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‘The Great Joke’: C. S. Lewis, World War II, and Fundamentalism

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Abstract: Eighty years after World War II's end, its influence persists in modern society, including the enduring legacy of C. S. Lewis. The war afforded Lewis the platform not only to draw people to faith and edify believers, but also to address a danger he saw growing within the larger Christian community, that of fundamentalism. While the scholarship on British fundamentalism and that on C. S. Lewis has taken important strides in the twenty-first century, their intersection has been relatively overlooked. To that end, this article hopes to encourage further research in this lacuna by exploring the wartime work of Lewis to reveal both the depths of his concern over fundamentalism as well as his counterpoint, “mere” Christianity.

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C. S. Lewis was no stranger to war. From his service in the British army in the First World War to living as a civilian through the Second World War to the driving themes of his favorite Greek and Norse narrative poems, to a persistent motif in his own writings, war permeated the life of C. S. Lewis. It was in part this familiarity which afforded him opportunities, largely during WWII, to address audiences across Great Britain in churches, over the radio, and in print. Yet, Lewis's primary purpose through those efforts was not to raise morale in the midst of a great crisis, but rather to shed light on the unperceived dangers of war for Christians. For Lewis, war was a tool for Satan and, as such, its primary function was misdirection. He saw no coincidence in the fact that, for many, the Second World War became something larger and different than "normal" life or that it was often thought proper that the war should demand the complete attention of all those involved. Satan would only benefit from a fear-driven and war-consumed life as it was a life drawn away from proper Christian living and, in the end, away from God.[1] For Lewis, however, war was not limited to fields of battle. The danger of war was also found for British Christians (although applicable to all) in the divisiveness of fundamentalism.

While British fundamentalists have been relatively overlooked—generally in favor of their more flamboyant American counterparts—recent efforts by scholars such as David Bebbington, Andrew Atherstone, and David Ceri Jones, have provided much-needed correctives to the historiography.[2] Accordingly, while British fundamentalists did not simply adopt

[1] C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War Time," in Walter Hooper, ed., *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 47–63.

[2] Much of this recent scholarship was a result of the impressive research project led by David Bebbington between 2008–2009 which led to the following: David Bebbington and David Ceri Jones, eds., *Evangelicalism and*

American fundamentalism wholesale, they did incorporate many of its tenets. As historians such as Frank Costigliola have noted, in the midst and wake of the First World War, American culture, including fundamentalism, found a receptive home in a Europe that was grappling with the horrors of war and the systems that had led to it.[3] The fundamentalism that developed at the start of the twentieth century in Britain shared much in common with that popular in America including an opposition to higher criticism, beliefs in the inerrancy of Scripture and premillennialism, as well as a penchant for separatism and militant attitude toward "modernism."[4] British fundamentalists then, while distinct in many ways, were not removed from the modernist/fundamentalist crisis.[5]

Similarly, C. S. Lewis was neither unaware nor indifferent. Traditionally, scholars have viewed Lewis from several perspectives: as a literary scholar, as a novelist, as one of the

Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Some other examples of this growing effort: Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Andrew Atherstone and John Maiden, eds., *Evangelicalism and the Church of England in the Twentieth Century: Reform, Resistance and Renewal* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2014); Andrew Holmes and Stuart Mathieson, "Evangelical 'Others' in Ulster, 1859–1912: Social Profile, Unionist Politics, and 'Fundamentalism,'" *Church History* 90, no. 4 (2021): 847–72; and Markku Mikael Ruotsila, "The Last Embers of British Fundamentalism," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 74, no. 2 (2022): 1–21.

[3] Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919–1933* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 168.

[4] Bebbington and Jones, *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism,* 8–12.

[5] Because the modernists and fundamentalists set the terms for the debates that raged within twentieth-century western Christianity, they have been thoroughly analyzed by scholars and have rightfully dominated the historical discussion of the period. See: Michael J. Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887–1937* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006); Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989); and Mark Noll, David Bebbington and George Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1770–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

twentieth century's most renowned Christian apologists, and even as one of traditional Christianity's greatest defenders against modernism.[6] While the growing literature on Lewis is invaluable to understanding him and his significance, these studies have largely overlooked his regard for those who warred within the faith, such as the fundamentalists. In contrast to what Lewis saw as the threat of modernism, which was chiefly ideological, the danger he saw in fundamentalists was not primarily in their beliefs, but rather how they approached Christians who did not agree with them. For Lewis, it was the militant attitude and separatism that not only rankled, but threatened the faith. To be sure, his concern with fundamentalism was not limited to the Second World War. However, as this article contends, Lewis's wartime writings consistently countered the divisiveness of British fundamentalism by proffering a unifying, non-sectarian vision of "mere" Christianity, which he viewed as an antidote to the spiritual dangers posed by war.

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The evening of October 22, 1939, C. S. Lewis addressed a crowd of Oxford undergraduates at the university's Church of St. Mary the Virgin, with the sermon "None Other Gods: Culture in War Time."[7] According to Canon T. R. Milford, who invited him to speak,

[6] For a good indication of the current scholarship concerning C. S. Lewis, see: Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013); McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Mark Noll, *C. S. Lewis in America: Readings and Reception, 1935–1947* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 2023); Stephanie L. Derrick, *The Fame of C. S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005); Wesley Kort, C. S. *Lewis Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); John A Sims, *Missionaries to the Skeptics: Christian Apologists for the Twentieth Century: C. S. Lewis, Edward John Carnell, and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); and Angus Menuge, ed., C. S. *Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997).

[7] This talk is also called "Learning in War-Time" and is published as one of the essays in the collection, *The Weight of Glory.* For more on the sermon, see McGrath, *C. S. Lewis,* 191.

Lewis was the perfect person to calm the general unrest among the students prompted by the British declaration of war the previous month.[8] While his national and international fame were still on the horizon, by October 1939, he was increasingly well-known as a Christian writer following the publications of his works, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933) and *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938). His suitability was also aided by the fact that he was an Oxford don who had served on the frontlines during World War I.[9]

For that fall evening, Lewis chose to address a well-worn question: "Why should we—indeed how can we—continue to take an interest in these placid occupations [attending university] when the lives of friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?"[10] That this question was pressing is partly seen through the precedent set by British universities during the First World War when classes were suspended and facilities repurposed for the war effort. Should, in a similar manner, all energy and attention be devoted to the war? As Lewis explored this prevalent idea, he called his audience to consider a parallel point: "To a Christian," he exhorted, "the true tragedy of Nero must not be that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell."[11] If so, he noted, "How can you be so frivolous and selfish as to think about anything but the salvation of human

[8] Milford was the vicar of St. Mary's, which was the university church at Oxford. For more see: Oliver Tomkins, "Milford, (Theodore) Richard (1895–1987), Church of England Clergyman and Philanthropist," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/40000.

[9] Walter Hooper, "Introduction," in *The Weight of Glory*, 17–18.

[10] Lewis, "Learning in War Time," 47.

[11] Ibid., 48.

souls?"[12] Lewis claimed that the answer to that question and the question of "How can you be so frivolous and selfish as to think of anything but the war?" had much in common.[13]

He assured his audience that "neither conversion nor enlistment in the army . . . will simply cancel or remove from the slate the merely human life which we were leading before we entered them."[14] The war, he contended, "will fail to absorb our whole attention because it is a finite object and, therefore, intrinsically unfitted to support the whole attention of a human soul."[15] Yet, despite this impossibility and the fact that Lewis believed the war "cause to be, as human causes go, very righteous," he made it clear that attempts to completely devote one's life to the war were potentially damning.[16] Further addressing this point, he stated, "A man may have to die for our country, but no man must, in any exclusive sense, live for his country. He who surrenders himself without reservations to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party, or a class is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, most emphatically belongs to God: himself."[17]

With regard to Christianity, Lewis added, "It is clear that [it] does not exclude any of the ordinary human activities. St. Paul tells people to get on with their jobs. He even assumes that Christians may go to dinner parties, and, what is more, dinner parties given by pagans."[18] For Lewis, "even the humblest" of activities "will be accepted, if they are offered to God."[19]

[12] Ibid., 50.

[13] Ibid., 50 and 51.

[14] Ibid., 52.

[15] Ibid., 52.

[16] Ibid., 53.

[17] Ibid., 53.

[18] Ibid., 54.

[19] Ibid., 56.

Clarifying this point, he added: "A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow. We are members of one body, but differentiated members, each with his own vocation."[20] As for pursuing the academic life in particular, Lewis claimed that it was "not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us." Still, with that commendation of academic pursuits echoing in the hall, Lewis reminded his audience that there were limits, just as there were with supporting the war cause, and they would know that "the time for plucking out the right eye has arrived" if they came "to love knowledge—*our* knowing—more than the thing known."[21]

For Lewis, nothing temporal, whether it was patriotism or fear or profession, was to take priority or distract from what was truly important, the eternal, which was comprised of a person's relationships with God and other people. A glimpse of this idea is found in another talk that Lewis gave in St. Mary's church on June 8, 1941 called "The Weight of Glory." To this audience he exhorted, "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."[22]

This emphasis on the eternal over the temporal is also found throughout Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* which were initially published that same year in a church magazine called the *Guardian.*[23] Within these letters, Screwtape, a demon of some importance, offers sage advice to

[20] Ibid., 56.

[21] Ibid., 57.

[22] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in Walter Hooper, ed., *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 46. For more on this idea, see Jacobs, *The Narnian*, 230–31.

[23] McGrath, C. S. *Lewis*, 216. The individual articles would be collectively published in book form in February, 1942.

his upstart nephew Wormwood on how to ensnare human souls for their "Father below." Throughout, Screwtape stresses the importance of the temporal for successful entrapments. In one letter Screwtape demanded "a full account of the patient's reaction to the war, so that we can consider whether you are likely to do more good by making him an extreme patriot or an ardent pacifist."[24] With the war in effect, he added, "There are all sorts of possibilities."[25] Picking up the point in a later correspondence, Screwtape writes, "I had not forgotten my promise to consider whether we should make the patient an extreme patriot or an extreme pacifist. All extremes, except devotion to the Enemy, are to be encouraged."[26] He added, "Any small coterie, bound together by some interest which other men dislike or ignore, tends to develop inside itself a hothouse mutual admiration, and towards the outer world, a great deal of pride and hatred."[27]

Yet this could and did extend beyond patriotism and pacifism to include the Church. For Screwtape, and Lewis, extremist and factious Christians were often a boon for diabolical objectives. Screwtape informed his nephew that "even when the little group exists originally for the Enemy's own purposes, this remains true."[28] He added, "We want the Church to be small not only that fewer men may know the Enemy but also that those who do may acquire the uneasy intensity and the defensive self-righteousness of a secret society or a clique."[29] Ideally, the elderly demon instructed, these temptations—separatist-minded Christians and

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[24] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, Inc., 1961), 30.

[25] Ibid., 30.

[26] Ibid., 40.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

Patriotism/Pacificism—could be combined. To that end, Screwtape continued, "Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the 'cause,' in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war-effort or of Pacifism."[30] Screwtape continued, "Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing."[31]

As is evident through this demonic exchange, C. S. Lewis saw the aforementioned dangers resulting from war as diabolical in origin. Yes, for Lewis, it was Satan who was the source of these problems. Still, war was the tool of the moment, and Lewis makes clear that the party spirit within the church was another dangerous temporal distraction prompted by a warring mind. Screwtape reinforces this point when he reminds Wormwood that if he cannot keep his human floating from one church to another "looking for the church that 'suits' him," the demon should prompt the man "to at least be violently attached to some party within it."[32] Although Lewis never specifically mentions the growing fundamentalist movement by name, the demon excitedly described characteristics that are easily associated with the group. In the nineteenth letter, Screwtape writes, "You complain that my last letter does not make it clear whether I regard *being in love* as a desirable state for a human or not. But really, Wormwood, that is the sort of question one expects *them* to ask! Leave them to discuss whether 'Love', or patriotism, or

[30] Ibid., 42.

[31] Ibid., 42.

[32] Ibid., 81 and 84.

celibacy, or candles or altars, or teetotalism, or education, are 'good' or 'bad.' Can't you see there's no answer? Nothing matters at all except the tendency of a given state of mind, in given circumstances, to move a particular patient at a particular moment nearer to the Enemy or nearer to us."[33] In the subsequent publication, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast,* Lewis presents the old demon relishing a wine made from the blending of contentious "Pharisees." Screwtape instructs his audience that these Christians were the "types that were most antagonistic to one another on Earth. Some were all rules and relics and rosaries; others were all drab clothes, long faces, and petty traditional abstinences from wine or cards or the theatre."[34] But, he added, "both had in common their self-righteousness and the almost infinite distance between their actual outlook and anything the Enemy really is or commands."[35] Screwtape triumphantly concluded: "The fine flower of unholiness can grow only in the close neighbourhood of the Holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar."[36] As is seen here, for Lewis, many of the diabolical stumbling blocks that endangered Christianity were unwittingly embraced by separatist-minded Christians, such as the fundamentalists, who put a stringent ideology before the welfare of Christendom.

While the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* captivated American audiences and saw Lewis's fame spread beyond Great Britain, it was his wartime talks on the BBC that captured the attention of his fellow Britons.[37] As Alister McGrath has noted, the BBC wanted a "voice of

[33] Ibid., 98–99.

[34] Ibid., 185.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] McGrath, *C. S. Lewis*, 205. For more in-depth studies on the reception of Lewis's work in the United States and Great Britain, see Mark Noll's *C. S. Lewis in America* and Stephanie L. Derrick's *The Fame of C. S. Lewis*.

faith" to offer "a transdenominational vision of Christianity" that might benefit the entire nation in their time of crisis.[38] This vision matched Lewis's well, and between 1941 and 1944 he wrote and presented four series of talks that would be initially published individually across three volumes: *The Case for Christianity* (1942); *Christian Behaviour* (1943); and *Beyond Personality* (1944). He continued to hone this material until it finally appeared in 1952 as *Mere Christianity.*[39]

The purpose of his work was twofold: "Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."[40] He added that he hoped to help "the cause of reunion," and if he was unsuccessful in that attempt, he hoped he had "made it clear why we ought to be reunited."[41] Simply put, Lewis countered modernism and fundamentalism with evangelism and Christian unity, rooted in 'mere' Christianity.[42] In this work, prompted by the Second World War, the idea of war within the faith was on his mind, and Lewis compared "mere" Christianity to a hall and the various denominations and sects to the

[38] Ibid., 206 and 207. McGrath notes that Lewis first presents "an image of nondenominational Christianity" in his publications in his novel, *The Pilgrim's Regress,* when he addresses "Mother Kirk." It was in the "Mother Kirk" that Lewis, McGrath argues, saw reconciliation between reason and imagination. For more, see McGrath, *C. S. Lewis*, 172.

[39] Ibid., 218–19.

[40] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1982), 7.

[41] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 12.

[42] Any survey of Christian history reveals this idea was not original to Lewis, but Lewis himself points to inspiration by the Puritan Richard Baxter who wrote, in his *Church History of the Government of Bishops and Their Councils*, that he strove to be simply a "meer Christian." For more see McGrath, *C. S. Lewis,* 219–20, and Baxter, *Church History of the Government of Bishops and Their Councils* (London, 1681), xv.

rooms on the hall. He stated that Christians should be primarily interested in getting people in the hall, not forcing them into any one room.[43] To do so could hurt the welfare of Christianity.

That welfare was better served, Lewis stated, if the specifics of doctrinal and creedal differences between Christians were not common topics of discussions. If it were necessary for the issues to be addressed, they should only be handled by "real experts," from which he excluded even himself.[44] Again, Lewis was taking aim at those within the Christian faith who focused solely on what made them different from other Christians. He referred to such groups as the "borderline . . . men not exactly obedient to any communion," and they would not be found at the center of the universal Church "where her truest children dwell."[45] Although Lewis chastised the divisive within the faith, he refrained from using their tactics—for example, challenging their salvation—as he proceeded. His most severe criticism was not included in his book, but rather in an unguarded letter to the Italian priest, and future Catholic saint, Don Giovanni Calabria, when he wrote that sectarianism was "one of the Devil's keenest weapons."[46] Within his talks/book, however, he settled for the implication that they were not the Church's "truest children." Lewis does not mention the fundamentalists by name, but rather relies on their well-known position on the doctrine of Atonement to draw his readers' attention to them.[47] He wrote:

> You can say that Christ died for our sins. You may say that the Father has forgiven us because Christ has done for us what we ought to have done. You may say that we are washed in the blood of the Lamb. You may say that Christ has defeated death. They are all true. If any of them do not

[43] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 17–18.

[44] Ibid., 7.

[45] Ibid., 12.

[46] C. S. Lewis, quoted in Reed Jolley, "Apostle to Generation X: C. S. Lewis and the Future of Evangelism," in Angus Menuge, ed., C. S. *Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 93.

[47] For more on the fundamentalist view of the doctrine of atonement see: Bebbington and Jones, *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism.*

> appeal to you, leave it alone and get on with the formula that does. And, whatever you do, do not start quarrelling with other people because they use a different formula from yours.[48]

For Lewis, Christ as God and savior was the key; pushing beyond that might prove personally edifying, but it should not be used as a weapon. As scholars have noted, *Mere Christianity* can be seen as a substitute for the modernist vision of Christianity; however, it should also be recognized as an alternative to the combative fundamentalist vision as well. Through the work, Lewis was attempting to reshape the contemporary discussion of the central tenets of Christianity. By focusing on the beliefs "common to nearly all Christians at all times" Lewis contended, and hoped, that the Christian community would largely sidestep internal conflict and the snare laid out by Satan.[49]

For Lewis, *Mere Christianity* was only part of a larger plan, and he confided as much in a letter to the American poet Mary Willis Shelburne: "I have always in my books been concerned simply to put forward 'mere' Christianity."[50] In this way each publication allowed Lewis to counteract the destructive interpretations like that of the modernists and fundamentalists. This included *The Great Divorce* which was first published in the Anglican newspaper, *The Guardian,* from 1944–1945 and then as a standalone book in 1946. The story is presented as a dream, and in the dream, the main character, presumably Lewis, found himself in a place called Grey Town. Unaware that he, along with everyone that he meets, is a ghost, he joins a bus trip to what turns out to be Heaven. Once in Heaven, each specter on the journey is met by a guide. Usually, these guides were a friend or relation who tried to convince the ghostly travelers to stay

[48] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 284–85.

[49] Ibid., 7.

[50] C. S. Lewis to a Lady, 16th March 1955, in W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), 262.

despite the initial pain of enduring Heaven as a shadow. The exchanges between the main character and his own guide—Scottish author George MacDonald—reveal how Lewis used the work to introduce "mere" Christianity. For instance, MacDonald revealed to the protagonist that the controversies which so easily distracted Christians on earth were insignificant in Heaven. As he struggled to accept the idea, MacDonald joyfully explains: "That's what we all find when we reach this country. We've all been wrong! That's the great joke. There's no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living."[51] Again Lewis emphasized the idea that Christians should focus on the commonalities of their beliefs instead of the differences because, as the guide noted, despite mankind's best efforts those beliefs were riddled with error and were, therefore, unsuitable as the sole foundations for the faith. Driving the point home, MacDonald tells the ghost that despite the many doctrinal disagreements that plagued the church, "Never fear. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"[52]

As the Second World War drew to a close, Lewis raised these issues again with the publication of the novel, *That Hideous Strength.* This was the concluding novel to what has been termed his "space trilogy" or his "Ransom trilogy" (named for the central character, Dr. Elwin Ransom), that had started with the 1938 publication of *Out of the Silent Planet* and continued in 1943 with *Perelandra.*[53] The dangers associated with war are subtly woven throughout the series. For example, *Perelandra,* while largely set on another planet, takes place during WWII

[51] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 102.

[52] Ibid., 75.

[53] For what is still one of the best studies on the "space trilogy," see Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,1974), 162–81. For a more recent study see Rhys Laverty, ed., *Life on the Silent Planet: Essays on Christian Living from C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2024).

which affords Lewis, through Ransom, an opportunity to echo his previous warnings about war found in his sermons and *Screwtape Letters*, while prompting his readers to consider their contemporary situation, and if they were Christian, the broader context of their faith. In *That Hideous Strength,* Lewis asked his wartime readers to imagine an alternative England shortly following the war. While the threat of Nazi Germany for his alternate England had passed, Lewis presented the crystallization of a danger that had been found throughout all the novels—"scientism."[54] "Scientism" for Lewis was the idea promoted by individuals such as J. B. S. Haldane, Bertrand Russell, and H. G. Wells, which contended that science alone was the remedy for the ailing modern world.[55] *That Hideous Strength* provided him a vehicle to challenge manifestations of scientism at the same time that the extents of Nazi Germany's experiments in eugenics were coming to light. In this fictional world, Lewis posited a united Christian faith as a powerful counteragent to the threat of scientism. Unfortunately, and reflecting the realities of mid-twentieth century British Christianity, there was no such broad community. As Ransom explained to a newly awoken Merlin, the whole of Christendom could not be called on to fight this evil, because "the Faith itself is torn in pieces since your day and speaks with a divided voice."[56] Internal warring had crippled the potentially powerful Christian church, and the groups responsible would be ineffective against the threat, but Lewis made it quite clear that the small group of united Christians that Ransom mustered at that time was superior to the factious remainder of Christendom. In the end, these "mere" Christians were enough, and alternate

[54] For more see McGrath, *C. S. Lewis,* 233–37.

[55] Ibid.

[56] C. S. Lewis, *The Space Trilogy: Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, That Hideous Strength* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1997), 633–34.

England was saved; however, after the dust settled, a question still lingered: what might a united, or even largely united, faith accomplish?

In part, this question motivated C. S. Lewis's work during (and after) the Second World War regarding an issue he saw hindering Christianity—the subjugation of the eternal by temporal concerns. The immediacy of the war meant that Lewis could more easily draw his audience's attention to the temptation of focusing exclusively on the war, a temporal reality, while their eternal relationships with God primarily, and others secondarily, suffered, perhaps irreparably. Of course, in this sense war was not entirely unique in that any temporal devotion would yield the same result; however, the feelings inspired by the war were hard to overlook, which made Lewis's arguments all the more compelling. The war also afforded Lewis the opportunity to address the danger of warring and separatist parties within Christianity, such as fundamentalism. The nature of that British fundamentalist movement meant that it could be both a temporal distraction for those within the faith and off-putting for those outside. When differences between Christians held sway in the public arena, he wrote, "We are much more likely to deter him from entering any Christian communion than to draw him into our own."[57] Although he shared with the fundamentalists an intense dislike of modernist Christianity, his wartime talks and writings reveal his concerted effort to counteract both movements by redirecting the general Christian conversation through his proposed "mere" Christianity.

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Beyond podiums, sound booths and the printed page, a final and necessary revelation is found in C. S. Lewis's daily life. Confiding to a friend he wrote, "I feel that whenever two

[57] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 7.

members of different communions succeed in sharing the spiritual life so far as they can now share it, and are thus forced to regard each other as Christians, they are really helping on re-union by producing the conditions without which official re-union would be quite barren."[58] His friend was Dom Bede Griffiths, the British-born Catholic missionary to India. "Mere" Christianity then was not something he simply recommended to others. He was able to gather around him a circle of intimate "mere" Christian friends that included Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. In this group Lewis mixed with popular British Christian authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Dorothy Sayers. He even developed a close friendship with the eventual Roman Catholic saint, Don Giovanni Calabria.[59] Yet, for Lewis there was more to these relationships than serving as a practical component for an ideology. Certainly, he believed that without them there was little chance for "mere" Christianity to prevail over divisive groups that tore at the fabric of the Christian faith, but more than this, it was edifying for "mere" Christians to dwell in the center with each other, highlighting "that at the centre of each there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice."[60]

[58] C. S. Lewis to Dom Bede Griffiths, 29th April 1938, in Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 226.

[59] For more on these friendships see the three volumes of C. S. Lewis's letters edited by Walter Hooper that were published by HarperSanFrancisco between 2000 and 2009.

[60] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 8.

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