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AN “OLD WESTERN MAN”: C.S. LEWIS IN LIGHT OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Herman Middleton first appeared in *Road to Emmaus* in Winter 2003, when he described his life as a theology student in Thessalonica, Greece.¹ Since then, he has received his Master’s Degree and published what has quickly become an English-language Orthodox classic, *“Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit”* – short lives and excerpts from the writings of contemporary Greek spiritual fathers. Herman is now completing his doctoral dissertation on C.S. Lewis and Orthodox Christianity, and has generously agreed to share his insights on this remarkable 20th-century Christian.

RTE: Herman, it’s good to have you back. You received your B.A. from Wheaton College in Illinois, and now, after a decade in Greece, you’ve finished your education. How did you decide on C. S. Lewis as the subject of your Greek dissertation?

HERMAN: Initially, I’d thought of two other dissertation topics, one dealing with St. Theodore the Studite on the source of authority in the Church, and the other on Fr. Sophrony Sakharov’s gnosiology (theory of knowledge), but I finally decided I wanted to do something that more than five or ten people in Greece would end up reading, something that would be useful and that I would enjoy working on afterwards.

At that point C.S. Lewis leapt to mind. Many people have come to Orthodoxy through Lewis, or at least credited him with help along the way. He is undoubtedly one of the most influential Christian writers of the 20th century, and there hadn’t been an in-depth study of him done from an Orthodox perspective. People don’t think of him as a theologian, but he’s had a greater influence than most 20th-century theologians who wrote more esoteric books that were read by far fewer people. I felt it was important that Orthodox (especially Orthodox in the West) know what he wrote and where he was coming from.

Opposite: Framed photo of C.S. Lewis from The Eagle and Child Pub, Oxford, where Lewis often met with friends.

¹ “Living Theology in Thessalonica,” *Road to Emmaus*, #12, Winter 2003.



Herman Middleton

RTE: I've heard Orthodox converts ask whether they can still read Lewis, as if it is somehow backpeddling.

HERMAN: Or people say, "I do love him, and what does that say about Orthodoxy?" It's the same question we ask about other pious, faithful Christians who do not belong to the Orthodox Church. "Where do we place them? How do we think about this?"

What we can say is that there is a difference between being inside the Orthodox Church and being outside of the Orthodox Church. This doesn't reflect on the merit of the person, but on the grace of the Church through the sacraments. The other thing is that when you look at Lewis's writing, you can say, "This is wonderful," "He's got it here," or "This is problematic." You aren't making judgements about him, you're evaluating aspects of his understanding in light of Orthodox belief. St. Gregory Palamas talks about how, in the rhetoric of defending the faith, there is sometimes room for a lack of precision – not flexibility, but a certain imprecision.

RTE: That you can over- or underemphasize a point in order to get it across?

HERMAN: Yes. And also in the heat of argument, when you are trying to get at something and it's still not clear. This is how I've always felt about Fr. Seraphim Rose's writings; it's having a "gut" sense of theology. The Church only clarifies things when it is absolutely necessary. It doesn't go around creating theoretical problems or theoretical ideas.

Also, Lewis was dealing with the modern world in a way that I haven't seen many people attempt. He saw himself as an apologist to the modern sceptic. He dealt mostly with criticisms of Christianity, which he showed to be prejudices rather than logically reasoned arguments. He was at Oxford with, among others, some incredibly intelligent atheists who were attacking Christianity on many fronts, and he tried to provide a defense of Christianity in the face of modern scepticism. In the heat of that debate, he wasn't always completely clear, and this was largely because he didn't have the necessary dogmatic foundation.

In a way, that was just as well, because he belonged to a church that

didn't have a clear-cut tradition – Anglican tradition is very broad. But what kept him small-"o" orthodox to the Christian tradition was his faith, and his dedication to prayer and reading Scripture. His desire to understand Scripture was incredibly sincere. The fact that he hadn't been trained theologically was actually a benefit because he didn't come to the debate with preconceived notions; he wasn't dedicated to a system of thought.

Most of Lewis's arguments are focused on overcoming prejudice by addressing intellectual obstacles to faith. Lewis would say, "I'm not trying to dogmatize, I'm trying to create room for a healthy agnosticism." Just as Christians often dogmatize, atheists also dogmatize their disbelief, and he tried to counter this by saying, "You say this, but you actually don't have a foundation. This is just supposition."

Nevertheless, although he says that Christianity can be defended intellectually, it wasn't logical arguments that finally brought him to faith. He described himself as the most reluctant convert in England.

RTE: Yes, it was an experience of God that led him to Christianity, and his intellectual training that allowed him to articulate his belief. How close does his writing resonate with Orthodoxy?

HERMAN: For the most part, I find that he is very close to Orthodoxy, especially when he bases his writing on his own study of Scripture and his prayer life, which was that of a pious dedicated Christian who wanted to know the meaning of the Incarnation. Through this honest search, he came to many positions that the Orthodox Fathers hold as well.

Lewis often focused on modern questions, particularly the relationship between Christianity and culture, something that modern Orthodox theologians haven't really dealt with yet. He wrote wonderful essays on Christianity and culture and on ethical issues, and he foresaw the path modern science is taking. These are all things that Orthodox people can use and benefit from by reading him.

Lewis deals with real situations and real issues. This isn't to say that fourth-century Christology, for example, is irrelevant, but you have to apply it, and that isn't done enough today. Also, in Greek we would say that Lewis *eixe perioxomeno*, that is, "had content." He was a man who had had a certain amount of spiritual experience and could speak with a certain authority.

RTE: What would you call "the best of Lewis"?

HERMAN: I would most enjoy rereading his essays. As far as his books go, *Miracles* is quite heavy going. *Mere Christianity* is much more accessible. *The Problem of Pain* was one of his earliest works, and that is part of the reason there are some problems in it.

The Great Divorce is one of his most interesting novels. Reading it, I began to grasp what the Catholics were struggling to understand with the idea of purgatory. It's a legitimate question, although not one we should spend too much time thinking about because the details of how human souls pass on to God are a mystery and in this earthly life we won't ever know exactly how it works out, but somehow the human soul is increasingly purified and goes from "glory to glory." But if we aren't at a level of perfected holiness when we die – which we never will be as there is a constant growth – what does this mean, especially if we die as sinners and spiritually immature souls? Lewis does not deal with any of this in a dogmatic way, but he provides an arena for asking pertinent questions.

Out of all of his books, perhaps *The Screwtape Letters* is the most useful and spiritually edifying. He hits on many things that are universally true, and Orthodox can definitely benefit here from being kicked (spiritually) in the backside a bit, along with everyone else. How did he get so many things right? Lewis begins to answer this question in the Preface to the book:

Some have paid me an undeserved compliment by supposing that my *Letters* were the ripe fruit of many years' study in moral and ascetic theology. They forget that there is an equally reliable, though less creditable, way of learning how temptation works. 'My heart' – I need no other's – 'showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly.'

While from an Orthodox perspective this would seem like a natural thing to say, I get the feeling that in the milieu he was living in at Oxford, it would actually have been a very humble thing for him to say. In the world that he lived in one wouldn't base the things that one wrote on one's own experience. You would base them on research, your intellectual understanding of other texts. His point was that in the spiritual life you can learn a lot just living and struggling as a Christian.

Orthodoxy, *true* Christianity, is always very subjective. You aren't dissecting things from the outside, you are attentive to what is going on

inside. In the West, especially in the academic world, objectivity is held up as the ideal. The idea of objectivity is that you can step outside and look at something as an object, while in the Christian life, you can't really do that.

Fr. Sophrony Sakharov talks about God as being "Who" as opposed to "What." His point is that God is a Person with whom you have a relationship; He is not an abstract idea that can be observed. There has been a kind of myth that we can be objective, that we must strive for objectivity so that we don't bring in our own prejudices, but this is impossible. If you are there, you bring who you are. You just need to be honest about what that is.

Actually, contemporary theories of knowledge now suggest that there is really no way you can divorce yourself from the object. The object perceived is influenced by the person looking. This is a new approach in the hard sciences that takes into consideration the fact that the object has a subject. Perfect objectivity is a myth.

So in *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis was saying, "Anything that is true in *The Screwtape Letters* is a result of being able to see into my own heart. I can see the evil there and the things I am struggling with, and that is enough to teach me." This is how the Fathers wrote, out of their experience.

Otherwise, I can't really explain why he ended up being so Orthodox. He is very faithful to the biblical witness. He had real problems with Protestant ideas such as Calvinism's understanding of the depravity of man, for example, because there is so much in Scripture that talks about man's responsibility. If man is completely depraved, how could he possibly be responsible? So, from a scriptural perspective, it is remarkable how capable Lewis is of keeping seemingly contradictory things in balance.

Thin Ice, "Supposal," and Seeds of Divine Longing

RTE: And what do you see as Lewis's weak points?

HERMAN: Lewis was essentially an experiential theologian as opposed to an intellectual or speculative theologian. Problems arise when he becomes speculative. Especially in the West, divergence from tradition often came from this very speculative, intellectual approach to Christianity and the scriptures, rather than dealing with actual problems, which is what the Fathers of the Church did in the Councils.

That said, I do feel that Lewis wasn't speculating for the sake of speculation. He didn't take it upon himself to write theology; opportunities came to him. People asked him to write articles, give radio talks, and so on. He felt that what he could offer was to help make Christianity a viable option for the modern sceptic. When he does speculate, it is always out of a desire to provide an apologetic and to encourage a certain "agnosticism" in scientists and atheists towards their own disbelief, so that the foundations of disbelief can be called into question. But, not having a formal foundation of Orthodoxy and the Church Fathers, he sometimes finds himself on thin ice.

The most obvious example of this is in *The Problem of Pain*, where he tries to deal with one of the most serious modern objections to Christianity: "How could an all-powerful and all-good God allow His creation to suffer?"

Addressing the problem of pain wasn't something unique to Lewis. His and Christianity's answer is that ultimately pain and the possibility of pain in the fallen world is necessary because of the existence of human freedom. He goes so far as to provide vivid examples of a world that wouldn't allow human freedom in order to avoid pain and how problematic that would be on a spiritual level.

In a particularly problematic section of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis speculates regarding the nature of animal pain: "Now that we know that carnivorousness existed before humans and was obviously a fall from an ideal, there must have been evil before Adam and perhaps we can speculate a fall of animals." This is a great idea if you agree with evolutionary cosmology, but otherwise it creates a great many other questions and quite frankly, the Pauline and biblical understanding of the fall of man is that through man's fall, all of nature fell.

Now, what does that really mean for Lewis? If, by the end of his life he had seen this passage as problematic, it seems reasonable that he would have done a revision, but perhaps he felt that because he had presented it as speculation, it was unnecessary to return to it.

This is one of the areas in which I'm still struggling to understand Lewis: his views on evolution. I've spoken to a number of people who have studied Lewis longer than I have and they essentially agree that he was a "theistic evolutionist," that is, he accepted the basic Darwinian view, but with the guidance of an intelligent designer; that evolution was God's way of creating the world.

A discussion on this arose between him and a Dr. Joad, head of the Department of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London. Dr. Joad was an agnostic on the verge of conversion who responded, "I appreciate what you are doing, but the image of a monkey being tempted by Satan is a little too much for me." Lewis apologized, and said that that wasn't the image he had wanted to give, and that an animal fall probably would have taken on a different form. So, he basically got into some very murky water here based on this presupposition. What makes things even more unclear is that in other places he explicitly rejects evolution.

RTE: He rejects it even as a complement of theistic design?

HERMAN: He talks about the "spirit of evolution" prior to Darwin and mentions two pre-Darwinian literary expressions of an evolutionary world-view: *Nibelung's Ring* and Keat's *Hyperion*. Lewis argued that Darwin was living in an era when this idea was in the air and because he went out looking for evidence for it, it wasn't surprising that he found it. In speaking of the appeal of evolution, Lewis said, "the mythology of evolution is very powerful. It has always taken hold of me and rung true in my deepest being, and it continues to do so. It appeals to every part of me except for my mind, and so I believe it no longer."



RTE: Have you found other troublesome areas?

HERMAN: Other problems include several points that Bishop Kallistos Ware (who is very appreciative of Lewis in general) has addressed, including the absence of Trinitarian theology in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In fact, Lewis doesn't talk a great deal about the Holy Trinity or about the Holy Spirit in any of his writings. He holds to the doctrine of the Trinity as any traditional Anglican would, but that hasn't translated to his writings.

If you look at the Holy Fathers of the first and second century, they didn't have a developed theology of the Holy Spirit. They had a living experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives, but they didn't write about Him and it wasn't clarified until the fourth century when heresies began springing up regarding the nature of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.



There's no question that he accepted the Holy Trinity. Bishop Kallistos' concern here was that if *The Chronicles of Narnia* were supposed to be a Christian allegory, there wasn't a Trinitarian dimension. One answer to this is that Lewis spoke of *The Chronicles* not as an allegory, but more like a "supposal," where you don't take anything as a direct allegory.

He wrote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* for his goddaughter, Lucy Barfield, and the rest of *The Chronicles of Narnia* came as a sort of afterthought. His children's fiction grew out of a love of story and it was perhaps inevitable that such a devoted Christian and gifted writer would include a great deal of Christian imagery and mythology. I don't think he wrote the books as an intentional teaching device, but considering who he was – an apologist, a Christian, a teacher – perhaps it was inevitable that it would come out that way.

Throughout *The Chronicles*, and especially in *The Last Battle*, Lewis plants seeds of divine longing in his readers' hearts, to awaken the desire to experience their own resurrection. This is where he comes closest to Orthodoxy. He understands that people are converted ultimately through their hearts, and that if seed falls on good ground, it will be nurtured by grace.

RTE: When you read Lewis's essays, you realize that he wrote for a very large audience: students, academics, clergy, village parishioners, young soldiers, as well as millions of listeners to his radio broadcasts.

HERMAN: Yes, and because of this, he was charged with anti-intellectualism. There is a book, *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, written by John Beversluis, a professor of philosophy at Indiana University, who tries to debunk Lewis's arguments philosophically, based on logic. His main thesis is that Lewis was dishonest, because for him all that mattered was that people converted to Christianity. Because Lewis already believed in Christianity, it didn't ultimately matter to him that his arguments were logically well-founded; all that mattered was that they worked, that they were effective. But maybe one can say this is Beversluis' problem. From his book it seems that he is probably an atheist, and his religion is logic.

I mention this because Lewis tried to provide intellectual arguments for both the university academic and the common man, because the common man had also bought into modern atheistic thinking, much that,

Opposite: The Kilns, C.S. Lewis's home in Oxford at Headington Quarry.

Lewis argued, is essentially prejudiced. Lewis was a gifted rhetorician: his works are often very convincing.

Lewis and Orthodoxy

RTE: In returning to aspects of Lewis's writing that are problematic for Orthodox, did he disagree with the Orthodox and Catholic veneration of the Mother of God and the saints, or did he simply not discuss it as a part of his stance of "mere Christianity?" In his writing, he honors their historical roles, but seems to stop there.

HERMAN: He would have said, "I don't see my job as healing the divisions of the Church, although that's very important." This was why he didn't deal with divisive issues, or with certain aspects of Scripture. He knew where his strengths as a Christian apologist lay and how best to use them. His idea of mere Christianity was that there is a foundation of Christianity that all Christians accept. Of course, as a Catholic student of his said, mere Christianity for Lewis as a Protestant is one thing, but for a Roman Catholic (and we would say, for Orthodox) mere Christianity is something else. It necessarily includes the active veneration of the Mother of God and of the saints.

Along the same lines, another difference between Lewis and Orthodoxy is that the Orthodox have a much clearer understanding of the significance of liturgy to the life of the Church than Lewis did. Lewis certainly believed in the spiritual reality of the sacraments, and he attended church frequently, but his attitude toward the Anglican services seemed, to a certain extent, ambivalent. He makes it very clear that he didn't like Anglican hymn-singing. He did believe it was important for people to worship together; he was obedient to church tradition and faithful to his duty as a Christian. It's difficult to pin Lewis down sometimes...there are so many seemingly disparate aspects to his thought that it's not easy to figure out exactly where he stood on some matters. What we can say with certainty, however, is that he had a very regular daily schedule, almost monastic in its rhythm: at 8 a.m. he said morning prayers, at 9 a.m. he was usually found in church for matins, and on Sundays he also attended liturgy.

He also made some remarks about liturgics that Orthodox could agree with. One of these was in his last book, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, when, during a time of increasing Anglican liturgical reform, he wrote about how he disliked the continual small changes in the liturgy.

At the service, he would wonder, "What has changed this week, what is the priest going to do now?" Liturgical renewal was something that many western churches were going through that didn't happen in Orthodoxy. Lewis felt that the ideal is for the liturgy to stay the same and for you to become so familiar with it that you just pray through it. It's a sacred structure for the Holy Spirit to work through, and he recognized that.

RTE: Was he ever exposed to Orthodox practice?

HERMAN: Again, in *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis refers to his experiences at an Orthodox liturgy: "What pleased me most about a Greek Orthodox mass I once attended was that there seemed to be no prescribed behaviour for the congregation. Some stood, some knelt, some sat, some walked; one crawled about the floor like a caterpillar. And the beauty of it was that nobody took the slightest notice of what anyone else was doing."²

Also there was great hope until the '50's that there would be a reconciliation between the Anglicans and the Orthodox. Talks with the Anglicans were quite advanced. We know that Lewis did give at least one talk to an Orthodox group, which was sponsored by *Sobornost*. Unfortunately, this talk was lost and there is no transcript. It was called something like, "An Icon, a Toy, and a Soldier."

I also suspect that Lewis felt that interchurch relations wasn't his forum. There were representatives of his own church doing this, and he felt that was their role. He always felt a little ill-equipped to do what he was doing with apologetics because he hadn't been trained, but at the same time, God was providing him with these opportunities.

RTE: How familiar was he with the Church Fathers?

HERMAN: We know that he read St. Athanasius on the Incarnation. He refers to St. Gregory the Great, to Origen, to St. Irenaeus and to St. John Chrysostom (although through a German commentator). He had a great respect for the Fathers, and an acute sense of tradition, but he didn't regard himself as a theologian so he didn't spend time developing his knowledge in that area. He had a great many professional and domestic responsibilities and very little "free time" to do the kind of intensive study that would have demanded.

² Lewis, C. S. *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1964, pg. 10.

RTE: What is the importance of Lewis for an Orthodox reader? It's natural that western Christians would have read him, but there is also growing interest in him in Russia, Greece, and Eastern Europe.

HERMAN: I recently spoke to a young Greek-American man who credits Lewis with saving his Orthodoxy precisely because Lewis dealt with modern criticisms of Christianity as an apologist. For some Orthodox I think he is very, very valuable. Because he is careful not to promote his affiliation with the Anglican Communion, he can actually be used more easily than other writers. Perhaps his most significant contribution is his interaction with modern western problems, which, as I said, we Orthodox haven't really dealt with sufficiently.

Christianity and Culture

After the Reformation there was an increasing emphasis upon the intellect in the West, and a stepping away from church tradition and scriptural authority, and odd ideas crept in under the guise of Christianity. In his essay, "Christianity and Culture," Lewis criticizes the confusion of the aesthetic with the spiritual that began in the nineteenth century (so he argues) in the English language with Matthew Arnold's use of the English word *spiritual* with the meaning of the German word *geistlich*. When Arnold used the word "spiritual" to speak of art, he displaced the traditional idea of human spirituality. Man's essence no longer had to be bound to religion; it could now be attributed to his "creative powers" – art, aesthetics, and higher feelings.

Lewis's point was that the aesthete, the culturally sensitive man, is really no more religious than the truck driver. They both do their work. If they do their work well, it is pleasing to the Lord because it is done for Him, in a manner that is pleasing to Him. Their spirituality is bound to religious practice, not to aesthetic or cultural values. Higher culture has an allure. As an undergraduate at Wheaton College, I remember buying into the idea that artistic and cultural pursuits are somehow inherently spiritual.

In a letter to his friend, Arthur Greeves, dated 15 June 1920, Lewis wrote: "We read of spiritual efforts, and our imagination makes us believe that, because we enjoy the idea of doing them, we have done them. I am appalled to see how much of the change which I thought I had undergone lately was only imaginary. The real work seems still to be done. It is so fatally easy

to confuse an aesthetic appreciation of the spiritual life with the life itself – to dream that you have waked, washed, and dressed, and then to find yourself still in bed."³

Lewis was very aware of the power of the imagination and of man's ability to fool himself, and he was always suspicious of this spiritualizing of the intellect and of creativity. He realized that real spiritual faith, real growth, is something that is much more tangible and real. You don't read a book about overcoming anger and then pass a theoretical exam. You work at it. It's a process.

You get intimations of this in *The Screwtape Letters*. The demon uncle tells his student nephew something like, "Focus your patient's attention on those lofty values of goodness and peace. Make them weep about a person who has been killed in war, and then turn around and bite the head off his neighbor. When it comes down to real brass tacks, something that would improve his relationship with his neighbor, have him focus on these other ideas."

RTE: Lewis died in 1963. If he had lived another few decades, how do you think he would have responded to the changes in the Anglican Church?

HERMAN: I'm not sure he could have stayed where he was, based on what has happened in the Anglican Church. One interesting example of his traditional views was when the first woman was ordained as a priest in the Anglican communion in Hong Kong in 1944. Lewis wrote to Dorothy Sayers asking if she would write to the newspaper about it, as he didn't feel that he could do so as credibly because he was a man. Dorothy Sayers replied that she didn't really see it as a theological problem, and she never wrote the letter. Lewis, however, did end up writing about this issue, and it shows his concern for the way things were going.

RTE: He has interesting ideas on men, women, and relationships in general. For example, in one of his essays or letters, he talks about the confusion between the sexes that results from the word "unselfish." Men, he says, most often use "unselfish" to mean not being a bother to others, while women use it to mean going out of one's way to do something for someone else.

For me, one of his most interesting passages on relationship is in *That Hideous Strength*. Jane Studdock, one of the main characters, is a modern

³ Lewis, C.S., *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Vol. I: Family Letters 1905-1931, New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004, pg. 906.

agnostic graduate student, unhappily married to Mark, an ambitious young university lecturer. She is speaking here with Ransom, the director of the small Christian fellowship she happens onto:

"I suppose our marriage was just a mistake." The Director said nothing. "What would you, what would the people you are talking about say about a case like that?" "I will tell you if you really want to know," said the Director. "Please," said Jane reluctantly. "They would say," he answered, "that you do not fail in obedience through lack of love, but have lost love because you never attempted obedience." Something in Jane that would normally have reacted to such a remark with anger or laughter was banished to a remote distance...

"I thought love meant equality," she said, "and free companionship." "Ah, equality," said the Director, "we must talk about some other time. Yes, we all must be guarded by equal rights from one another's greed because we are fallen, just as we must all wear clothes for the same reason ... Equality is not the deepest thing, you know."

"I always thought that was just what it was, I thought that it was in their souls where people were equal." "You were mistaken," said he gravely. "That is the last place where they are equal. Equality before the law, equality of incomes, that is all very well. Equality guards life, it doesn't make it. It is medicine, not food."⁴

HERMAN: Yes, each one is given his own equality, but there is perfect natural equality only when there is perfect love. Equality in this world is one of the laws that keeps us from devouring one another.

RTE: Another interesting idea, and this is an echo of St. Paul, is that submission in marriage is just a small earthly reflection of the much deeper personal surrender that faith requires.

HERMAN: Yes, and Lewis is also getting at the idea of us being the "sons of Adam and daughters of Eve," that if we go back far enough, we spring from one root. Like most modern people, Jane and Mark have no sense of this.

In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis portrays untamed nature, untamed creation, in a Christian context. The modern world in particular has tried to box the world into categories, and we are suffocating. People feel cornered,

⁴ Lewis, C.S., *That Hideous Strength*, New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing, 1977, pg. 147-148.

that God doesn't exist, or if He does, He is like a robot, or we are like robots; we are caught in a matrix. But Lewis's depiction of a Christian Merlin, awakened for a last battle against the forces of evil, is very appealing because he is somehow that medieval man with his natural faculties intact, unfragmented. Merlin is not made into a saint, but his innocence has not been completely lost. He is portrayed as a Christian who, in his own time, consciously participated in nature. All of us have had some moments in our lives when we felt at one with the nature around us, but that continual uninterrupted, integral humanness is a wonderful image.

Many Orthodox feel close to Lewis because he is like a pre-modern. He identified himself as an "old western man," and he tried to reach back to the mindset of pre-Enlightenment humanity. He was a great critic of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance and identified himself with the medieval world, a world still very close to Orthodoxy. With the Enlightenment, however, objectivity became an absolute. Fr. Sophrony Sakharov said that there is nothing so negative as the idea of Truth as "What." Truth is never "What," Truth is always "Who." If it is something you can touch and evaluate, you can do so only because it is dead. Objective truth is dead, whereas a subjective truth is something you are in relationship with.

Although modern Greeks and Russians may not have treated creation as they should, as their theology teaches them, theologically there is a place in Orthodoxy for a responsible attitude towards creation, while in the West we have often developed an antagonism toward creation. Man versus nature, reason versus faith. Greece didn't go through a Reformation or an Enlightenment. They never burned scientists because they seemed to be contradicting the Christian world-view. In Lewis's writings, fictionalized characters like a Christianized Merlin are used to embody that earlier and more cohesive world-view.

RTE: From what I remember, he saw social action as an integral part of a Christian's response to the goodness of the created world. For instance, ecology wasn't only for nature's sake, it was reverencing God's whole plan of creation.

HERMAN: Definitely. In fact, there are aspects of Lewis's theology and approach to Christianity that echo an Orthodox understanding of creation that is seldom encountered in the West. In fact, in his celebrated sermon,

“The Weight of Glory,” Lewis actually speaks of the presence of God’s energies working through creation:

We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendour which she fitfully reflects.

And in there, beyond Nature, we shall eat of the tree of life. At present, if we are reborn in Christ, the spirit in us lives directly on God; but the mind and still more the body, receives life from Him at a thousand removes – through our ancestors, through our food, through the elements. The faint, far-off results of those energies which God’s creative rapture implanted in matter when He made the worlds are what we now call physical pleasures; and even thus filtered, they are too much for our present management. What would it be to taste at the fountain-head that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating? Yet that, I believe, is what lies before us. The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy. As St. Augustine said, the rapture of the saved soul will “flow over” into the glorified body. In the light of our present specialized and depraved appetites we cannot imagine this *torrens voluptatis*, and I warn everyone most seriously not to try.

Again, I should emphasize that Lewis’s theology is at the level of gut-feeling, an intuitive sense of truth. His theological language is imprecise at best and certainly does not provide an adequate theological understanding of creation as found in patristic cosmology.

Lewis’s Fictional Works

RTE: Can we talk now about Lewis’s fiction: *The Chronicles of Narnia*; his space trilogy – *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*; and *Till We Have Faces*?

HERMAN: I find that much of his fiction lacks the richness of detail of J.R.R. Tolkien’s works. The volumes that make up *The Chronicles of Narnia* are short and aren’t really enough to thoroughly develop Narnia. That said, he tells a very entertaining story, and of course, the first book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is full of Christian allegory (even though he would

Opposite: Holy Trinity Church where Lewis worshipped and is buried.



argue that it's not Christian allegory at all!). *Till We Have Faces* is probably his most mature novel and is the one I most look forward to re-reading. It is a retelling of the Cupid and Psyche myth, and in it, Lewis develops the hiddenness, mysteriousness, and sovereignty of God. It's probably his most profound fiction.

RTE: It is difficult to think of his fiction without also thinking of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Not only were Lewis and Tolkien friends, but they read portions of their works-in-progress aloud to each other, and the Catholic Tolkien helped Lewis in his conversion to Christianity. Even so, the modern novel is a literary style which has only existed for a few centuries. How do you see fiction fitting into an Orthodox world-view, and Lewis's works in particular?



J.R.R. Tolkien, 1972.

HERMAN: I think from an Orthodox perspective, it could be argued that the greatest writers of fiction were the realists, and in particular, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the Greek Alexander Papadiamantes. Both were realists and refused to romanticize; they wrote about a world that was real, a world of joy and of tragedy. They didn't romanticize the Church, they didn't simplify issues. They tried to provide an accurate picture of both good and evil. By virtue of that, the truth shines through their works much more profoundly and beautifully.

As regards the imaginative literature of Tolkien and Lewis, an Orthodox person might say that they are less than ideal as artistic forms, in the same way that western religious paintings, although artistically masterpieces, are less ideal on a spiritual level than icons. At the same time, a Renaissance painting of Christ is much more edifying than the distasteful religious exhibits done by some modern artists.

In fact, there is a significant difference between Tolkien's and Lewis's views of fantasy. They've been painted with the same brush, but Tolkien felt that *The Chronicles of Narnia* were too allegorical. Tolkien's objection to allegory was that if you put conscious meaning into a story, this meaning is limited by the author's understanding. This destroys it as art and it hinders God's ability to speak to people through the story.

But where Tolkien really differs from Lewis is in this sense of divine inspiration in creative work. He felt that there was too much rationality, too much of Lewis in *The Chronicles*, and that this destroyed something. Of course, this isn't black and white. He supported much of what Lewis did, and Lewis, in turn, speaks of divine inspiration in art, but in a less direct way.

Lewis felt that the artist and the charwoman's work were equal in the sight of God if both were done for Him and that, in a sense, culture is only necessary for those who aren't simple enough. There is a much faster, safer, and more sure way to Christ that many pious souls have followed for generations, and that is the way of simple faith. Art and culture are props that sophisticated people need to get to the point where these simple souls start, which is faith in Christ.

RTE: But Lewis would be the first to admit that we aren't simply spiritualized beings, and if we can't fill our senses with beautiful things, we will fill them with ugly ones. If we don't cultivate beauty, even on a natural level, we descend to something less. I suspect that someone who is spiritually advanced might appreciate art, music, and literature even more deeply than the average person, but he wouldn't try to use it as spiritual food.

HERMAN: Of course, and we can receive a mistaken impression of saints from hagiography. We may make the mistake of thinking that they are all basically alike, and very different from us. In the lives of contemporary spiritual fathers of Greece, we see how unique each one was, and how human. For example, in his later years, Father Porphyrios of Athens began taking piano lessons, simply because he loved music.

But for Lewis, the most valuable thing was to plant these seeds of a Christian mythology that could eventually bear fruit. He wanted people to look through the image he was trying to create to the prototype. Also, he was interested in his fiction as a story and he wanted people to approach it as children approach it.

RTE: Some of the Church Fathers write about not using the imagination, particularly in prayer or contemplation. How would that translate to imaginative literature?

HERMAN: Like Lewis, the Fathers of the Church don't romanticize man's imaginative faculty. In his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, St. John of Damascus describes the imagination without condemning or praising it.

He says that imagination is a faculty of the unreasoning part of the soul that is brought into action through the organs of sense.

Although they regard the imagination as an important part of man's being, the Fathers also say that it can be used by the evil one to confuse and deceive. Although their main concern is the danger of the imagination in prayer, this can also be applied to reading imaginative literature. Christians need to separate the wheat from the chaff, to consider what they read in light of the Church's teaching.

In his essay to young men on how they might derive profit from pagan literature, St. Basil the Great explains its usefulness for the soul: "...While it is through virtue that we must enter upon this life of ours and since much has been uttered in praise of virtue by the poets, much by historians and much more still by philosophers, we ought especially to apply ourselves to such literature." Then he advises which historians and poets to read. He doesn't simply say, "It's all wonderful." Certain things are better than others. Of course, this is a little different case because St. Basil was referring to a pre-Christian world.

RTE: As opposed to a Christian society that is re-inventing paganism?

HERMAN: Yes, they still had a lot of grace by virtue of searching for God, and their pagan literature was still innocent, a part of the search for God. Unlike classical literature, most modern literature doesn't have a foundation of virtue. Knowing that Lewis was a realist regarding spiritual life validates his literature for me. Although he is creative and gives free rein to his imagination, he doesn't romanticize the imagination. Like the Fathers, he felt that the imagination is not a spiritual faculty. His literature is essentially didactic; he is trying to teach, although he would not have put it like that.

RTE: If you put meaning into something, you must hope that people will catch that meaning.

HERMAN: He did want his works to have meaning, but he wanted people to come to God through them, for them to be an aid in experiencing God rather than a moral sermon. For instance, there is an obvious difference between *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan wrote a direct allegory, with each character named for the vice or virtue he represented.

RTE: As soon as Lewis and Tolkien became popular, there was a rash of fantasy novels, many of them in several volumes. Often they didn't hang together and, unfortunately, moved away from Lewis and Tolkien's goodness and nobility into a darker orbit.

HERMAN: As literature, Lewis's science fiction trilogy doesn't always hold together either, it's more of a vehicle for his ideas. Nevertheless, we could ask, "Is there such a thing as a Christian science fiction novel, and if there is, what would that mean?" I'm not sure that Lewis asked that question, or if it bothered him. As an apologist, he felt (even if it was somewhat subconscious) that if works such as *The War of the Worlds* were popular, science fiction might be a way to reach people. "If they are already reading this stuff, how do I get into their world and respond to these ideas?" I'm quite sure that he wouldn't have put it in these terms and I should note that his attitude and approach was a great deal more nuanced than I have presented it. That said, I think that, in general, this was definitely a factor in Lewis's fiction, again consciously or subconsciously. A good example of Lewis's apologetic use of science fiction is in *Out of the Silent Planet* when he sends his character Ransom to Malacandra (Mars) in a rocket ship. Ransom is amazed at what he experiences in space.

RTE: That in itself is a huge departure from other science fiction. Lewis saw the heavens as full of light and angelic beings, as opposed to the usual dark, empty, or hostile space.

HERMAN: Yes. It was very interesting that he used outer space as an apologetic device to battle the modern atheistic cosmology, to talk about God's presence in all of creation. He wanted to debunk modern prejudices that had been created through science and popular literature. He also has a remarkable passage where he talks about the grotesque forms of life on other planets that have been created by science fiction writers:

His mind, like so many minds of his generation, was richly furnished with bogies. He had read his H. G. Wells and others. His universe was peopled with horrors such as ancient and medieval mythology could hardly rival. No insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable, no twitching feelers, rasping wings, slimy coils, curling tentacles, no monstrous union of superhuman

intelligence and insatiable cruelty seemed to him anything but likely on an alien world.

When Ransom arrives on Mars, he meets creatures that he discovers to be very lovely once he overcomes the prejudices of his own culture.

RTE: They are not only lovely, but subservient to God. Lewis also uses the space trilogy to alert readers to the danger of progressive amorality through the misuse of education and technology. He was one of the first Christian writers to go after what is now a very common theme.

Magic and Imagination in Children's Literature

HERMAN: Evil seems to have become more powerful today, and it spreads fast with technology such as the Internet. The more access people have, the more likely they are to misuse it. I recently came across a feature on Yahoo! where you can see the most searched-for topics on any given day. On one index focusing on what children age 12 to 18 were looking for, the 12th most popular subject search was Satanism.

RTE: Young people hunger for intense experience, but without models of nobility and heroism, they look for something else to plunge into.

HERMAN: Yes, and this could be a problem for the wider public, with books like the *Harry Potter* series. For an Orthodox family consciously struggling to live as Christians, if their child reads *Harry Potter*, he is probably not going to go searching for wizardry schools to learn to cast spells, but outside of that context, it could be very problematic.

RTE: Although there have been many reviews comparing *Harry Potter* with Lewis and Tolkien, I find them leagues apart.

HERMAN: Yes, in fact there are a few Orthodox writers who attempt to justify Rowling's use of magic by discussing the difference between incantational and invocational magic.

RTE: But practicing witchcraft in any form is forbidden to Christians.

HERMAN: Yes, and for those who justify the *Potter* books as being part of a tradition that includes Lewis and Tolkien, the point should be made that

there is one very fundamental difference. Tolkien's Middle Earth is a realm that is completely detached from our world. It is totally imaginary. In Lewis's Narnia, also, you have the backdrop of our world where the children come from, and then the *completely* imaginary Narnian world where most of the story takes place. In neither case are human characters glamorized because of their magical powers, which is precisely what happens with Harry Potter. Harry Potter lives in *our* world, and even Hogwarts Academy is theoretically somewhere in England.

So, there are some very clear problems here. First of all, you have a familiar setting in our own world and time, which provides an element of realism to the mind of a ten year-old who doesn't have a spiritual foundation; I also believe there is a very real problem in creating a hero out of a young warlock. That doesn't happen in either *The Lord of the Rings* or in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

RTE: How would you answer a reader who asks what the difference is between Tolkien's Gandalf the Wizard and Harry Potter?

HERMAN: Gandalf is from this completely different realm, which we have no possibility to enter, and he is not a mortal human being as are some of the other characters. With Tolkien there is no chance of a child thinking, "This could be me." There is a very clear problem in Rowling's books, because a great deal of the books' appeal is that in *our* world there is both white magic and black magic, and a child can engage in them.

RTE: Also, Gandalf's powers are rarely used; he protects and leads the Fellowship primarily through his wits, knowledge, and experience, and, as you say, the humans in the story never have any power they wouldn't have in our own world. Tolkien himself once said, "In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about 'freedom,' though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour."⁵ That is a major difference between the self-centered world of the Potter books and Middle Earth.

HERMAN: The same is true of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The children do not use magic themselves, and it is obvious that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things. In *The Last Battle*, the children try to reenter Narnia through the magic wardrobe in the country house. In other words, they try to force their way in, but they are unsuccessful and in the end, Aslan

⁵ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, HarperCollins, (paperback) 1995, pg. 243.



provides his own means. They do not have powers of their own. Also, there is a much greater mental distance between the reader and Middle Earth or Narnia, than between the reader and Hogwarts Academy.

The whole business of the Harry Potter books is complicated by misinformation that drifts around the Christian world. Some Orthodox have taken as factual a quote Rowling supposedly made to *The Onion*.

RTE: The satirical paper out of Chicago?

HERMAN: Yes, the paper consists of spoofs and satire. The articles are very convincing, and if you didn't know that the entire newspaper is a farce, you might think it was real. They have her say things like, "Yes, I wrote the Harry Potter novels so as to initiate children into satanism." Apparently this article made its way to Greece and was taken seriously by people who didn't realize the nature of the paper. It created a terrible backlash.

On the other hand, one Orthodox writer (apparently) argues that Rowling uses a lot of Christian imagery and is simply following this great tradition of Christian mythology. He also argues that she is a great Christian writer who is secretly planting Christianity in the hearts of millions of people around the world.

RTE: What would you say to that?

HERMAN: I suppose the first thing I would say is that I hope he is right...but I have my doubts. I haven't read his book from cover to cover and I suppose it's possible that some of the elements he sees in Rowling are there. He seems to be a well-read and thoughtful person. But, and I hate to say it, the idea seems naïve. Even if they are there, the great majority of people who read it will have no idea that these esoteric Christian elements exist. Perhaps the writer would counter that it makes no difference if you are aware of the Christian elements or not, that they sink in subconsciously.

In any case, if you read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Christianity is obvious, it hits you in the face. When I read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the things this writer points out didn't hit me at all, and I have studied theology and literature for a fair amount of time. If there is Christian imagery there, it is pretty deeply buried. It is not so much that the Harry Potter novels don't have any redeeming qualities. I would say

Opposite: The Eagle and Child Pub, Oxford, where Lewis, Tolkien, and other members of "The Inklings" met weekly.

that one of the main problems is that their redeeming qualities always seem tainted by a lack of spiritual clarity: in both Lewis and Tolkien good and evil are very clearly delineated. I don't feel Rowling has achieved this and it makes her novels potentially dangerous. What the average reader is going to be left with is a hero who is a warlock, and it's almost inevitable that some children will be inspired by the wrong aspects of the *Potter* books.

RTE: A Russian woman recently told me that in her son's second-grade class, the children have learned the "forbidden" magic spell from the *Harry Potter* books that "kills" an opponent instantly, and they spend recess waving sticks at each other and shouting these words. These are second-graders in Moscow.

HERMAN: This suggests a problem with the logic of those Orthodox advocating the Harry Potter novels as spiritually edifying and as covert evangelism. One of their arguments is that Rowling uses a great deal of medieval Christian symbolism in her novels. But what happens when these novels are translated into a completely foreign language and read by people of a completely foreign culture? If educated people who share the same linguistic and cultural background with Rowling are not aware of her apparent covert Christian symbolism, how is someone from a completely different cultural background going to grasp it? And if they aren't grasping it, what are they getting out of the novels?

RTE: A good antidote to *Harry Potter* are the early 20th-century books by E. Nesbitt, who wrote about children from our world receiving "wishes" from magic carpets, rings, birds and beasts, but in each instance, the delight of receiving magical wishes is counteracted by the unexpected results. The magic is uncontrollable, as magic really is, and the children invariably find themselves in very humorous and tangled situations that take a real effort to get out of. Lewis once said that Nesbitt was *his* favorite children's writer.⁶ On the other side of the spectrum, I recently read an abstract titled, "Fairyland is Hell" by a Catholic author, Paula Haigh, who lumps Tolkien, Lewis and Rowling into the same pot and argues against all fantasy writing as unpatristic. Do you have any comments on this?

⁶ E. Nesbitt's books include: *Five Children and It*, *The Wouldbegoods*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, *The Enchanted Castle*, *The Treasure Seekers*, *The New Treasure Seekers*, *The Railway Children*, *The Book of Dragons*

HERMAN: I've heard of Ms. Haigh's book, but I haven't actually read it, so I can't comment on it specifically. My initial feeling, however, is that she might be confusing the relation of the imagination to prayer and the relation of the imagination to the acquisition of knowledge. As I said earlier, it's true that the Fathers often seem to be critical of the imagination, but it is usually not the imagination *per se*, but the use of the imagination in prayer that they criticize. As I mentioned earlier, in his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, St. John of Damascus provides a very objective definition of the imagination: "Imagination is a faculty of the unreasoning part of the soul. It is through the organs of sense that it is brought into action, and it is spoken of as sensation." And in St. Gregory Palamas's *Topics of Natural and Theological Science* and *On the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts*, he explains one of the natural functions of the imagination: "When the intellect enthrones itself on the soul's imaginative faculty and thereby becomes associated with the senses, it engenders a composite form of knowledge." St. Gregory explains that the imagination is actually an important aspect of how humans acquire knowledge. We use our imagination every time we view and interpret anything we come into contact with. Christ used parables to teach, and many of the Fathers (in particular, St. Basil and St. Ambrose) refer to the imaginative literature of the pagans as being potentially useful in education.

At the same time, there is no question that imaginative literature can be dangerous, in the same way that all good things, when used inappropriately, can be dangerous. I certainly wouldn't want to lump Lewis and Tolkien in with Rowling, and, as I said, there are significant differences between Lewis and Tolkien themselves in their understanding of the imagination and imaginative literature.

It seems that some people attack Lewis and Tolkien because they regard their works as attempts to create "Christian Art." What happens, however, if we don't judge whether or not their art is "Christian," but whether or not it is "good" (beautiful, edifying, etc.) or bad (ugly, hedonistic, nihilistic)? This is the test that St. Paul asks us to make when he tells us to focus on those things that are good, beautiful, and noble. Art is a vehicle for expressing truth, but it is not the truth itself. Even icons are simply windows into heaven; they are not heaven itself. Many modern westerners accord art and culture a spiritual dimension that it does not merit. Lewis discusses this, in fact, and reacts against it. Art is not the same as prayer and we should not judge it according to the same criteria.

RTE: In that same vein is a piece from the December 2006 issue of the Russian Orthodox magazine *FOMA* by rock singer and actor Petr Mamonov, who has the leading role in "*The Island*," a film about a northern Russian monastery now playing in cinemas throughout Russia. The quote refers to the endless discussions about whether rock music is compatible with Orthodoxy:

How is it always put? That creative work *per se* – and especially rock and roll – is a demonic affair. I do not agree with this in principle. If you have talent, you must convey it, because burying a talent in the ground doesn't count. And as for forms... why do you *have to* play a guitar softly, by candlelight? Metropolitan Anthony [Bloom] of Sourozh wrote: "As soon as an artist tries to turn his work, his skill, into an illustration of his faith, for the most part it becomes wooden." ...Normal people, with intelligence and taste, just cannot react otherwise. So what then? Again Metropolitan Anthony: "If an artist is steeped in his faith, he does not need to check his inspiration against it, because they are not only intertwined, they make up a single whole." So, believe, pray, root out your sins, but do as your heart says! To the extent that you have grown spiritually, you will deliver. But if you choose the theme "Dear, lovely God, glory to Thee!" but are yourself rotten, this is a dual sin: you are confusing people and lying.

In regard to artistic expression, what do you think of the Narnia movie?

HERMAN: I was pleased, although I could have done without the "Hollywoodization" of the film. Some scenes were rewritten and altered so as to heighten the action and suspense, especially the scene with the wolves at the waterfall where Peter thrusts his sword into the ice and the children float off as though it's a surfboard. That said, there were one or two changes they made which actually provided more Christian content to the story, which I was glad to see.

The important thing is that the sense of mythology, of truth, is there. Orthodox Christians would get a lot more out of it in that respect as, on an intellectual level, most people won't think to themselves, "Aslan is asking the children why they did that because he wants to encourage them to

repentance," but they might be left with an overall impression of Aslan, of the desire for a resurrection, the desire for good over evil, and the sense that there are moral choices to be made. These are the kinds of things that Lewis felt were important and what he wanted people to take from his stories.

RTE: And now, how would you sum up Lewis?

HERMAN: Lewis, I think, has a great deal to teach us about living and struggling as Christians in the modern world. His integrity as a scholar, his dedication to a life of prayer and the study of Scripture, and his ability to combine the two, the spiritual and the secular, are qualities that we can admire. Finally, however, the goodness of the tree is revealed through its fruit. Not only does Lewis's legacy live on in the hearts and minds of millions of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians, but Lewis's works themselves attest to a profound understanding of Christian truth seldom found in the post-schism West. ✦