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C.S. Lewis 'couldn't touch anything without illuminating it'

Jonathan Luxmoore | Oct. 27, 2012

The work of Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), creator of The Chronicles of Narnia, *has been gaining popularity, especially in the United States, where his vision of an open, nondenominational Christianity has attracted a following among both Protestants and Catholics.*

Three Narnia books -- The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian and Voyage of the Dawn Treader -- *have been made into blockbuster films since 2005. But Lewis' other allegorical works, such as* The Great Divorce, The Screwtape Letters *and* Till We Have Faces, *have also proved influential, as have Lewis' religious expositions, including* The Abolition of Man, Miracles *and* The Problem of Pain.

Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Lewis won a scholarship in 1916 to Britain's prestigious Oxford University, where he graduated in classics and English after fighting in the trenches of World War I. He became a fellow of Magdalen College in 1925.

Having abandoned the Anglican Church of Ireland at school, he was brought back to Christianity by his Catholic friend and fellow academic, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of The Lord of the Rings *trilogy. Lewis recalled in the autobiographical* Surprised by Joy *(1966) how he had finally "admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed ... the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."*

As a writer, poet and literary critic, Lewis met regularly with a circle of friends, the Inklings, who included Tolkien, with whom he shared a fascination with Nordic and Celtic legends. In 1956, he married an American former communist and fellow convert, Joy Davidman, who died of cancer at age 45 just four years later, a tragedy portrayed in the 1993 film, "Shadowlands," starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. Lewis himself died of bone cancer on Nov. 22, 1963, and was buried at Oxford's Anglican Holy Trinity church.

With interest picking up for the 50th anniversary of his death, journals and books are being published, looking again at his attempts to popularize Christianity in a world where faith and science often appear in conflict, and to highlight what unites rather than divides believing Christians.

Walter Hooper, 81, lived with Lewis at the end of his life and is a trustee and literary adviser to his estate. Born in Reidsville, N.C., he taught English at the University of Kentucky before moving to Oxford in the early 1960s, and converted to Catholicism in 1988 after serving as an Anglican priest. Hooper has edited Lewis' letters, diaries, essays and poems. In addition, he has authored biographies and companions to Lewis' work, and prepared several of Lewis' unfinished stories for publication. Hooper spoke with NCR *at his Oxford home.*

***NCR*: How did you first encounter C.S. Lewis?**

Hooper: We began corresponding in 1954 and I finally met him in 1963, when he asked me to move in as his secretary. Lewis believed you had a responsibility to readers who wrote to you about your books, and he tried to reply to every letter by return post. Since his elder brother Warren, who usually typed for him, was away for long periods, he needed help. He died some months later and I've been editing his writings ever since.

What kind of a person was he?

Although he spent most of his time reading, he also very much appreciated the friendship of the Inklings. When I attended their pub meetings, there were usually around eight of us, and I think he enjoyed this more than anything else. His conversation was close to his books. He talked as he wrote. But you couldn't be lazy with him, since he would contest whatever you said. To argue with Lewis was like entering a beauty contest: You had to be prepared to be told you were pretty damn ugly. But it certainly sharpened my wits. He was also humble enough not to venture opinions on subjects he was uninformed about.

Lewis was famous by then, as his many letter writers suggest. *The Chronicles of Narnia* alone would sell 100 million copies in 40 languages. How did he cope with this?

It bothered him that people often took his fictional work so literally. After *Out of the Silent Planet* was published with its two sequels in the late 1930s and early '40s, he continued to get letters asking how the hero, Elwin Ransom, was getting on in his journey around the cosmos. But I think he was easygoing about his fame. It didn't really change him.

I once asked if he was sure his letter writers deserved such attention, and he replied, "My rule is, when in doubt, always give."

On the way to an Inklings meeting, he gave some money to a street beggar, and I made the usual objection: "Won't he just spend it on drink?"

Lewis answered, "Yes, but if I kept it, so would I."

Tolkien, who loved Lewis, found fame more difficult; indeed, it drove him out of Oxford when it came late in his life. But I never heard Lewis complain. As one of his characters remarks in *The Great Divorce* (1945), when a man dies, he has many more pressing things to think about than his success on Earth.

Lewis achieved most fame for his allegorical stories, with their deep Christian echoes. He saw how Christianity's witness to the world was diminished by denominational rivalries, and how the traditional answers offered by Christian apologists no longer carried conviction. Yet he wasn't a professional theologian or church functionary. How important was this evangelical task for him?

Lewis believed he had a responsibility to spread the Gospel through his writing. But he also felt strongly that Christianity's core beliefs were the most important, and that he shouldn't get involved in anything not central to them.

I remember when a high church Anglican came to tea and remarked as she left that she had to go to the Assumption Mass in Oxford. Lewis asked me what the Assumption was, and I felt foolish as I explained it to him -- the feast of Our Lady's ascent into heaven. After all, he was an authority on medieval literature, so he must have known. But I think this was where he put down his markers, as an average Anglican who really didn't want to know anything much beyond. He felt he owed it to his followers not to go beyond what he called "mere Christianity."

This was a key reason for his popularity, that he confined himself to what Christians shared in common. That's why his books have been appreciated by Protestants and Catholics alike, and valued by people as diverse as the American evangelist Billy Graham and the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Lewis is commemorated on the Episcopalian church's calendar and has given his name to evangelical societies and study centers across the United States. He also disappointed Tolkien by declining to become a Catholic. But interest seems to be growing in his work among Catholics.

Since the Second Vatican Council, many more Catholics have been reading Lewis' works, especially for their emphasis on natural law. In 1988, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave a talk at Cambridge University on [Lewis'] 1943 book, *The Abolition of Man*, which focused on this. Given what Benedict XVI thinks about relativism, this made perfect sense. In a 1994 U.S. tour, Ratzinger also quoted from Lewis' 1961 *Screwtape Letters* during a talk on the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

He wasn't the first pope to admire Lewis. In November 1994, I myself was asked to go to Rome to talk with John Paul II about Lewis. I met him after his general audience and he explained that he had greatly valued Lewis' 1960 study, *The Four Loves*. He also asked me a very pastoral question: "Do you still love your old friend?" I replied that I did, "both with *storge* [familial affection] and *philia* [friendship]." I did my best to answer his questions, thinking all the time how alike these two men were. At the end, the pope said something I found deeply moving: "C.S. Lewis knew what his apostolate was, and he did it!"

One could say the same about John Paul II, who appeared to know more about Lewis' works than I realized. I believe he was personally behind their translation into Polish.

Have the Narnia films helped or hindered our understanding of Lewis?

Lewis didn't expect his books to survive long after his death, so he would have been surprised by the films, as would Tolkien. As for the films themselves, these lack subtlety and have too many special effects. I think [director] Peter Jackson did a much better job with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, combining a vision with great talent. Whereas Jackson generally stuck to what Tolkien wrote, the Narnia producers just changed the stories as they wished.

I was consulted, especially about the character of Aslan. It was always Lewis' proviso that Aslan must be handled very carefully. He represents the Son of God, so you can't blaspheme with him. I've read many screenplays of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, however, and almost all have portrayed Aslan as a comical character. Lewis would also have disliked the way human persons are placed inside his animals. He'd seen Walt Disney's *Fantasia* and would have been thrilled to see what can be done now with computer-generated images. But it's the scripts which always let us down. They should stick to what Lewis wrote, as with Shakespeare.

Didn't Lewis suffer from uncertainties in what he did?

I asked Tolkien about this once, and he said he'd written *The Lord of the Rings* chiefly for Lewis, since Tolkien himself was more interested in the genealogies and histories of language than in storytelling. Tolkien confirmed this later in a letter, acknowledging that Lewis had helped mainly by encouraging him.

At the end of his life, however, Lewis was writing a novel about Menelaus, husband of Helen of Troy, which begins with he and his men crammed together in the dark Trojan horse. They finally exit via a trap door and find themselves on the streets of Troy, with a cold wind blowing. Menelaus sacks the city and finds Helen, but he barely recognizes her because she's now much older. The Greeks have been fighting for the most beautiful

woman in the world, and she's now middle-aged.

Lewis faced a dilemma: What should a man do when he had to choose between the wife of his dreams or the wife of his experience, the world's most beautiful woman or the woman he loves? He couldn't work out how to go on with it, so the story never had an end.

How should we expect interest in C.S. Lewis to develop now?

I think he'll be recognized increasingly as a major literary and religious figure. Almost all the early books and articles about Lewis were by American evangelicals, who especially admired his *Mere Christianity*, a book compiled from his wartime BBC broadcasts.

Because he was claimed by the evangelicals, academics from Harvard, Yale and elsewhere wouldn't touch Lewis with a barge pole, and it's taken a long time for his works to be recognized. But Lewis couldn't touch anything without illuminating it, and I think many people are now appreciating the imagination which runs not only through his fiction but through all his works.

Can we expect the church to recognize his achievements too, not least the skill with which he set out to popularize Christianity within a skeptical modern society?

Both recent popes have shown an obvious interest in Lewis, and this may have a lot to do with the changes since Vatican II which connect with Lewis' ecumenical and nondenominational approach to Christianity. You can't really understand the Assumption unless you understand the Incarnation, and I think Lewis fulfils an important function in getting to the core of traditional Christianity. The threat facing his own Anglican church comes from leaving these core beliefs behind.

Lewis himself would have agreed with Pope John XXIII at the start of Vatican II, that the deposit of faith is one thing, while its presentation is another. He showed how the form of presentation can be almost anything -- from science fiction to children's fables. But the core beliefs must always remain, no matter how things change. You can't throw the baby out with the bath water. If you get rid of the sense and meaning of the faith you'll have nothing to come back to. I think he and John XXIII would have been absolutely in agreement about this, and I think it explains why both popes have been so interested in him.

Aslan forever!

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