1 Introduction

ROBERT MACSWAIN

LEWIS AND THE CONTEMPORARY ACADEMY

C.S. Lewis is both a phenomenon and an anomaly.

He is a phenomenon in that, almost fifty years after his death, he remains one of the world's most popular and best-selling authors. And he remains so, not just in one genre but many: children's literature, science fiction, theology, philosophy, Christian apologetics, autobiography, essays, the novel, poetry. Remarkably, all of this output was incidental to his professional career as a highly respected scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature at Oxford and Cambridge. Despite enormous changes in the way literature in general is studied and despite substantial shifts in the scholarly landscape of his specific areas of expertise, his academic publications are still of considerable importance to students and specialists alike.

Rather oddly for such a literary and donnish figure, even his personal life is part of the phenomenon. Numerous biographies have been written about him. *Shadowlands*, the story of his late marriage and eventual bereavement, won popular and critical acclaim as a television film, a stage play, a radio-play, and a movie. His most famous children's book – *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (the first of the Chronicles of Narnia) – also achieved success as a major motion picture, and became one of the top-grossing films of 2005. Lewis's close friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien (a similar figure in many ways whose fiction has also, of course, been adapted for the stage and screen) adds to the fascination. Both the individual personalities and the collective character of the 'Inklings' – their circle of literary friends – have, perhaps surprisingly, become legendary.[1]

But if Lewis is a phenomenon he is also an anomaly in that, while he has a vast and loyal readership, scholars are sharply divided over the value and significance of his work. This is especially true in theology and religious studies. While in evangelical circles Lewis's reputation

is astonishingly high, most mainstream academic theologians do not consider him a 'serious' figure. For example, in 2000 the influential American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* put Lewis's *Mere Christianity* on the very top of their list as the 'best' religious book of the twentieth century, with Karl Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics* following humbly at number 3, and other influential texts such as the documents of Vatican II, Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Simone Weil's *Waiting for God* ranked even lower.[2] But anyone conversant with contemporary trends in academic theology would consider these ratings topsy-turvy.

Take the comprehensive multi-author reference work *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, an excellent and authoritative survey of theological figures and movements in this period.[3] In this volume, Lewis's *Mere Christianity* is not discussed at all (not even in the chapters on Anglican or evangelical theology), and Lewis himself does not even make the index (although he is in fact mentioned once, as an example of someone who believed in miracles[4]).The editors undoubtedly have good reasons for their criteria of selection, but it is still fair to ask whether the importance of a figure is best judged by their standing in the academy or by influence outside of it. As I will argue further below, academic theology ignores Lewis at its peril.[5]

But Lewis is also anomalous in that evaluations and interpretations of his life and work do not simply fall within the 'enthusiastic evangelical' and 'apathetic academic' options noted above, but go far beyond them in each direction. Lewis often inspires extreme reactions, both positive and negative, with readers either devoting themselves to him with a passionate and uncritical acceptance that borders on the fanatical, or reacting with a loathing and contempt that is scarcely less intense. The positive extreme is largely associated with American evangelicals, and the negative extreme with British atheists, but the actual situation is rather more complex than that neat national/ideological dichotomy. His detractors are certainly not all British, and those who regard his thought as valuable and interesting can be found across the theological spectrum, including British and North American Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox.

In an article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, literary scholar James Como is quoted as saying that 'C. S. Lewis is one of those writers who takes hold of a person's intellect and imagination, and rearranges the furniture. … The inner landscape changes. With some

readers, that experience leads to a kind of proprietary attitude, a feeling that "he's *mine*".'[6] Accordingly, various schools of Lewis interpretation have developed on both sides of the Atlantic, some scholarly, some less so, each promoting its own version of the man: now more Catholic, now more evangelical, now more conservative, now more liberal; there has been a maelstrom of conspiracy theories; questions about the canon have been raised. And just as the proprietary voices are numerous and mixed in quality, so are the accusations of his critics: is Lewis to be condemned for sexism, racism, obscurantism, philistinism, Christianity, or all of these at once?

This may seem like a rather journalistic beginning to a Cambridge Companion, but it aptly expresses the challenge faced by anyone who wants to think intelligently about C.S. Lewis in the contemporary context. While all writers may hope for the result Como describes above, such a response inevitably makes scholarly assessment of Lewis's work difficult. He is not a simple topic – or target – to begin with; his immense popularity considerably complicates matters; and what may fairly be called 'Jacksploitation' makes the situation almost intractable.[7] Far from being a 'dead' figure whose place in the canon of British literature and Christian thought is 'fixed', or someone merely of interest to scholars and students, Lewis is the subject of intense concern and lively controversy that spills far outside the confines of normal academic discussions.[8]

He is, however, almost certainly the most influential religious author of the twentieth century, in English or any other language. For good or ill, literally millions of people have had their understanding of Christianity decisively shaped by his writings. Whether they respond positively or negatively, it is Lewis's vision of the Christian faith that they (for whatever reason) take as normative, and thus either accept as Saving Truth or reject as Pernicious Error. But why? Why has Lewis – a former atheist turned Anglican Christian, a literary scholar without formal theological training or church authority – assumed such a significant role as the interpreter of Christianity for so many? Theories abound, but there is no simple answer. Lewis is, as stated at the beginning of this introduction, both a phenomenon and an anomaly, and by definition such entities confound regular categories. But – again, for good or ill – he is too important to be ignored.

For, most surprisingly, he has been ignored, at least by the mainstream academic theologians mentioned above. It is not an exaggeration to say that many such theologians – even among his fellow Anglicans – have been hoping for over half a century that Lewis would quietly go

away.[9] Obviously, he hasn't, but up to this point, with rare exceptions, the most substantial studies of Lewis's work have been from literary scholars.[10] Outside of evangelical Christian circles, theologians and specialists in religious studies have for the most part kept their distance.[11] While some prominent philosophers of religion have occasionally mentioned Lewis as an influence, and while the odd article on some aspect of his thought may appear in a major journal, there has been very little sustained engagement with or critique of him in the general academy. Indeed, aside from the late Paul Holmer (Yale Divinity School), Wesley Kort (Duke University), and Gilbert Meileander (Valparaiso University), it is difficult to think of any other mainstream scholar in theology or religious studies who has ever written a monograph on him.[12]

However, as stated above, academic theology can ill afford to disregard C.S. Lewis. If only because he is so influential, scholars and students need to be familiar with the specific content of his many books in order to know (and if necessary counter or correct) his impact on the masses. But, more positively, it is at least possible that Lewis – despite not being an academic theologian himself – might have something to teach academic theologians about their own subject. Among other things, this may have to do with the way in which Lewis harnessed his imagination, reason, historical knowledge, wit, and considerable rhetorical gifts in a sustained effort to communicate the substance of his convictions to as wide an audience as possible. In its commendable quest for disciplinary purity and intellectual integrity, academic theology is actually in great danger of sealing itself within a very small, self-enclosed echo chamber in which experts talk to other experts while losing all contact with the outside world. Meanwhile, Lewis continues to sell millions of books a year and to shape the religious faith of thousands.

CLIVE STAPLES ('JACK') LEWIS: 1898–1963

This is not the place for an extensive biographical portrait, and for several full-length treatments the reader is directed to the Bibliography at the end of this volume. However, it is important to establish the basic facts and thus present at least one 'version' of Lewis as more or less normative for this Companion.

Clive Staples Lewis was born on 29 November 1898 in Belfast, Ireland – partition was still decades off – and was baptized the following year in the (Anglican) Church of Ireland. His parents – Albert James Lewis and Florence Augusta Hamilton – were well-educated members of the middle class. Their only other child, Lewis's older brother Warren

(1895–1973), was to become Lewis's closest lifelong friend. At a young age, not liking his name, Lewis announced that he was 'Jack', and 'Jack' he remained to his family and friends for the rest of his life. He died on 22 November 1963, the day of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Lewis's early childhood was happy, but his mother's death from cancer a few months before his tenth birthday had a devastating effect on him: not only did he lose his mother, but this also led to a growing emotional estrangement from his father. Perhaps unwisely, he was sent away to boarding school in England less than a month after her death. It was a horrendous experience, and Lewis also hated his subsequent educational experience at Malvern College (1913–14). In 1911 he became an atheist, although on 6 December 1914 he still accepted the Anglican rite of confirmation in the same church where he had been baptized. After leaving Malvern, Lewis was privately tutored by his father's former headmaster, William Kirkpatrick. He entered University College, Oxford on 29 April 1917.

Of course, the First World War was in full tragic spate, and almost immediately after arriving at Oxford Lewis joined the British Army. He travelled to France as a second lieutenant in the 3rd Somerset Light Infantry and arrived in the front line on his nineteenth birthday. On 15 April 1918, in the Battle of Arras, he was seriously injured by an exploding shell and spent the remainder of the war in hospital. In January 1919, he returned to Oxford to continue his formal education.

By any standard, Lewis was a brilliant student. He achieved three consecutive First Class qualifications: the first two in the Oxford 'Greats' course – Classical Honour Moderations (1920) and Literae Humaniores (1922) – and the third in English (1923). 'Greats' involved 'the study of Greek and Latin language and literature, philosophy and ancient history, and thus provided a threefold mental training: in precision of language, clarification of concepts and the weighing of historical evidence'.[13] In terms of twentieth-century philosophy, Lewis was educated in the metaphysical Hegelian tradition of British Idealism, then dominant in Oxford, but soon to suffer a dramatic eclipse by the more logically and linguistically oriented work of the Cambridge philosophers G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein.[14] He never formally studied theology.

Lewis's first position was teaching philosophy at his own college ('Univ'), but this was only a one-year sabbatical-replacement appointment. In 1925, he was elected to a fellowship in English at Magdalen College, Oxford. Although he was certainly a competent philosophy tutor and possessed considerable analytical and dialectical gifts, Lewis's

first love was English literature and it became his area of professional expertise. He tutored at Magdalen and lectured at Oxford for almost thirty years, and it is in this context that most people think of him. However, in January 1955 he became the first occupant of the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge, where he was to remain for the rest of his career. In July of that year he was also elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

As stated above, Lewis became an atheist in 1911. This was not the passing phase of an angry and bereaved adolescent, but a sincere, thoughtful and indeed rather intense rejection of religious belief on moral and intellectual grounds. Lewis's diaries, letters and earliest writings all testify to the consistency and vigour of his atheism. However, as Lewis details at length in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, his atheistic view of the universe was in constant tension with a recurring experience that he called 'Joy' and identified with the German Romantic concept of *Sehnsucht*: an 'unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction'.[15] This persistent experience, combined with various philosophical difficulties over naturalism, alongside his growing friendship with Tolkien (a devout Roman Catholic), rendered Lewis increasingly – if reluctantly – open to the possibility of theism. And in 1929 he indeed became a theist, but only in abstract, impersonal, 'Idealist' terms. It was not until September 1931, after a long conversation with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson about metaphor and myth, that Lewis finally accepted Christianity as what he called 'a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the other, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*'.[16] Lewis eventually reaffiliated with the Anglican tradition of his childhood and – since he was already baptized and confirmed – simply began attending services in his local Church of England parish, Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry, outside Oxford.

Because he is now so strongly associated with American evangelicalism, it is important to stress Lewis's essentially Anglo-Irish and Anglican character. Culturally and socially, Lewis was very much the product of his middle-class Ulster childhood, Edwardian Britain, the trenches of the First World War, and the Oxford Greats School. And, in the preface to *Mere Christianity*, Lewis says: 'There is no mystery about my own [religious] position. I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, not especially "high", nor especially "low", nor especially anything else.'[17] Although he eventually adopted some 'High Church' practices – such as spiritual direction, confession and frequent communion – Lewis was never a member of the Anglo-Catholic wing

of the Church of England, nor indeed of the evangelical or any other 'wing'. He remained committed to 'mere Christianity', which he found in the broad Anglican *via media*, with its attempt to fuse the Catholic and Protestant tendencies of Western Christendom, its long tradition of scholarship and literary expression, and its reluctance to define points of controversy among Christians. Although theologically traditional, doctrinally orthodox and generally conservative in his interpretation of the Bible, Lewis nevertheless accepted some form of cosmic and biological evolution, did not hold to the inerrancy of scripture, and was not committed to a specific theory of the atonement. Nor, on the other hand, did he accept papal infallibility, Marian dogmas, or the claims to primacy made by the Roman Catholic Church. These issues, for him, were not essential to mere Christianity.

If Lewis had not made this journey into Christian faith, he would still very likely have continued on his path toward academic eminence, and so would probably only be remembered today by a few specialists for some exceptionally erudite but obscure works of scholarship. However, Lewis's conversion set off an unanticipated secondary career while simultaneously releasing his powers of imagination, intellect and persuasion to an exceptional degree. In addition to his distinguished professional work at Oxford and Cambridge, for the next three decades Lewis wrote book after book in one genre after another, beginning with *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism* (1933) and ending with the posthumously published *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964).

The details of his life and career, along with various controversial interpretations of them, are provided in several biographies, and the themes of his books are surveyed in the chapters which follow this introduction. But to conclude this section it must be mentioned that in 1957 Lewis greatly surprised his colleagues – and himself – by marrying Joy Davidman, a terminally ill, divorced American (with two young sons) who was also an author, a former Marxist atheist, and an ethnically Jewish convert to Christianity: the story told in *Shadowlands*. Lewis thus became both a phenomenon and an anomaly, and so we arrive back at the beginning of this introduction.

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO C.S. LEWIS

It is not at all obvious that this volume should appear in the Cambridge Companions to Religion series, as opposed to the Cambridge Companions to Literature. As stated above, Lewis's professional work

was literary rather than religious; much of his published output falls within various literary genres; and most of the best work on Lewis has been produced by literary scholars. A good case may thus be made that Lewis ought to be studied primarily as a literary figure himself, a writer of fiction and fantasy, satire and polemic, poetry and autobiography – in short, as a 'man of letters' rather than as a theologian or philosopher. This would help explain his almost total absence from texts such as *The Modern Theologians* and his general neglect within academic theology and religious studies, and might also suggest that a 'Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis' should focus primarily on his accomplishments from a literary angle.

However, it is part of Lewis's anomalous character to confound this expectation as well, and for two reasons. First, some of his professional writings do trespass into the territory of academic theology and philosophy, and his works of fiction and poetry are likewise often occupied with such matters. This, indeed, is one reason why Lewis is so often criticized or condemned by students of *literature*: he is, rightly or wrongly, perceived as someone who is not literary *enough*, but who is primarily engaged in a didactic or evangelistic purpose thinly veiled under fairy-tales or science fiction. He is, they say, not a real writer, but only a closet theologian – precisely the opposite to the charge the theologians bring against him! Hence, for better or worse, even Lewis the 'man of letters' is inevitably read as a religious man of letters, and so any serious study of his writing at least needs to take this element into account. This present volume will thus, we hope, be of use to those whose interest in Lewis is indeed primarily literary rather than religious.

But second, and more positively, it may also be the case that Lewis should rightly be considered in this particular series because he has, in fact, expanded the genre of theology to include the imaginative works for which he is so famous. Thus, instead of an amateur, dilettante theologian who cannot possibly be considered in the same league as, for example, Barth, Gutiérrez or Moltmann, Lewis might rather be seen (*à la* Kierkegaard) as a deliberately 'indirect' theologian, as one who works by 'thick description' or evocative images, operating in multiple voices and genres, through which a single yet surprisingly subtle and complex vision emerges. Yes, of course it is ludicrous to compare Lewis's *Mere Christianity* to Barth's *Church Dogmatics* – but perhaps it is equally ludicrous to let Barth define the character of all theology. And when Lewis's entire output is considered as a whole, the comparison might not be so ridiculous after all. Lewis cannot possibly count as a theologian

on the Barthian model, but he may nevertheless offer a model of theological expression which needs to be appreciated on its own terms.

This Cambridge Companion is therefore an intentional and perhaps risky experiment. First of all, it is impossible adequately to cover every aspect of Lewis's accomplishment in a single volume, although we have at least aimed at comprehensiveness. Although this text belongs in the Cambridge Companions to Religion series and so will probably be read mostly in that context, we have still included introductory chapters on Lewis's literary scholarship and other professional interests. This is an essential aspect of his career and those who want to understand him must at least be familiar with it. The other chapters are also written by a more interdisciplinary team than usual for such a volume, but all have still been intentionally composed for inclusion in a Cambridge Companion to Religion.

Second, in a deliberate attempt to widen the discussion of Lewis's legacy beyond 'the usual suspects', we have invited a number of contributors who have not hitherto participated in these debates, or at least not at this public level. While several of the contributing scholars are indeed already well known for their work on Lewis, all are experts drawn from various areas to which Lewis himself contributed (intellectual history, literary criticism, theology, philosophy). They include some of the most prominent contemporary practitioners in these fields. Feeling that the current situation in Lewis scholarship represented something of an impasse, we wanted to bring some fresh voices to the conversation. Some are evangelicals; some are not. Some offer their chapter as a first-order contribution to theology or philosophy; some as an academic essay on the interpretation of Lewis's work. And we have deliberately sought out some provocative figures to interact with well-known aspects of Lewis's thought.

However, in all cases, the contributors to this volume fall somewhere between the two polarized communities of interpretation mentioned earlier. Despite many disagreements and differences of opinion, we all believe that Lewis has made some genuinely important contributions to a wide range of disciplines and genres: literary, historical, philosophical, ethical, theological, spiritual, narrative, and poetic. He is, beyond doubt, a major twentieth-century voice – particularly when the full range of his work is considered as a whole – who does not deserve to be ignored, dismissed, or even vilified by today's intelligentsia. However, he also does not occupy the place of unique, privileged and untouchable significance that some of his followers have attributed to him. Hence, his legacy both deserves and requires careful commentary and critical

analysis. Our goal here is not to offer the definitive treatment of C.S. Lewis, nor conclusively to answer either his defenders or his detractors. Rather, our goal is to stimulate conversation about Lewis in academic theology and religious studies, and to facilitate a greater understanding of his work. We hope this volume will contribute to that end.

Notes

1 See Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: HarperCollins, 2006; 1st publ. 1978).
2 'Books of the Century', *Christianity Today* 44:5 (24 Apr. 2000). The magazine compiled its list of the hundred best and most influential religious books of the twentieth century by asking one hundred of its regular contributors and evangelical church leaders each to nominate ten titles. The preface states: 'By far, C.S. Lewis was the most popular author and *Mere Christianity* the book nominated most often. Indeed, we could have included even more Lewis works, but finally we had to say, "Enough is enough, give some other authors a chance."' They do, however, include the Chronicles of Narnia in the unranked list of 90 books that follow the top ten. This article and list is available online at <www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/april24/5.92.html>.
3 David F. Ford (ed.) with Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
4 See Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*, 346.
5 Although they are both British theologians, Ford and Muers are forthright about the decisive emphasis in their volume on the 'German-language tradition of academic theology' as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is arguably, they say, 'the best single tradition through which to be introduced to what it means to do Christian theology in intelligent engagement with modern disciplines, societies, churches, and traumatic events' (see the preface, pp. viii–xi, especially p. ix). And this explains why Lewis is not treated – and is indeed barely mentioned – in that book, for he was not a professional academic theologian, nor a modern one, nor did he seriously engage with the tradition of German-language theology. Thus, according to those criteria, it is no surprise that he is not discussed in *The Modern Theologians*, since he wasn't one. Lewis is also entirely absent from Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Paul Fiddes, however, considers the extent to which Lewis may indeed still be considered a theologian, and even a significant one, in Chapter 7 of the present volume.
6 Scott McLemee, 'Holy War in the Shadowlands: A New Book Revives Old Allegations and the Struggle for the Intellectual Legacy of C.S. Lewis', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 July 2001 (http://chronicle.com/article/Holy-War-in-the-Shadowlands/19700).