read *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, still has the power to tickle the hairs on my neck. It testifies to the enduring power of CS Lewis's recasting of the Christian myth that I'm far from alone. If this were all there were to him, it would still be pretty remarkable that, 50 years after his death, this tweedy old Oxford don should occupy such an exalted place in our cultural life.¹¹⁴

Leith argues here that there is much more to Lewis than simply the content of his children's fiction. Lewis scholar and fellow Oxford don Alister McGrath agrees and further states that Lewis's reputation as a Christian apologist is the seminal quality of his continued legacy. McGrath proposes that "From about 1990 [before the first Walden Media Narnia film in 2005] Lewis enjoyed a resurgence of such magnitude that his books now sell more copies than at any point during his lifetime," and according to McGrath, that resurgence was due to Lewis's "rare ability to convey the imaginative and rational appeal of faith in a time of growing scepticism towards both religious ideas and institutions."¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Tom Wright, in a review of a book concerning Lewis, wrote, "It would be a great pity if the still prevailing Saturnine mood of our times, which has belittled and sometimes even reviled Lewis as a thinker, were to blind us to his remarkable literary, philosophical, cosmological and theological achievement."¹¹⁶ According to Wright, the 'age of scepticism' mentioned by McGrath in some ways mars Lewis's literary legacy, but due to his remarkable popular achievements across a range of disciplines — though most

¹¹⁴ Sam Leith, "CS Lewis," *Guardian* (London, England), Nov. 19, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Alister McGrath, "Beyond Narnia, the imaginative appeal of faith," *Times* (London, England), Jan. 7, 2012.

¹¹⁶ Tom Wright, "Donegality," *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), Oct. 23, 2009.

notably fiction and apologetics — Lewis has endured the test of time and remains popular even in the twenty-first century.

More than simply testifying to Lewis’s popularity, social commentators have continued to adopt his literature and language as a means to assess British culture. Libby Purves laments that modern children are no longer held accountable for their actions, especially in literature, writing, “C.S. Lewis the allegorist takes children’s misdeeds and guilts as seriously as they do, but modern sensibilities flinch from such old-fashioned blame. When BBC TV did the prequel, *The Magician’s Nephew*, it cravenly omitted the central sin, in which evil is released into the new-created world by a boy’s curiosity in striking a forbidden bell.”¹¹⁷ According to Purves, the BBC misrepresented one of Lewis’s central messages, which is that individuals are always responsible for their actions. In this way Purves both defends Lewis’s work against her perceived reinterpretation as well as uses Lewis to make her stand against cultural decline. In a different type of example, Paul Tankard, in an article detailing Lewis’s two appearances on television and Lewis’s view that television was not a worthy use of one’s time, wrote that due to “his suspicion of politics and fashion, his hatred of noise, scepticism about ‘news’ and love of reading,” Lewis is a “quintessentially pre-televisual personality.”¹¹⁸ Additionally, the *Daily Mail* ran an article detailing the “Many striking echoes of Tolkien and Narnia in the magical novels of JK Rowling,” which traced the literary lineage of Rowling’s series from *Narnia*.¹¹⁹ Although the *Harry Potter* series certainly stands in its own right as a contemporary children’s masterpiece, the fact that the *Daily Mail* placed *Potter* within the

¹¹⁷ Libby Purves, “Watch out for the moral in the tale,” *Times* (London, England), Jan. 3, 2012.

¹¹⁸ Tankard, Paul. “Forbidden Art,” *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), March 11, 2011.

¹¹⁹ “A history lesson for Harry Potter,” *Daily Mail* (London, England), Nov. 12, 2001.

family of Lewis's children's fantasy strongly communicates the cultural power of his work. Similarly, T.M Luhrmann, when writing about the quintessentially 'British' nature of *Folklore Journal*, describes the "deeply learned scholarship and whimsy" present in the journal that suggests "a particular sensibility at work here of the sort which has led to serious children's literature and numinous magical literature — from C.S. Lewis to J.K. Rowling."¹²⁰ Again, the equation of Lewis and his work with particular literary aspects that set Britain apart from other cultures, most notably the writing of J.K. Rowling — testifies to the enduring cultural relevance of Lewis as representative Christian within Britain.

Additionally, church leaders as well as laypeople have continued the trend of adopting Lewis's language to comment on the Anglican Church. For instance, when then-Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams announced his retirement, one commentator wrote regarding the then-unknown future Archbishop of Canterbury's approach to modern culture, "'My own view,' wrote C.S. Lewis in 1943, 'is that the Churches should frankly recognize that the majority of the British people are not Christians and therefore cannot be expected to lead Christian lives.'...It would be destructive and futile for a new Archbishop to pick a fight with modernity and call it prophetic."¹²¹ By using Lewis as a religious authority, the author of the piece wishes to curb the desire of the Church to critique the culture. In response to this, Jonathan Luxmoore, a reader, wrote back, "But if the new archbishop fails to be prophetic, he will fail in his duty...This may be fitting for a large social and cultural association. But it is not the function of a religious body — nor is it

¹²⁰ Luhrmann, T.M. "Folklore." *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), Nov. 1, 2013.

¹²¹ "Pilgrims' Progress," *Times* (London, England), Oct. 30, 2012.

one which C.S. Lewis, whose authority you invoke, would have recognised.”¹²² According to Luxmoore, invoking the authority of Lewis is not enough to make a point; one must do it in accordance with Lewis’s own views. As Lewis was a firm critic of modernity, so the Church should be as well. Debate such as this, however, is unsatisfactory to Tim Montgomerie, who quoted from *Screwtape* to urge the Church to avoid internal debate and instead focus on reaching those outside the Church. He wrote,

That half-finished, sham Church certainly still provides *Screwtape* with weapons of mass distraction. The Church that on too many occasions appeared to turn a blind eye to the abuse of children. The Church at war with itself over homosexuality. The church leaders who waste prime-time Easter and Christmas Day sermons to pontificate on party politics...If *Screwtape*’s aim is to get people focused on the Church rather than Jesus, it is obvious what Britain’s leading churchman must focus on.¹²³

In this way Montgomerie adopts the language of Lewis to urge the future Archbishop to focus on the Church’s core beliefs rather than its response to a variety of contemporary controversies.

On the other hand, some use Lewis to weigh in on those same controversies. N.T. Wright laments that the idea of being ‘progressive’ was utilized as the primary reason for the inclusion of female clergy in the Anglican Church. He wrote, “‘But that would be putting the clock back,’ gasps a feckless official in one of C.S. Lewis’s stories. ‘Have you no idea of progress, of development?’ ‘I seen them both in an egg,’ replies the young hero. ‘We call it *Going bad* in Narnia.’ Lewis nails a lie at the heart of our culture. As long as we repeat it, we shall never understand our world, let alone the Church’s calling.”¹²⁴ Wright uses Lewis’s language to critique the notion of progression

¹²² Jonathan Luxmoore, Rev Joseph Walsh, and J.F. Barnes, “Church, politics and the next Archbishop” *Times* (London, England), Nov. 1, 2012.

¹²³ Tim Montgomerie, “No palace, no politics. Just Christian teaching,” *Times* (London, England), Oct. 29 2012.

¹²⁴ Tom Wright, “It’s about the Bible, not fake ideas of progress,” *Times* (London, England), Nov. 23, 2012.

necessitating change, and although Wright does not discredit female clergy altogether, he does claim that the inclusion based upon ideas of progression disdained by Lewis would certainly be a bad idea.

Commentators also continue the trend of invoking Lewis to argue contemporary issues regarding science, an area far outside Lewis's academic expertise. Such arguments frequently employ Lewis's spiritual writing to discuss the perceived moral consequences of particular issues. For example, John Lennox claimed, "Scientists are wrong to call the Higgs boson 'more relevant than God'," because according to C.S. Lewis, "Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver."¹²⁵ Lennox, professor of mathematics at Oxford, here uses one of Lewis's arguments for the existence of God (ironically) to urge scientists not to make judgments outside the realm of their expertise. In the same way, Libby Purves uses Lewis to argue against prescribing anti-depressants for those who have recently experienced loss, writing that a such practice "typifies our urge to medicalise everyday experience." Purves described the reality of bereavement using Lewis, who wrote, "The pain I feel now is the happiness I had before. That's the deal," but Purves wondered, "But is our soft Western cowardice no longer up for that deal?"¹²⁶ In this way, Purves, like Lennox, uses Lewis's spiritual writing to infuse extra-scientific significance into what appears at the surface to be purely scientific issues.

One of the more unique examples Lewis's popularity enduring in a constantly changing culture is his prevalence in listicles. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a listicle is "a

¹²⁵ John Lennox, "He is not the God of gaps, he is the God of the whole show," *Times* 18 Aug 2012.

¹²⁶ Libby Purves, "Why must grief be a sign of mental illness?" *Times* (London, England), Feb. 20, 2012.

journalistic article or other piece of writing presented wholly or partly in the form of a list,” and this term first saw use between the years 2007-08.¹²⁷ Coincidentally, in 2008 the *Telegraph* named *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as number one in their list of the top fifty children’s books.¹²⁸ Similarly, Robert McCrum included *A Grief Observed* at number twenty-two in a list compiled for the *Guardian* of the top one-hundred non-fiction books of all time.¹²⁹ Likewise, Tim Thornton designated *The Great Divorce* as a top ten book concerning the afterlife.¹³⁰ In a list selecting the top ten metropolises in fiction, Chibundu Onuzo chose Tashbaan, the Calormene capital in *The Horse and His Boy* as the number four city.¹³¹ The *Narnia* series as a whole was voted by readers of the *Guardian* as the number three book series most pretend to have read but never had.¹³² Lastly, Pauline Baynes, the original illustrator of *The Chronicles of Narnia* was chosen as one of the six best book illustrators of all time.¹³³ While such lists do not necessarily provide piercing insight into the religiosity of Britain, that Lewis’s work — both his fiction and explicitly Christian non-fiction — remains so popular as to top “best of” lists in national

¹²⁷ "listicle, n.". OED Online. December 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36354548?redirectedFrom=Listicle> (accessed December 05, 2018).

¹²⁸ “The top 50 children’s books,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Feb. 22, 2008.

¹²⁹ Robert McCrum, “The 100 best nonfiction books: No 22 – A Grief Observed by CS Lewis (1961),” *Guardian* (London, England), June 27, 2016.

¹³⁰ Tim Thornton, “Top 10 books about the afterlife,” *Guardian* (London, England), June 20, 2018.

¹³¹ Chibundu Onuzo, “Top 10 megacities in fiction,” *Guardian* (London, England), Jan. 18, 2017.

¹³² David Barnett, “James Bond, Lord of the Rings, Narnia – the books we most pretend to have read,” *Guardian* (London, England), May 2, 2017.

¹³³ Rob Ryan. "Six of the best." *Times* (London, England), June 9, 2012.

newspapers certainly indicates his cultural longevity and a remnant of Christian religiosity within mainstream British culture.

Conclusion

Since his initial popularization during the long fifties, ‘C.S. Lewis’ (the man and his work) has cultivated a Christian idiom that fosters an individual, orthodox religiosity not confined to any particular institution. His staunch anti-modernism, specifically his promotion of the worth of each individual and the spiritual purpose inherent in hardship, both reflects Britain’s religious culture during the long fifties and is also the reason for his continued appeal through the present day. His elevation of ‘story’ as vehicle for truth and his simple communication of complicated theological concepts also explains his enduring appeal, for people who look to him as inspiration or representative of Christianity often outright borrow his imagery or repurpose his ideas in their own way. Three recent examples of Lewis’s cultural influence – his inclusion in Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey, a book on Lewis by Rowan Williams, and the constant comparison between Lewis and *His Dark Materials* author Philip Pullman – show how Lewis’s reputation as Christian representative in secular Britain has continued to grow.

Poet’s Corner

One important cultural moment for Lewis was his inclusion in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, which took place on November 22, 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of his death. John Dugdale commented that “Lewis, author of children's and science fiction novels, religious works and literary criticism, will be honoured with a plaque in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey on Friday.”¹³⁴ This honor embodies the resurgence of Lewis as an important author in the twenty-first century, although there was debate among commentators as to whether Lewis deserved to be included based on the merit of his work. Some, such as Sam Leith, wrote, “This Friday, his

¹³⁴ John Dugdale, “Books Blog: CS Lewis,” *Guardian* (London, England), Nov. 14, 2013.

reputation will be crowned with a plaque in his honour, between John Betjeman and William Blake, in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. The tribute might have pleased him, but it's an odd one: as a poet, Lewis is usually regarded as pretty useless.”¹³⁵ If Lewis’s poetry is not memorable or considered excellent, what, then, is used as grounds for his inclusion? Alister McGrath argues for Lewis’s inclusion because “the poetic vision that Lewis never quite managed to actualise in his verse was found instead in his prose. Here we find one of the keys to his success as a writer – his ability to express complex ideas in simple language, connecting with his audience without losing elegance of expression.”¹³⁶ McGrath appeals to the popularity of Lewis’s spiritually significant prose as bearing enough cultural currency to merit his inclusion. Likewise, Iona McLaren argues that Lewis was not remembered for his poetry or academic publishing, but rather “by his imaginative prose.” What made that prose so memorable, according to McLaren, was that “by rinsing out the familiarities of liturgy and organised religion, CS Lewis throws into relief what he considers essential – sacrifice and belief, among other things.”¹³⁷ Here McLaren demonstrates — fifty years after Lewis died — that the endurance of his popularity rested on his still fresh approach to communicating “sacrifice and belief,” the basic tenets of Christianity according to Lewis. Finally, Christopher Howse observed, “Adherence to Christianity may be no requirement for a memorial in the Abbey, but Lewis is generally regarded as a strong Christian apologist,” while concluding that should Lewis's reputation as an apologist not suffice for his inclusion, “readers not already in his fan club find themselves most moved in mind by his imaginative writing, such as *The*

¹³⁵ Sam Leith, “CS Lewis,” *Guardian* (London, England), Nov. 19, 2013.

¹³⁶ Alister McGrath, “CS Lewis deserves his place in Poet’s Corner,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Nov. 21, 2012.

¹³⁷ Iona McLaren, “CS Lewis joins Poet’s Corner,” *Telegraph* (London, England), Nov. 22, 2013.

Screwtape Letters, from an older to a younger devil, as read on Radio Four this week, or more so by his seven children's books about Narnia."¹³⁸ Thus, the installation of a memorial to Lewis in Poet's Corner was a brief but clear indication not only of his continued popularity in Britain, but also of the reasons why he endures, most notably his imaginative, spiritual prose.

Rowan Williams

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has also contributed to the enduring legacy of C.S. Lewis, particularly in recent years. Williams served as Archbishop for ten years (2002-12), earning a reputation for academic prowess, and he is currently the Master of Magdalen College at Cambridge University. In a story written about Lewis in 2013, Williams is quoted saying that "Lewis 'is coming up the agenda again'. He [Williams] says the last five years have seen Lewis given 'serious academic attention – and attention from people who are not just in the evangelical camp'."¹³⁹ Williams has certainly participated in renewing interest concerning Lewis, for in 2011 Williams dedicated his Holy Week Lectures – an annual series of talks given by the Archbishop in the week leading up to Easter – to Lewis's Narnia series. In his introduction to the talks, Williams asked, "In an age less familiar with Christian images and ideas than his, how can we best draw out these themes?"¹⁴⁰ He chose Narnia to frame his Easter message because he

¹³⁸ Christopher Howse, "CS Lewis memorial: A stone for a lover, not for a poet," *Telegraph* (London, England) Nov. 22, 2013.

¹³⁹ Sam Leith, "CS Lewis's literary legacy: 'dodgy and unpleasant' or 'exceptionally good'?" *Guardian* (London, England), Nov. 19, 2013.

¹⁴⁰ "Archbishop of Canterbury discusses Narnia in Holy Week Lectures," *Dr Rowan Williams 104th Archbishop of Canterbury* online, last modified April 18, 2011, <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1703/archbishop-of-canterbury-discusses-narnia-in-holy-week-lectures>

witnessed the staying power of Lewis's storytelling to captivate the heart and imagination of readers.

Furthermore, Williams has proven to be a prolific author, writing books concerning both theology as well as popular literature. Following his 2011 Holy Week Lectures, Williams decided to write a book expounding his ideas on the power of Narnia to freshly communicate the message of Christianity. Consequently, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* was published by Oxford University Press in 2012. According to one reviewer, as Williams is known just as much for his high-minded literary taste as he is as Archbishop of Canterbury, it is surprising that he would devote attention to Lewis, "whose apologetic writings seem to embody a cosy conservatism far from his [Williams's] probing Christianity."¹⁴¹ Due to Lewis's cultural currency, however, Williams believes that what he believes is the central message of Lewis can transcend his 'cosy conservatism'. Another reviewer notes how Williams, instead of defending Lewis's apologetics, proposes that Narnia reveals "life attitudes...which can lead to a deeper, and more joyful, experience of being human" and which challenge "the milk-and-water brand of Christianity often associate with his own Church."¹⁴² The Archbishop of Canterbury choosing Lewis and his work to reach those unfamiliar with the message of Christianity during the last year of his tenure is indicative of how Lewis has provided a popular theological language with which Christians and skeptics can understand Christianity.

According to Williams, Lewis should be understood today as a writer with profound clarity, wisdom, and spirituality whose central message is able to transcend his cultural specificity to reach

¹⁴¹ Sameer Rahim, "Rowan Williams: 'Aslan is on the knife-edge of the erotic'" *Telegraph* (London, England), July 30, 2012.

¹⁴² Salley Vickers, "A pilgrimage to the heart of Narnia," *Times* (London, England), Aug. 6, 2012.

contemporary readers. Williams writes that Lewis “was, when I was first being educated as a theologian, a slightly embarrassing phenomenon...someone who was read and circulated enthusiastically – if pretty selectively – by the sort of people who would be regarded as very unsophisticated by a proper theologian.”¹⁴³ As the case has been made in this paper, this description fits Lewis perfectly – a writer who presents lofty theological concepts in a popular lexicon, often without many traces of nuance. More problematically, though, Williams also admits that Lewis’s “attitudes to women and ethnic ‘others’ are abrasive for most contemporaries.”¹⁴⁴ While admitting that Lewis oftentimes espouses unabashedly an Edwardian cultural worldview, the contemporary reader should not allow such differences to dissuade him from engaging with Lewis, who in his fiction tended to be much more nuanced than in his apologetics. Williams maintains that Lewis regularly challenges the views of his time in order to further his narrative or communicate a spiritual truth.

How, then, should Lewis (specifically Narnia) be read? Williams argues that the contemporary reader should shed the aforementioned qualms about Lewis because his audience is able to qualify his views according to the immense amount of personal writing from Lewis that remains accessible. The ability to further understand his thought processes means that Lewis, whether purposefully or not, “gave us the tools with which we can question even some of his own positions,” which Williams claims is “one of the most serious compliments that could be paid to any thinker, a far more serious compliment than to assume that he or she is always right.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Rowan Williams, *The Lion’s World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), x.

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Lion’s World*, 45-6.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

Because of this, the reader of Narnia is not required to piece together each character or plot device into a systematic theology of Narnia; rather, the reader is able to see the main thrust of Lewis's point in telling the story of Narnia the way he did. According to Williams, this creates

Certain central themes [that] hang together – a concern to do justice to the *difference* of God, the disturbing and exhilarating otherness of what we encounter in the life of faith; a relentless insistence on self-questioning, not so as to understand ourselves in the abstract or as 'interesting' individuals, but simply to discover where we are afraid of the truth and where we turn away into self-serving falsehood; a passion to communicate the excess of joy that is promised by the truth of God in Christ...*that is what matters most: the possibility Lewis still offers of coming across the Christian story as if for the first time* [emphasis added]. Whether for the jaded believer or the contented unbeliever, the surprise of this joy is worth tasting.¹⁴⁶

In this powerfully evocative prose, Williams captures the essence of Narnia for the contemporary reader (and an idea with which Lewis likely would have agreed) – the 'disturbing and exhilarating otherness' of Narnia meant to inspire and challenge all who read the stories. The importance of this experience, though, is that "The reader is brought to Narnia for a little in order to know Aslan better in this world."¹⁴⁷ The central figure in the Narnia stories, according to Williams, is Aslan, Lewis's allegorical Christ, and Williams demonstrates that reading the series through an 'Aslan-centric' lens proves most fulfilling.

In *The Lion's World* Williams also explains how the writing of Lewis has impacted his own life, providing an interesting perspective on how Lewis transformed the most important figure within the largest Protestant denomination in Britain. Williams explains how despite being raised in a Christian home in Britain, he did not read the Narnia books until much later in his life; despite this, he writes "I can only confess to being repeatedly humbled and reconverted by Lewis in a way

¹⁴⁶ Williams, *Lion's World*, 6-7.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

that is true of few other modern Christian writers.”¹⁴⁸ Such regular visits to and transformations by Narnia are not something Williams kept to himself, and he explains how just as “C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books continue to captivate new generations of young readers...I was delighted when my own children discovered them,” further dedicating his own book on Narnia to his children and the “memories of many hours spent reading aloud from Narnia and watching the new world open up for them.”¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, Williams writes that one important feature about Narnia for him is Lewis’s regular emphasis on the complete satisfaction, or transcendence, that Aslan offers, often through physical experience. In order to communicate this experience, Lewis “goes as far as he can towards this erotic realm without breaking the proper boundaries of a narrative for children...by making his ‘divine’ presence an *animal*.”¹⁵⁰ According to Williams, the physicality of Aslan allows Lewis’s characters to intimately interact with him in such a way that demonstrates a complete satisfaction of physical desires. Additionally, Williams emphasizes in more personal language what he believes is the central theme of Narnia, writing,

What Lewis portrays with such power and freshness in Narnia is simply *grace*: the unplanned and uncontrolled incursion into our self-preoccupied lives of God’s joy in himself...once you had begun to understand this, all sorts of *details* of Christian doctrine would fall into place – the nature of repentance as both gift and demand, the possibility of a transfiguring of the material order, the unchangeable character of God as something that necessarily goes with his freedom to be involved in the totally different life of created beings, the inseparability of knowledge and love in God, and so on.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ix; xi.

¹⁴⁹ Williams, *Lion’s World*, xii-xiii.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

The ability of Lewis to communicate anew the concept of God's joy entering into and transforming the humdrum affair of modern life – mediated through the account of Narnia – is what has created a fan of Lewis out of Williams, who has similarly sought to inspire others to seek joy in Lewis.

Lewis & Pullman

The most illuminating example of Lewis's endurance as a representative of Christianity within Britain is the intertwining of his fiction with that of Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. At the surface level of analysis, Pullman is Lewis's antithesis, for the proselytizing aims of each differ dramatically. Lewis the Christian and Pullman the secularist are pitted against one another as if the two are fighting for the souls of Britain. Andrew Marr, in an article aptly titled "Pullman does for atheism what CS Lewis did for God," heralds *His Dark Materials* as a moralistic manifesto for secularity, noting his excitement that "a post-Christian world can be as intensely filled with pity, the search for goodness, and an acute awareness of evil, as any religious universe." Far from being a positive comparison, however, Marr concludes by saying, "These books have disturbed and angered Christian theologians almost everywhere that they have been noticed. So they should: Pullman is against all that."¹⁵² The defining trait of Pullman's trilogy, then, is not Pullman's moralism but rather his anti-theism. Marr's analysis of the Christian response is accurate; from a plethora of examples, one will suffice. Michael Ward, Christian apologist and Senior Research Fellow at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, notes the comparisons between the beginnings of *The Golden Compass* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Pullman and Lewis's first books of their respective series. The two tales diverge quickly, according to Ward, who writes, "Having thus hooked his audience, Pullman proceeds to tell a tale as different

¹⁵² Andrew Marr, "Pullman does for atheism what CS Lewis did for God," *Telegraph* (London, England), Jan. 24, 2002.

from Lewis's as night is from day. Whereas Lewis was a champion of traditional Christianity, Pullman is a zealous unbeliever. Pullman evidently cannot abide Lewis's religious worldview and is determined to provide the book-buying public with a story which contradicts it in all its essential points."¹⁵³ Ward notes similarities between the two — the zeal of each author to present a belief system through literature, the aim for a popular audience, and the elements of fantasy in each work — but despite these similarities, these authors are fundamentally divided by their different beliefs. This is the predominant narrative regarding Lewis and Pullman, such that Pullman is often considered the 'secular Lewis'. For example, in a piece criticizing the Narnia series, Polly Toynbee cites Pullman as the exemplar of the secular criticism of Lewis, writing, "Philip Pullman - he of the marvellously secular trilogy *His Dark Materials* - has called Narnia 'one of the most ugly, poisonous things I have ever read'."¹⁵⁴

As Pullman's words here reveal, Pullman actively fosters this understanding of his and Lewis's literary relationship. Pullman, an avowed secularist, marvels at the literary and spiritual legacy of a man whose work he considers immoral. According to Pullman, "One of the most vile moments in the whole of children's literature, to my mind, occurs at the end of the Last Battle," when Lewis kills off his main characters via a train accident, thus (in the world of Narnia) sending them to live with Aslan forever. In Pullman's view, "To slaughter the lot of them, and then claim they're better off, is not honest storytelling: it's propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology."¹⁵⁵ Pullman has frequently asserted that *His Dark Materials* is meant to contradict and

¹⁵³ Michael Ward, "C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman," *Planet Narnia* (blog), March 5, 2019 (3:44 p.m.), http://www.planetnarnia.com/assets/documents/74/Lewis_and_Pullman.pdf.

¹⁵⁴ Polly Toynbee, "Narnia represents everything that is most hateful about religion," *Guardian* (London, England), Dec. 5, 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Pullman, "The Dark Side of Narnia," *Guardian* (London, England), Oct. 1 2002.

replace the ‘life-hating ideology’ of Christianity central to Lewis’s Narnia series. In an earlier interview, Pullman states that the thrust of his series is the replacement of Christianity with a moral humanism, saying, “The idea is that God has been kept alive longer than his natural lifespan. Will and Lyra — the hero and heroine — let him out of his crystal chamber and he disappears. He has an expression on his face of profound and exhausted relief.”¹⁵⁶ By doing away with God, Pullman hopes to give humanity a new start, based on a new morality. Inherent to Pullman’s critique of Lewis is that Lewis and his work embody the whole of Christian morality, and Pullman often attacks Lewis’s conception of Christian morality as not measuring up to its own standards. For example, he writes that “it is not the presence of Christian symbolism I object to in C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books, it is the absence of Christian virtue,” further explaining, “they give the strong impression that if you show a sneering disdain for women and girls, a fear and hatred of sexuality, an automatic mistrust of people with dark faces, a loathing of the created world, and a jeering, scoffing attitude to anyone not socially reactionary, then you have all the qualifications you need for salvation.”¹⁵⁷ Moreover, in a more recent article describing the appeal of magic in literature, Pullman jabs Lewis for his view on witchcraft, writing,

Many intelligent people believed that witchcraft existed, and that it was right and proper to stamp it out by killing those who practised it. Nor is that cast of mind safely buried in the past. Until quite recently, people known to be intelligent have felt it was acceptable to put their names to arguments like this: “If we really thought that there were people going about who had sold themselves to the devil and received supernatural powers from him in return and were using these powers to kill their neighbours or drive them mad or bring

¹⁵⁶ Frances Welch, “Jesus was like the Buddha and Galileo,” *Sunday Telegraph* (London, England), Nov. 19, 2000.

¹⁵⁷ Philip Pullman “Narnia,” *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), May 2, 2003.

bad weather — surely we would all agree that if anyone deserved the death penalty, then these filthy quislings did?” That was CS Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, 1952.¹⁵⁸

Altogether, Pullman himself separates his work from Lewis’s along the lines of belief, although Pullman is not concerned with the plausibility of Lewis’s Christianity but rather a perceived lack of morality and humanity within the works of Lewis, most notably the *Narnia* series.

The public defenses made against Pullman concerning Lewis are another example of his enduring legacy. Stephen Clark of the University of Liverpool criticizes Pullman as “obtuse” and concludes that Pullman’s “stories are a lot better than his literary or theological theories, and are — like C.S. Lewis’s — open to a more creative, sensible and sympathetic reading.”¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Melanie McDonagh wrote the *Telegraph* to say that Pullman “did Lewis a real injustice” in reference Pullman’s accusation of racism against Lewis, for “Lewis was a medievalist, and that whole spirit infuses his books.”¹⁶⁰ Pullman has harshly criticized Lewis for his depiction of the Calormenes within the literary world of Narnia – a villainous people group ostensibly parodying the Middle East. Here McDonagh denies racism on the part of Lewis, rather suggesting that Lewis offers a romantic recasting of medieval myth and legend. That fans of Lewis would defend him against Pullman not on religious grounds but rather according to the literary merit of his work is a telling example of his cultural significance.

Despite what many, including Pullman, believe about his fiction’s inherent opposition to Lewis’s, specifically concerning religiosity, it is quite clear that Lewis was more than likely the

¹⁵⁸ Philip Pullman, “Philip Pullman: why we believe in magic,” *Guardian* (London, England), Sep. 1, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Clark, “Under-age sex in Narnia,” *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), May 9, 2003.

¹⁶⁰ Melanie McDonagh, “Reading too much into Narnia tales,” *Telegraph* (London, England), June 5, 2002.

most important literary forerunner to Pullman, especially considering the nature of their children's series. After Pullman made his position on Lewis quite clear, Michael Coveney nevertheless placed him within the same literary lineage as Lewis, writing, "As in the Lord of the Rings and C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, the writer [Philip Pullman] has hit a nerve by plugging his stories into the spiritual void of modern life and confronting old values with secular cynicism."¹⁶¹ Despite the differing content of their respective messages, what makes Pullman similar to Lewis in a literary sense is that Pullman adapted Lewis's approach of communicating truth about reality through the vehicle of fantasy and myth. William Gray offers piercing insight into this phenomenon, arguing that Pullman's approach mirrors Lewis so closely that he cannot but mimic the nature of Lewis's storytelling. He writes,

Pullman admitted in a radio discussion: 'I have read [Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories"] and I have also read C.S. Lewis on...fairy stories and I find what both of them have to say when they are writing about fiction much better than what they say when they are writing fiction to be frank. They are both fine critics.'...It also appears that Lewis's claim in this piece that the Narnia stories began not as allegories, but rather as mental images or pictures...is closely echoed by Pullman's parting shot in his 2002 Guardian interview...the almost verbatim repetition of Lewis's words about the genesis of the Narnia books by a writer who arguably misreads and rewrites Lewis's work (*à la* Bloom) is curious. Of Pullman's literary relationship with Lewis, one is tempted to use the adage: 'Can't live with him, can't live without him.'¹⁶²

According to Gray and the most cursory reading of Pullman's work, Pullman clearly writes within the fantasy heritage of Lewis. SF Said declares "Pullman may not like it, but the comparison will be made, for the 54-year-old Oxford author has just finished his equivalent of Lewis's Narnia

¹⁶¹ Michael Coveney, "The Devil is in the details" *Daily Mail* (London, England), Feb. 6, 2004.

¹⁶² William Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 154-5.

books.”¹⁶³ Regardless of what Pullman might say about Lewis or his perceived immorality in *Narnia*, Pullman’s fiction is inescapably similar.

More than their literary similarities, the similar content as well as the public interplay between *His Dark Materials* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* are clear manifestations of religious narratives that impact the secular and the religious up to the present day in Britain. William Gray proposes that Pullman’s goal in *His Dark Materials* is “to suggest the possibility of a reconciliation of humanity with itself and with nature in which experience re-appropriates the lost vision of innocence, but on a higher plane.” The vehicle through which Pullman attempts this goal is an adaptation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which would seem to make *His Dark Materials* another manifestation of Christian myth. The issue with Pullman’s distancing himself from Christianity is that such a move is only made possible by the collapse of discursive Christianity suggested by Callum Brown, such that “Whatever we may think of Lewis’s Christian commitments...there seems to be truth in his insight that only when a mythology ceases to be believed in as a living religious system does it become free to be recycled as imaginative ‘Romance’.”¹⁶⁴ While Pullman may propose a new age of secular morality, that he borrows the framework for that morality (his myth) from Christianity cannot but infuse his ‘anti-Christian’ literature and morality with elements of Christianity. Julia Briggs agrees, writing, “Christian ethical thinking is built into Western subjectivity, and more difficult to avoid than it looks...Pullman resents Lewis’s didacticism, yet his trilogy recalls Lewis in a number of details...nor is Pullman exempt from the charge of

¹⁶³ SF Said, “Big ideas for small people,” *Daily Telegraph* (London, England), Oct. 21, 2000.

¹⁶⁴ Gray, *Fantasy, Myth, and the Measure of Truth*, 4-5.

preaching.”¹⁶⁵ If the propensity of those in Britain toward religiosity has not changed even though the manifestations of that religiosity have, Pullman’s *Dark Materials* emerges as another narrative espousing spirituality, although non-Christian. Pullman and his work simply cannot escape the religiosity of the world he inhabits, literary or real. Bernice Martin suggests, “In the end, the ‘atheism’ of *His Dark Materials* may be less important than the fact that it is a bestseller that treats theological matters with the deepest seriousness in what is to all appearances a ‘secular culture’.”¹⁶⁶ Although the dominant narrative suggests that the Britain who received *Narnia* is fundamentally different than the Britain who similarly received *His Dark Materials*, an enduring religiosity within that same culture explains why British audiences readily accepted two series who treated weighty spiritual issues with the utmost importance, two series whose similarities far outweigh their differences.

¹⁶⁵ Julia Briggs, “Fighting the forces of evil,” *Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), Dec. 22, 2000.

¹⁶⁶ Bernice Martin, “Dark Materials? Philip Pullman and Children’s Literature,” in *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives*, eds. Jane Garnett et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 187.

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